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Saying goodbye: carers' experience of separation and loss in carer-child relationships in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to explore the reported experiences and subjective meaning-making of South African carers' attachment to and separation from the children they helped to raise during their employment. This research was primarily conducted due to the absence of any known research exploring separation and loss in carer-child relationships in South Africa. Therefore, this study was carried out in order to contribute to the small body of literature in this area and to create awareness in the public regarding domestic carers' unique and ever-changing needs in order to support their emotional wellbeing. In doing so, it is believed that this will impact positively on the emotional wellbeing of the children under their care as well as their own biological children. Based on an exploratory design, with a foundation in attachment theory, nine domestic carers employed in Johannesburg, South Africa, were asked to report on how they made sense of their relationship with the children they were paid to care for during a semi-structured interview. Additionally, carers were asked to reflect on their unique experiences of separation and loss following termination of employment (for various reasons). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed within an interpretivist framework, using thematic content analysis. Three broad areas of interest emerged based on previous literature and inductively from the carers' interviews. These were namely, attachment, identity and separation and loss. The carers were found to form deep, emotional attachments to the children and family as a whole. A number of sub-themes emerged delineating the facilitators of the development of such an attachment between the carer and child. Themes regarding carers' identity construction and the intricate and unique position they undertake within their employing family, emerged. The existence of an attachment relationship and the formation of an identity around this relationship inherently gave way to themes regarding carers' profound sense of loss and grief following separation. This was accompanied by themes providing insight into some of the after effects and mediating factors of separation for the carers in this study. These findings were used to suggest recommendations for support initiatives and future research endeavours.

Keywords: Domestic worker, carer, emotional labour, motherhood, attachment, separation, loss, mourning, support, South Africa