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‘Return-Migration in Contemporary South Africa’

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of theories of culture, this research questions the motives and experiences of expatriates that return to South Africa, their country of origin. In re-telling their personal stories the research aims to shed light on the decision-making processes that repatriates go through and explores the experiences associated with such migration so as to better comprehend what social re-integration and re-adaptation means for the individual returnee.

The research uses a range of interview-focused methodologies and concentrates on the interrelated topics of migration, home, identity and social experience as the primary thematic loci. In total, fourteen returnees were interviewed. The Life Histories of two of them are examined in greater detail and their fuller stories anchor the findings and research results.

All interviewees stated that special emotional bonds with South Africa had brought them back "home": they either wanted to 'reconnect' with their families or the country itself; they wanted to expose their children to it or they wanted to be part of the new South Africa and help bring about change. As a consequence of their migrant journeys the interviewees gained a much stronger awareness for the cultural (i.e., geographical and lifestyle) sources of their personal identities. By exposing themselves to different surroundings and cultures they developed hybrid identities, thereby layering international associations onto their established cultural traditions and senses of self. Existing models on repatriation do not adequately account for the importance culture plays in people's experiences of repatriation; yet clearly social as well as cultural issues play an important role. The main factors relating to ease of re-integration and re-adaptation (identified by the literature as economic, logistical, financial and social support) seem to hold true - but again the current literature tends to overlook the role that culture plays in these processes. The majority of these repatriates have established strong residential ties to overseas, whether it be through multiple citizenship or a foreign spouse, and several would consider leaving again should circumstances deteriorate locally.

The research was fundamentally qualitative and therefore narrowly focused in nature. A so-called 'snow-ball' system was used to identify possible interviewees. This resulted in findings that may have limited statistical validity in the strict sense. Nonetheless, the data generated valuable insights that might be considered applicable for later analytical incorporation and/or policy applications in regards to the continuing 'brain drain' out of South Africa and other countries of the Developing World.