

# African migrants and stress coping strategies in Australia: Implications for social work

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## Abstract

This research investigates resettlement stress among African migrants in Australia and how migrants manage stress. The research used 30 semi-structured interviews with African migrants in Western Australia. Participants used various strategies, including reliance on family as a community and on God – usually constructed by alliance rather than kinship – to manage stress. The article’s key contribution highlights the multilayered approach for social work to integration strategies for migrants. The study identifies three significant issues emerging: the importance of ‘families’ as community networks, the experience of discrimination and the significance of faith in God as crucial migrant support factors.

## Keywords

African, coping strategies, migrant family, racism, resettlement, social work

## Introduction

The number of migrants has significantly increased globally in the past two decades. This has raised questions about the capacity of some receiving nations in the West to absorb the new

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migrants and the impact of mass migration on Western culture, race relations, demographics and the economy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016). There is little consensus about the real impact of these recent migratory movements. The Syrian crisis, which brought over a million refugees to Europe in 2015 (Eurostat, 2016; Mahmoud and Al Atrash, 2021), has exacerbated the debate. Some in the media and political arenas contend that opening the West's borders to the entry of thousands of new residents has detrimental effects in that migrants are a cost and burden to the host nations. However, other authors question the validity of such arguments (Ostrand, 2015), as recent research has demonstrated that 61 percent of the nations where nearly half of the world's migrants live see newcomers as a positive contribution more than a burden (Mahmoud and Al Atrash, 2021). Migration has a long history in Australia, with the claim that it has one of the highest proportions of people born overseas (OECD, 2019) and has been subject to a number of debates (BBC, 2017; *The Guardian*, 2018). Migrating to countries like Australia can be beneficial for African migrants. However, stressors associated with resettlement may be substantial and could have a profound effect on their mental health and well-being (e.g. Ward et al., 2005). Previous studies have established that African migrants often experience stress related to separation, acculturation, multiple losses and isolation (Pittaway et al., 2009). Stress can result in some migrants constantly thinking about their homeland, not sleeping well, refusing to eat food, and feeling weak and anxious (Ward, 2000). Homesickness has also been seen in migrant workers and expatriates (Hack-Polay, 2012). There is a convergence of views in the literature that the host country can be a tough endeavour for migrants. This is because a new socio-cultural context has complexities which requires time to be intelligible to newcomers (Maloutas, 2012; Pessar, 2005). Social work has a key role in responding to migrants' complex needs, e.g. development of cultural intelligence, interpersonal skills and professional credentials, etc. (Briskman and Cemlyn, 2005; Crowther, 2019; Hayes, 2004; Hugman, 2004; Robinson, 2014; Valtonen, 2012; Williams and Graham, 2014; Wroe et al., 2019). The main research question sought to address the following: Beyond retraining and finding employment, are there other psychological or spiritual strategies that migrants deploy to cope with stress in exile and integrate into the new society? This research therefore examines critical strategies developed by sub-Saharan African migrants in Australia to combat stress deriving from displacement and socialisation into a new societal nomenclature that seeks to highlight the everyday social narratives of migrants, originally from sub-Saharan Africa, in their quest to find 'meaning' in their integration into Australian society.

## Literature review

It is well documented in the literature that migrants experience a significant amount of stress at an intrapersonal level as a result of role and identity discontinuity. Migrants are confronted with many factors that contribute to the stress that they experience (Valtonen, 2012; Wroe et al., 2019). The literature highlights that the major cause of stress and disadvantage for migrants is the lack of recognition of their prior learning or qualifications. Consequently, many migrants face unemployment (Schweitzer et al., 2006) or take up jobs that are lower than the positions they once held in the homeland (Hack-Polay, 2019). Sectors such as hospitality and retail absorb significant numbers of migrants, but they equally largely offer jobs that represent underemployment when compared with the skills that migrants harbour (Barrett et al., 2006; Hack-Polay and Igwe, 2019; Hack-Polay and Mendy, 2017). The lowering of their professional status is a key stressor and source of dislocation in the host country and can be viewed as a significant barrier for migrants in integrating into civil society.

Resettling migrants into new communities has allied complications. Leaving cultural spaces where one has deeply rooted connections is often credited with dramatic structural, socio-economic and psychological effects (Fantasia and Pfohman, 2016). Adaptation is one of the

challenges that migrants face. Migrants' behaviour and mental health can be profoundly affected by such issues and climax in intense stress (Hilado and Lundy, 2018). Hack-Polay (2010) believes that seven key elements cause and exacerbate stress levels in migrants. Such factors include separation, and trauma resulting from separation, dislocation and social isolation in host country as well as status inconsistency, and acculturation stress (Ghorashi, 2005; Hack-Polay, 2010). These factors help to understand the multifaceted nature of the migrant experience.

A critical factor associated with the resettlement process is acculturative stress emanating from the dual and overlapping processes of grieving and at the same time navigating the socialisation process. Acculturative stress is the disruption in social ties following the encounter with a different culture, usually more dominant than one's original culture, characterised by psychosocial anxiety which impairs the usual behaviour of individuals and their ability to perform normal social roles (Berry, 1970). Many authors have argued that stress, particularly acculturative stress, can damage the life expectancy of those suffering from the issue, and can curtail life expectancy by 2.8 years and 'precipitate' the degradation of physical health (Härkänen et al., 2020; Kobasa, 1979; Smart and Smart, 1995; Zhong et al., 2016). In a recent study of Filipino migrants in Australia, Maneze et al. (2014) established that acculturative stress had key implications for health promotion, pointing to the degree to which the level of stress affects migrants' diet and lifestyles, which led them to develop various physical health problems. Furthermore, acculturation stress and psychological distress have been identified as critical factors in the mental health of migrants (Hilado and Lundy, 2018).

Acculturation can create additional challenges for displaced people. Kovacec and Shute (2004) argue that living in a different culture has psychological and social impacts on displaced people. Lin (1986) pinpoints that many migrants struggle to adapt to complex socio-cultural realities that are not only alien but also critically dynamic. This is exacerbated where there is a significant cultural distance between the migrants and their new society. The adaptation difficulties for migrants are well-documented (see Rumbaut and Rumbaut, 1976; Wagner and Obermiller, 2004). These difficulties are so acute in some cases that, given a choice, many migrants will sit out the process and confine themselves to the ethnic enclave, the purpose of which is to remain close to their own culture and identity (Consoli et al., 2018; Hack-Polay, 2019; Mazumdar et al., 2000). The problem of identity is part of the struggle faced by refugees (Kebede, 2010), many of whom feel a sense of belonging in the host society in time, while their self-proclaimed sense of belonging may be denied by the dominant society.

Through gaining competence in the host country culture, migrants can aspire to be a part of their new community. The level of socialisation and inclusion differs sizably depending on the social and cultural baggage and location in the host country. For example, those with strong prior academic backgrounds and those escaping their family ties and relevant ethnic networks, and thus social networks, can often display an adaptation advantage. However, for many, the barriers associated with being part of their new collective can present a significant source of stress (Markus, 2019; Phillimore, 2011).

Social networks represent social capital that assists the migrants in their attempts to root themselves in the new society. Migrant social networks are predominantly in the realm of ethnic networks and enclaves. Such networks help migrants maintain some familiar norms and values which provide a degree of psychology safety. These networks play an essential role in migrant integration. Values and norms help migrants succeed in the integration process (Omi and Winant, 2014). However, the role of migrant social networks could be contradictory (Hack-Polay, 2019). While they can support the transition of migrants in an alien socio-cultural and physical sphere, migrant networks could present a degree of dysfunctionality and become barriers that retain migrants in a situation where they are indecisive about whether to strengthen efforts to integrate or to fashion separate lives in the migrant and ethnic enclave (Stein, 1986).

## *African migrants and stress*

Regardless of the level of preparation, migration to a new country and new culture, whether voluntary or otherwise, is a complex process that is likely to result in a degree of culture shock which can be stressful. African migrants may encounter stress associated with loss of homeland, family, friends and social networks. Multiple losses were established as a source of stress for African migrants in Australia who professed that they had lost almost everything (Ogunsiji et al., 2012). Another stressor affecting involuntary African migrants is separation from family members. Sudanese refugees in Australia experienced constant stress because of separation from their family and friends, who often remain in refugee camps and war zones (Savic et al., 2013). A major stressor impacting on African migrants is racial discrimination. Anti-racist practice (ARP) is central to practice social work effectively. The problem lies in the fact that ARP might be used in a milieu of established racism and those trying to protect migrants' rights are increasingly in conflict with the policy of the government (Collett, 2004). A study in Australia found that Africans experienced more discrimination compared with other migrants with lighter skin (Colic-Peisker, 2009). High levels of discrimination affected Africans in the Australian labour market and everyday life (Fozdar and Torezani, 2008; Hancock, 2017).

Somali refugees were stressed because of cultural differences, parenting issues, gender, and role reversal (Omar, 2003), with Somali women in Australia also experiencing challenges in their ability to use social networks and produce social capital during their resettlement process (McMichael and Manderson, 2004). Studies in other countries have also shown that culture shock can cause stress among migrants. Most Sudanese women in Baird's study experienced culture shock because they found the culture in the United States different. Culture shock can be terrifying and stressful, particularly for refugees who have been forced out of their country and have never travelled outside their country (Baird, 2012).

Gender and role challenges can create stress within African families due to the existing disparity between men and women. In African cultures, the roles of men, women and children are well defined, and each member of the family functions within these boundaries. Traditionally, African men are the head of the family and are responsible for providing material and financial support for their families. The lived and gendered experience of men and women is a major factor affecting relationships within the families of African migrants, which can result in family violence, breakdown and divorce (Abur, 2018; Abur and Spaaij, 2016; Heger Boyle and Ali, 2010; Kuyini and Kivunja, 2020). The major challenge for many African men is acceptance of the differing and complementary roles of women in mainstream Australian society (Ahmed, 2006).

## *Coping strategies used by African migrants*

People cope in different ways when faced with stressful situations. Southern Sudanese refugees in Australia used coping strategies such as inner resources, social support networks and focus on hope for the future (Khawaja et al., 2008). McMichael and Manderson (2004) contended that African migrants in Australia who use social networks accessed more social and material support and suffered less distress. Migrants endure severe difficulties by holding aspirations for belongingness in Australia at the same time as retaining a degree of ethnic identity (Peisker and Tilbury, 2003). Similar studies conducted outside Australia (Phinney et al., 2001) reached similar conclusions. Women, adolescents and single people benefit from extended family support, which helps them cope with the resettlement stressors (Taylor et al., 2014).

Prayer is also an important coping strategy used by African migrants (Ager and Strang, 2008). The primary source of coping among Somali and Ethiopian refugees is praying to relieve their sadness in hopeless situations (Halcón et al., 2004). Prayer is an effective coping strategy to deal with past trauma (Goodman, 2004; Khawaja et al., 2008). While some studies already exist on African migrants in Australia, they appear to be limited to refugees only. This is a significant gap; hence, our study aimed to examine the major stressors impacting on the mental health and well-being of both involuntary and voluntary African migrants. It also aimed to explore the coping strategies they use to aid their resettlement process in Australia. This highlights the role of social workers in the constructing of a relational bridge through individual empowerment, supporting diversity and difference, and prompting integration between cultural and social diversities, immigrants' heritage and integration into the mainstream culture (Hilado and Lundy, 2018; Viola et al., 2018).

## **Method**

The study examined the major stressors impacting on the mental health of both involuntary and voluntary African migrants and how they cope with stress. The study used an exploratory interpretive qualitative research design, using in-depth face-to-face interviews to allow participants to express their experiences and feelings that were pertinent to their personal circumstances. We sought to investigate the resettlement experiences of African migrants in Australia. The study also aimed to examine the status of the mental health of African migrants and how they cope with stress, and to evaluate the available migrant support services. A sample of 30 participants (19 females and 11 males) were interviewed.

The sample included ethnic sub-Saharan African migrants living in Western Australia (WA). Sub-Saharan countries are African nations south of the Sahara Desert. Convenience sampling was used to recruit volunteer participants, which enabled us to include diverse participants from a wide range of African countries. Selection criteria were as follows: ethnic adult African migrants (aged 18 years or above) of either gender, from sub-Saharan African countries, who had become permanent residents or citizens of Australia. Temporary visa holders were excluded because they may not have been allowed to stay in Australia.

The recruitment process involved the following. Flyers outlining the purpose of the study were displayed in public places around the Perth (the capital of WA) metropolitan area, appealing to interested individuals to contact the first author. Participants were also recruited by word of mouth through the first author's social networks. The length of time for participants in Australia was between 1 and 17 years. All participants had gained Australian citizenship or had permanent resident status at the time of the interviews.

In-depth interviews allowed participants to express their experiences and feelings pertinent to their personal circumstances. The participants were asked about barriers hindering their successful resettlement in Australia and how they coped with difficult situations. The interviews took approximately 45–60 minutes to complete. The interview questions about barriers to resettlement and the coping strategies explored are as follows:

- **Barriers to resettlement:** participants were asked to name any barriers hindering their successful resettlement in Australia, and to indicate the most challenging situations they had encountered since coming to Australia. If they had children, they were also asked to indicate any particular concerns for them.
- **Coping strategies:** participants were also asked to describe how they coped with the most challenging situations, and to explain how their families and/or friends had helped them deal with these situations. In addition, they were asked to specify whether they belonged to a

community group, church/mosque or other support organisation, and if so, what role these organisations had played.

The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. We sought to provide an understanding of the context of the African migrants' lived experiences through sense-making. The use of thematic content analysis was in that spirit. Each transcript was thoroughly read by the researchers to penetrate the participants' experiences. The data were therefore coded extensively using open coding as each transcript was read and reread to ascertain the meaning of its content. The many codes identified were then grouped to establish the final analytical categories by examining the similarities and differences in the data, which were identified and colour coded, and words capturing similar ideas were reduced. Several major themes and subthemes emerged from the data, for example, the role of networks and the family, faith, experience of discrimination, and so on.

Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee granted approval to conduct this investigation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each prospective respondent was provided with a Participant Information Sheet, which detailed the aims and scope of the study. Space was provided on the sheet for the participants to provide their telephone numbers if they agreed to take part in an interview. The participants were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity, and that any response would be identified only by a number or pseudonym that could not be traced to any specific individual.

## Findings

This section presents the key themes related to the causes of stresses and coping strategies which derive from the data. Several key quotes from the participants are used to illustrate the analysis.

### *Sources of stress*

*Separation and loss.* Participants who were mothers reported that they experienced increased stress because of their feelings of increased responsibilities for their family's well-being after migrating. An unemployed male participant with two children did not report any stress associated with increased responsibilities of looking after his children. However, all female participants who had children under 5 years ( $n=12$ ) stated that they were stressed because they no longer had access to extended family members who could help them with advice and childcare:

My biggest problem is about coping well with the absence of my family who were a huge source of support, emotionally and practically with issues such as childcare. Having the children by myself hundred per cent of the time and having to work is draining. I went and sat down and convinced myself, 'I have to look after my children'. (P3)

The African migrants spoke freely about the difficult situation they encountered upon arriving in Australia. Participants experienced multiple losses, including the loss of their culture, food, family, friends and social networks:

Oh, heaps [of losses] – your family and the support network. It's not there – it takes a lot to build that up. (P11)

The missing of the network of advice and support of family and other relatives demonstrates the importance of the African extended family network, owing to cultures being

largely collectivistic. The sense of loss was felt in human terms with the missing of the family and childhood friends. However, other cultural artefacts and constructs added to the loss expressed by the participants. For instance, a participant explained that her sense of loss was exacerbated by

[t]he lack of food from back home here in Australia. You have to go very far to find something to eat which is typically and culturally African. That depresses me even more. (P5)

### *Culture shock*

Participants reported experiencing culture shock when they initially arrived in Australia. Most aspects of social and cultural life were significantly different from practices in the participants' homelands. These differences ranged from the dressing style for women to the way in which people interact and communicate. The experience is psychologically distressing:

Culture shock was significant. I don't think that I ever saw young girls exposing their bellies; particularly I remember well how pregnant mothers exposed their bellies; they go around with very short skirts. I never saw that in my country. Okay the fancy styles, yes, those ones exist in cities back in Africa, but not the almost walking naked. (P14)

Although the participants were generally happy with the move to Australia, many were concerned that their loss did not end with their losing the homeland. They now feared losing their children – both newcomers and those born in exile – to Australian culture. Despite trying hard to teach them African language and culture at home, some African migrant families felt that the effort was not worthwhile. They were anxious about acculturation and about their children being drawn into culturally unacceptable activities, for example drug or alcohol abuse. Migrant parents were concerned about the rapid adoption of the new culture by their children as rejection of their own cultural heritage:

Talking with my big daughters, I realise that they are drifting into these [cultures] and I try to bring them back. I tell them, 'remember where we come from – Africa – with our culture. I don't want you to get lost into the things you see'. (P25)

Another migrant mother who was anxious about the rapid westernisation of her children was firmer in her approach to drawing them out of a popular culture that she saw as corrupting the values she was trying to get her daughters to internalise. The mother participant hinted some of the stiff warning she had for her daughters:

You're not going to walk naked as [wearing short shirts or shorts] in front of me. (P14)

However, some African migrants had no concerns about their children, expressing their support because their children had adjusted well and had made the transition to resettlement easier for their families. The unconcerned migrants expected their children to grow up as a new generation that espouses the value of their new country. The words of one of these migrant parents summarise the main view of the non-conservative African migrants:

I came to live here to be safe, work and belong here. I'm happy that my children have learnt Australian society and values. They won't be different from anybody else. (P2)

### *Unmet expectations*

Thirteen of the migrants had very high expectations when they arrived in Australia, believing that Australia was issue free and that most of their needs could be met almost effortlessly. However, when faced with the reality of their experiences, this caused stress when they were faced with demanding situations. These participants had fled their homeland to neighbouring countries because of civil war and expected the safe haven to be a place without anxiety. These assumptions were formed while they lived in refugee camps prior to coming to Australia on a refugee status:

Frankly, at first, I had very high expectations, but some expectations dropped later, realizing that life in Australia isn't as easy and stress-free as I imagined. I got to know that things aren't all roses – you have to struggle. (P13)

### *External and self-imposed exclusion*

A key issue that the migrants faced that was independent of their own doing was discrimination, particularly concerning their ethnic and racial origins. This was prominent in the narratives of the migrants, with 18 participants reporting experiences of racial discrimination which was present in the employment market and the wider society. The migrants felt that equal opportunity laws were inadequate to protect them. For example, they believed that employers circumvented these laws by providing other reasons for not employing them, leading the qualified migrants to go through a period of trauma with their professional identity. Two participants explained their experiences of racial discrimination – which were echoed by many of the 18 migrants who reported the issue:

One thing that still sticks to mind for me is racism here – it's there, but it's subtle and many times people don't want to talk about it. (P29)

I've experienced open racism where people call you names or where you walk on the street and someone says 'go home'. (P18)

Hidden, more subtle racism (e.g. microaggressions, in the everyday experiences of the migrants) was highlighted as the most hurtful of all racism in the participants' view. Another participant expresses this in vivid words:

Ah silent racism! It's especially when you go to institutions, you get that silent treatment – turning heads and treating you like you don't exist. Though they may not say anything, you can read the disdain in some people's eyes. That's threatening and unwelcoming. (P29)

However, the oppressive forces that isolate the African migrants also come from within the migrant enclaves and families in the form of domestic abuse, with two participants believing that this was a major stressor which had a significant effect on their mental health. They proposed that education about domestic abuse should be provided in African communities. These participants witnessed domestic violence between their parents:

I think this is quite sensitive, but domestic violence is a big issue in the African community. I don't mean just physical violence but also emotional violence. I've seen it occur; I think we need more education on how it affects children. (P9)

Participant 10 supported this and commented that domestic abuse is hidden within some African families and migrant enclaves because the social control and culture within the community is not conducive to reporting the issue.

Overall, participants experiencing stressors such as culture shock, multiple losses, separation issues, high expectations, parenting issues and domestic abuse between their parents felt very distressed. Different factors enabled many of the participants to deal with oppressive issues and move forward with their new lives. The next section examines the practical steps that African migrants in Australia take to cope with the issues faced in the new cultural context.

### *Coping strategies*

**Family support.** The ability to cope well with difficulties was highlighted as being associated with the support from families, both in Australia and in the country of origin ( $n=20$ ). Some would telephone family members back home as needed:

We always talk about [stressful] issues as a family. That's what I think helped us all the time, from when we first arrived in this country. We talk about what happened and then each person comes in and gives some support. We encourage family members to share their problems. (P18)

Yeah. My family is supportive when I have problems, and they've been behind [me]. I had a problem at work and I had to stop work almost immediately – my whole family supported and helped me to get through the issue. (P26)

The children have actually made my transition even easier because they are very happy to be in Australia and one reason, I think – actually, they've categorically told me – that they like Australia because there are parks nearby to run around and play. They have cousins here and really play well together. They gather with cousins in Ghana. (P6)

**Migrant networks.** Coping well was also associated with sharing their problems with their support networks for guidance ( $n=7$ ). Their friends and other support networks were from a range of places, including their home countries, the African community in Perth, workplaces and learning institutions, for example those offering further education or universities:

Oh, friends are very important because they give you the moral support; your friends listen to you when you have problems, friends share their own stories. Friends give you guidance and tell you where to look. Your friends become family here; they're very important. (P23)

Friends help tremendously. Sometimes it's about providing certain things that one might be lacking, and also connections – they try to link you to potential employers. For instance, I was connected to my current job by my friends and other support network. Before I got a job, I received significant help, like food and money from friends. (P24)

Connections with other African communities in Australia, and the way in which they used the community to socialise and for support during major events such as weddings and Christmas and New Year celebrations was an important feature of social networks ( $n=8$ ). They reported that members of the African community help new migrants with their initial resettlement needs, such as providing transport and other needs. Furthermore, they help other African migrants who are facing difficulties in resolving their problems:

Now, I'm a member of the African Community Association and a member of specific community groups – for example, Congolese and Kenyan community. When I have problems, I can reach out to friends from

the group and express my feelings. I also help other African migrants by employing them in my hair salon. (P11)

I come from a community where people live together; so, what troubles me also troubles them; they'll be there to offer me encouragement and support. (P29)

*Faith in God.* Two-thirds of the participants ( $n=20$ ) stated that they believed in God and belonged to different faith communities. There is a convergent acknowledgement that God helped them through the difficulties of migration and dislocation. Many of the African migrants believed that their belief in God provided psychological healing and spiritual renewal and fostered opportunities for them:

I believe that every human being needs some spiritual strength from God. I believe there's a God who helps his creation. (P15)

For many problems that we encounter as human beings, only God sometimes can best help us. (P24)

The impact of faith was felt by several migrants who believed that it was 'Heaven' that helped them to find the way to Australia. God was described as placing relevant people on their resettlement paths to provide comfort, reassurance and practical help:

I belonged to the Seventh Day Adventist Church back home. When I arrived in Australia, the Lord [God] showed me where to find them. I found the church and started attending. That was blessing in disguise. (P30)

The church played a big role in my resettlement. Weeks after I arrived, I found the church. The additional support from church made settling easier. (P20)

Divine intervention was not limited to guiding the participants to find a church. However, it was, in their eyes, visible in all walks of life, from finding other Africans and local communities that would embrace them to finding jobs, having children and staying in good health, and so on. One participant linked finding his first job to his faith:

When I came, I wanted a job to start making sense of this place. But many months later, I was still unemployed. Something told me 'you must pray'. I straight away knew that God was speaking to me. I knelt and prayed for three days. The next Sunday after the service, a brother-in-Christ asked if I was looking for work. He invited me to his office the next week. When I arrived, he showed me the job I was to do. I think only God can do this. (P3)

Another participant who 'experienced the hand of God' recounted her godsent gift:

One year exactly after arriving here, I had my baby. That was a big gift from Him [God]. Because it changed my life. I went from sad and depressed to a happy mother. I had a sense of purpose. (P4)

The same participant thought that the charity workers who looked after her and her child, providing assistance with clothes, gifts and friendly visits, were led by the Spirit. These accounts associated with a faith in God were widespread among the participants.

Overall, the data show that most participants used coping strategies, such as seeking support from family, friends, African communities, and finding employment. However, the most important

strategy was the reliance on God for guidance and intervention to deal with resettlement difficulties, for example stress, depression, homesickness and unemployment.

## Discussion

Our study provides a qualitative empirical inquiry into the emotional and spiritually cognitive coping strategies for resettlement-related stress among sub-Saharan African migrants in Australia. The results of this study indicate that all participants experienced multiple losses, including the loss of their culture, food, family, friends and social networks, leading them to identify culture shock as a foremost source of stress. Another important finding was that family by alliance, migrant networks and God were the primary psychological domains relied on by the participants to deal with resettlement stress. Interestingly, our research demonstrates that participants joined African community-based events and used other supporting networks that demonstrate cultural vicinity, for socialising and exchanging support for emotional pressure and stress-related issues. In the following subsections, we offer further discussions that engage our findings with previous research.

### *Resettlement stressors*

The findings indicate that all participants experienced multiple losses, including the loss of their culture, food, family, friends and social networks. These findings are supported by Ogunsiji et al.'s (2012) study in Sydney (Australia). Ogunsiji et al. identified multiple losses as a significant source of stress for African migrants, because they perceived they had lost everything they had achieved in their homeland, and described their loss as starting again. This finding aligns with most previous studies of the effect of dislocation on migrants (see Fisher et al., 1984; Hack-Polay, 2012; Lin, 1986; Scharp et al., 2016).

The migrants saw culture shock as a key source of stress. Some experienced culture shock associated with the style of dress for women in Australia. This is consistent with the findings of another study which linked culture shock to adjustment attempts (Dunbar, 1992). This is also consistent with the findings of Casimiro et al. (2007) about Muslim refugee women in Australia. Berry's (2005) research found that culture shock represents a major resettlement stressor because of the attempt to merge two cultures. The findings show that the migrants were concerned about cultural issues for themselves and their offspring. Adjusting to a new culture and environment is significant for migrant resettlement, particularly for those originating from cultures perceived to be distant (Hemmasi and Downes, 2013; Hinsliff, 2007). Equally, during the process of acculturation, non-dominant groups in the society may experience a great deal of stress when trying to adjust to their new life in their host country (Brand et al., 2014).

The findings indicate that the resettlement stresses that African migrants' ( $n=18$ ) experience is compounded by their experience of racial discrimination operating in the employment market, and they felt that equal opportunity laws were inadequate to protect them. Likewise, one-third of Sudanese refugees in Australia experienced discrimination (Murray, 2010). Moreover, Fozdar and Torezani (2008) found high levels of perceived discrimination among refugees. Practices of discrimination, disadvantage and stigma are endemic when dealing with asylum-seekers, refugee groups and ethnic minorities (Solomos, 1996). Therefore, Parker (2000) argues that the diverse spectrum of social work intervention programmes for migrant groups demands the implementation and acquisition of essential knowledge and expertise. Such education is encouraged to include promoting and evaluating anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches to the practice of social work (Parker, 2000).

While several of the findings reported above may bear similarities to findings on various migrant groups and settings, our research revealed that unfulfilled expectations were a significant source of

resettlement stress for African migrants. Many participants ( $n=13$ ) reported that they had very high expectations when they arrived in Australia. Such findings are limitedly reported in the literature. Such limited reports about the link between the expectation of the new country and stress are by Cox (1999) and Stein (1986). They postulated that most refugees expect to recover from their lost status when they arrive in the host country.

In addition, a significant finding in our study indicates that adult children who were living with their migrant parents reported witnessing domestic abuse between their parents, and they also claimed that it was pervasive within African communities. Domestic violence among migrants is also underreported in the academic literature. Only a major study in the United States considered the issue and found that the role reversal is a significant factor affecting relationships within the families of African migrants and can result in family violence, breakdown and divorce (Heger Boyle and Ali, 2010). As a consequence, children and adolescents witnessing domestic abuse are at increased risk of experiencing emotional distress (Holt et al., 2008).

### *Strategies for dealing with resettlement stress*

Several approaches to managing stress are linked to migrant resettlement, for example, community involvement, obsessive attachment to some specific things, obsessive thoughts about home, medicalisation and so on (Hack-Polay, 2012). Participants in this study too deployed many of these strategies signalled in the literature. However, our research unveiled and reinforced three significant strategies employed by African migrants in Australia that commend further reflection. These are family by alliance, migrant networks and the central significance of God.

The findings indicate that more than two-thirds of participants ( $n=21$ ) believed in God and belonged to different faith communities, as they found this to help make the resettlement process easier. A previous study also found that prayer and belief in God are effective coping strategies for dealing with past trauma, among the Sudanese refugees in Australia (Khawaja et al., 2008). God helped the migrants to be tolerant of critical social issues in exile, for example, unemployment, racism, anxiety and so on. Since they believed that God himself brought them to safety in Australia, He would be gracious in helping them to have children, find jobs, and have health and hope. Having God in their mind led many of the African migrants to find 'peace', knowing that the difficulties they may be facing were only temporary. Similarly, the migrants were resigned to leaving everything to God, even when they felt they had been badly treated by some sections of the population or by the system. Faith and belief increased within migrant groups, especially in the early period after arrival. The complexity associated with such heavy reliance on the 'divine' is the potential development of a disempowering *laissez-faire* approach whereby some migrants would sit back and await opportunities from heaven as opposed to deriving them from personal hard work.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the African migrants relied on friends and family members to cope with stress. Some would telephone their families in Africa to find much-needed support. This is consistent with another study in the United States which found that Ghanaian migrants cope by maintaining ties to their homeland through keeping in regular contact with their families (Owusu, 2003). Similarly, another study in Australia reported that the coping strategies used by Sudanese refugees include seeking support from extended family members and friends (Schweitzer et al., 2007). A significant finding of this research is about the nature of family that some migrants described. Some participants identified as 'brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts' people from their cultural or of the same nationality. This is an extrapolation of the notion of family in the African migrant milieu. This emphasises the importance of utilising culture (collectivism in the case of the African migrants) as a tool for successful resettlement in Australia. By calling the 'strangers' from

their national origin relatives – what we refer to as ‘family by alliance’ – they build trust and extend their newly developed close networks.

Our study also shows that participants engaged in African community activities and used other support networks that show cultural proximity in order to socialise and to help them solve stressful situations. A study by McMichael and Manderson (2004) established that African refugees needed to rely on support networks from their various communities, as this gave them a sense of belonging to a recognisable and supporting collectivity and provided them with the means to deal with their immediate needs. Networks act as an assurance during the resettlement process of migrants (Lamba and Krahn, 2003). In addition, such networks have been found to be utilised by recently arrived refugee migrant men while seeking employment in Australia (Correa-Velez et al., 2015).

The current study builds on a range of studies, especially Khawaja et al.’s (2008) study, by examining the major stressors affecting African migrants to Australia and how they cope with stress. The research reveals that many of the migrants have identified similar features of stress and mechanisms for coping.

## **Conclusion**

Our study indicates that, while there were high expectations of life in Australia compared with their previous experiences, African migrants experienced a number of similar and new stressors, including multiple losses, culture shock, separation issues, parenting issues and racial discrimination. Coping strategies included the use of support from family members, friends, African communities, spirituality and membership in faith groups.

Social workers have a critical role in supporting migrants to establish family and support networks. Social capital is critical to support cohesion and integration (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013). However, the experience of migration, whether voluntary or involuntary, can have a profound impact on the development of social capital experienced both as ‘hidden’, for example through the impact of domestic abuse, and ‘visible’, when migrants seek to integrate into civil society through the experience of discrimination, particularly racism, and micro aggression in their everyday experiences. Social workers have a central role in advocating, representing and promoting the rights of migrants to support ‘recovery’ for the individual and in promoting integration. Thus, social workers should not only show compassion for or empathise with African migrants but also reflect critically on the prejudices that cause emotional pain to those migrants (Allan, 2015). As an integral part of the social policy in the host country, social work practice should responsibly respond to the challenges concerning the resettlement of African migrants. In this regard, Collett (2004) argues that without functioning in an anti-racist manner, social workers are increasingly drawn to the dark side of social policy, where social workers bolster up the injustice they are supposed to confront.

For social workers, allegiance with religious organisations may be instrumental in the integration of migrants and their emotional well-being. They have a key role in ensuring that migrants are referred to appropriate services, to support the development of social capital and social cohesion, for example job findings, integration and citizenship learning, professional counselling and physical health services. Recognising the importance of God and religious services to the African migrants, general service providers need to be more sensitive to the impact of this in working collaboratively with the church and religious leaders and integrate a degree of pastoral care in their provision, for example invite the services of religious leaders, when appropriate. Such integrated service provision, in the context of Australia and potentially other multicultural societies, could yield more success in citizenship preparation and community harmony.

Physical, emotional, sexual and other kinds of abuse occur in all communities. However, the status of being a migrant, dependency on the migrant community, issues of lack of integration and

therefore feelings of isolation, experiences of discrimination and the lack of education in relation to domestic abuse, can place victims in situations of greater vulnerability to abuse. Further attention and research is needed to probe the prevalence and impact of abuse on African migrant communities, to support culturally competent domestic abuse and other services to immigrant survivors and communities to understand the complexities of survivors' lives and the barriers survivors overcome when deciding to seek help.

Our study appears to be the first within Australia to examine the major stressors impacting on African migrants and how they cope with resettlement stress; it provides baseline data. The main limitations of our research centre on the fact that we have not been able to systematically segregate the participants into voluntary versus displaced people as the experiences of the two categories could have some variations. Further research would be valuable to gain a greater understanding of the stressors and coping strategies used by these groups of migrants. In the same perspective, it would be important for future research to consider a larger sample to attempt to identify trends. This would support the work of social workers and others as crucial to engage in a continuous process of learning and applying the knowledge gained to increase culturally competent services.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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