

## **Parenting from a Distance: Children's Living Arrangements and Migrant Well-Being in South Africa**

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### Abstract

The physical separation of children from their parents driven by labor migration has been a defining characteristic of Black family life in South Africa since the days of apartheid and continuing to the present. While high unemployment often necessitates geographic mobility to secure a livelihood, conditions in the destination area are rarely secure enough to accommodate children. Whereas there is research on the children left behind, we know very little about the impact of separation on migrant parents who may be under strain from worrying about their non-resident children. However, remittances may allow parents more control over decisions and, therefore, mitigate stress. In this analysis, we investigate three research questions: 1) *To what extent are such arrangements associated with migrant stress?* 2) *To what extent does gender moderate these effects?* and 3) *To what extent do remittances moderate these effects?* To address these questions, we leverage data from the Migration and Health Follow-Up Study (MHFUS) in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Preliminary findings suggest that 1) migrants are more likely to be separated from young children but 2) face lower odds of experiencing sleep problems than migrants with co-resident children.

The physical separation of children from their parents driven by labor migration has been a defining characteristic of Black family life in South Africa since the days of apartheid and continuing to the present. While high unemployment typically necessitates geographic mobility to secure a livelihood, conditions in the destination area are not secure enough to accommodate children. Therefore, the majority remain in distant, often rural, homesteads in the care of extended kin and, where possible, financially supported through remittances from migrant parents. Such “stretched households” (Spiegel et al. 1996) continue to be a common feature of Black families in South Africa 30 years after the collapse of apartheid. Whereas there has been research on the children left behind (Gaydos 2017; Mazzucato et al. 2015; Townsend et al. 2002), we know very little about the impact of separation on migrant parents who may be under considerable strain from worrying about their non resident children. However, remittances may allow parents to have more control over health and nutrition decisions and, therefore, mitigate stress. In this analysis, we shift the analysis of “stretched households” from the children to the parents with three questions: 1) *To what extent are such arrangements associated with migrant stress?* 2) *To what extent does gender of migrant moderate these effects?* and 3) *To what extent do remittances moderate these effects?* To address these questions, we leverage data from the Migration and Health Follow-Up Study (MHFUS) in South Africa.

The importance of these questions is underscored by high unemployment in South Africa that necessitates mobility to secure a livelihood but one that is not secure enough to accommodate children. Both the constraints of work environment and concerns for safety argue against the joint relocation of children with the migrant worker. Moreover, the role of kin in child rearing that has dominated the African literature (Caldwell & Caldwell 1987; Madhavan et al. 2012; Parker & Short 2009) may be shifting towards privileging biological parenting. While a large amount of scholarship has focused on the determinants of migration (Brockhoff & Eu 1993; Ginsburg et al. 2016; Schewel & Fransen 2018; White & Lindstrom 2005) and effects on development (Clemens et al. 2015), there is increasing recognition that more attention needs to be paid both to young children and other caregivers ‘left behind’ (Toyota et al. 2007; Yeoh and Lam 2007) and to the parents who are separated from their children. Lastly, whereas the body of research on the familial consequences of transnational migration is growing, our knowledge of the differential effects of movement on family members in *internal* migration context is woefully lacking. While there is ample evidence that both internal and international migration processes are institutionalized in many contexts, it does not do away with the need to consider the negative effects on physical and mental health of those involved. By providing this evidence, we make an important contribution to the family based migration literature through a more complete understanding of the benefits and costs of labor migration.

## Background

Wickramage et al. (2015) estimate that, globally, there are 193 million migrant workers who have left behind families. Labor migration has been and continues to be a key livelihood strategy in many countries in the Global South and, in particular, sub-Saharan Africa. A migration survey in five source regions of Ghana in 2013 and a follow up survey in 2015 showed that 65% of households had at least one migrant member in urban areas connected to rural family members through remittances (Awumbila et al. 2016). A recent study drawing on multiple demographic surveillance sites across the African continent shows rates of mobility ranging from 7% to 27% (Ginsburg et al. 2016). Children rarely accompany their parents. Gaydos (2015) found that migration is not only the most common cause of parental absence in Tanzania but is also quite lengthy.

The effects of separation can be examined from the perspective of the children left behind and the migrant parents. For children, the research findings are equivocal. Some work highlights the benefits for education mainly through remittances (Gaydos 2017; Townsend et al. 2002) while other work reports no effect on child mortality (Yabiku et al. 2012) or cognitive development (Nguyen 2016). Yet other research suggests negative effects on psychological and emotional well-being (Bennett et al. 2015; Mazzucato et al. 2015). The relative cost and benefit of parental migration for children is likely to depend on a number of factors including the amount and frequency of remittances, extent of physical contact between parents and children and attributes of the caregiver. Indeed Yabiku et al. (2012) found that the best outcomes in terms of child mortality were for children whose mothers reported successful migration by fathers (i.e. sending remittances).

How do such arrangements affect the parents? Findings from the transnational families research suggests that migrant parents, particularly mothers, feel enormous guilt about leaving children behind and report feelings of loneliness and depression (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Horton 2009; Parreñas 2001; Schmalzbauer 2004). Haagsman et al. (2015), in their study of Angolan and Nigerian transnational parents in the Netherlands, found lower levels of subjective well-being as did a more recent study also in the Netherlands of Nigerian parents (Berckmoes and Mazzucato 2018). In one of the only such studies on internal migration, Cotton and Beguy (2020) draw on in-depth interviews with migrant mothers separated from their children in a low income context in Nairobi to identify different strategies mothers use to maintain their connection to their children. They emphasize that most respondents found all of the strategies to be insufficient forms of mothering and expressed concern and significant stress about the well-being of their children even if they were in the care of close kin. The current analysis makes an important contribution to the “translocal parenting” scholarship.

## South African Context

South Africa has a long history of labor migration put in place under apartheid when large number of Black African men migrated to cities to service the mines (Ramphela 1993) and women moved to become domestic workers (Cock 1989). Children were raised by extended kin in rural communities. Despite the collapse of apartheid, mobility has not abated and has become increasingly female (Camlin et al. 2014; Posel 2004) with children and parents continuing to experience long periods of separation from one another. Bennett et al. (2015) found only 14% of children from origin households living in destination households and that children of migrant mothers, particularly if they are under the age of five, are more likely to move with them than with migrant fathers. They also found that children in the destination households of migrant fathers live in small, nuclear arrangements with their mothers whereas children of migrant mothers are in larger households often without fathers. Migrant parents prefer leaving their children in rural areas because conditions in urban destinations are not conducive to child rearing (Smit 1998) but how well such arrangements work is likely to vary by caregiver attributes. Older work, for example, documented the negative effects of being raised by grandmothers on children's health due to their lack of knowledge about health and poverty (Cock et al. 1986). More recent work suggests that extended kin could play an important role (Madhavan et al. 2017; 2012).

The continuing importance of migration as a livelihood strategy is made clear in light of the unemployment rate, which has been rising and has remained above 20% for at least two decades (Bloomberg News 2020). In the advent of apartheid's demise, the country has experienced significant shifts in gender roles with women (Dworkin et al.2012 ; Richter and Morrell 2006; Morrell 2002) -- and particularly Black women -- attempting to leverage new rights and employment opportunities. Additionally, the country is undergoing a complex health transition in which both communicable and non-communicable diseases are present (Tollman 2008) and in which stress related health conditions are garnering more attention. Sleep, in particular, is receiving increased attention (Mai et al. 2019; Soehner et al. 2014, Maume et al. 2018 ) as it is an indicator of population health (Buysse 2014).

## Family Based Migration, Social Ties and Stress

We approach this analysis bringing together Root and De Jong's (1991) model of family-based migration and theories of social ties and stress (Kawachi and Berkman 2001). The family-based model is, at its core, defined by the links between family/kin at place of origin and family/kin at place(s) of destination. The shared rearing of children is one obvious linkage. The system entails an exchange of

information, support and money between migrants and other family members towards the goal of strengthening the socioeconomic status for all members. In contexts where both kin-based childrearing and migration are normative, as in South Africa, it may be tempting to assume that neither children nor parents experience adverse impacts from migration related separation. We don't know whether this is true particularly when expectations of parenting and the role of extended kin are changing (Clark et al. 2017; Madhavan et al. 2017). While we know that extended family systems have been under strain in countries with severe HIV epidemics including South Africa (Ankrah 1991; Foster 2000), we know little about the stress placed on biological parents and caregivers in the context of family based migration.

Regardless of how normative migration is, it is almost always accompanied by some level of disruption both for the individual who moves and the family left behind. We also know that social ties are critical for coping with such disruption, mitigating stress, and protecting mental health (Kawachi and Berkman 2001). Positive effects come through elevated self-esteem and an increased sense of purpose, and feelings of belonging or inclusion (Thoits 2011). In the case of migration, social ties based on shared ethnicity within and across space are critical to cope with adjustment to a new place and migration related stress (Korinek et al. 2005; Sanders et al. 2002). However, social ties can also be a source of emotional strain due to unmet expectations and financial burden (Fleischer 2007), which may have direct, negative impacts on mental health. Moreover, these ties may even exacerbate the adverse influence of other stressors such as unemployment. If we consider the care of non-resident children, social ties not only provide key support for children's well-being but also facilitate migrants' ability to find employment and ease adjustment, both of which can decrease stress. However, the same ties may be sources of stress if caregivers themselves are experiencing financial instability and/or migrants have little confidence in the ability of caregivers to care for their children. Remittances may mitigate some of the stress both from alleviating hardship for the caregiver but also by enabling the migrant parent to exercise greater control. Indeed, recent work has shown that sending remittances is associated with lower psychological distress among Cuban migrants to the US (Torres et al, 2016). Interestingly, the same study found little evidence for a mitigating effect of cross-border ties on psychological distress.

In this analysis, we contribute to the growing interest in migration and health by focusing on separation from children and adult stress. We use sleep as an indicator of stress as has been done in recent work linking sleep to social relationships (Ailshire et al. 2012; Chen et al. 2015). We offer the following hypotheses:

- 1) Migrant parents who are separated from their children have poorer sleep outcomes compared to migrant parents who reside with their children because of worry and guilt

- 2) Female migrant parents who are separated from their children have poorer sleep outcomes compared to their male counterparts (moderation)
- 3) Migrant parents who remit regularly have better outcomes than those who don't because they can exert more control on the care of children and through improvement in socioeconomic status of the household where child resides (moderation)

## Site, Data and Methods

The Migrant Health Follow-up Study (MHFUS) is a 5-year cohort study aimed at better understanding the relationships between migration, urbanization, and adult health in South Africa by following migrants who leave the Agincourt DSS site, usually to access employment in Gauteng province (which includes Johannesburg and Pretoria) or larger towns. The data collection began in 2017 with a target sample of 3800 individuals aged 18 to 39 drawn from the DSS. It included residents of the Agincourt site and those members who were not present but counted as part of the household. These “temporary migrants” maintain contact with their origin households through remittances, phone and periodic visits. MHFUS collects detailed information on motivations for migration, residence histories, household rosters for both origin and destination households, remittances including relationship of receiver to migrant, and details about life in the destination location, employment, adult health and well-being including a module on sleep quantity and quality.

In Wave 1, 3103 interviews were completed comprised of 1886 (70%) non-migrants residing in the Agincourt HDSS and 1221 (30%) migrants living outside of Agincourt. Out of the 1221, 200 (16.4%) had at least one child aged 2-17 residing with them (N for total children is 265) and an estimated 312 (26%) had at least one child in the same age range not residing with them (N for total children is 360). Out of the original sample of 3103, 92% (N=2869) were successfully followed up in Wave 2. To improve on estimates of non-resident children, full maternity and paternity histories were added to data collection in Wave 2. All respondents, regardless of migrant status, were asked about all living children, age, sex and current location.

Using data from Wave 2, we will analyze differences between migrant parents who live with their children under age 15 and those who don't along relevant descriptors. We will also present child level attributes and the distribution of caregivers for children not living with parents. In terms of modelling, we will first identify key predictors of children not living with parents net of socio-demographic characteristics of parents using logistic regression and controlling for migration status. To examine

associations between proximity to children and parental sleep, we will use logistic regression models. We include both migrants and non-migrants with at least one child under the age of 15 to identify whether it is parents leaving children (migration) or children leaving parents (fosterage). The main dependent variable is a three category measure of sleep hours: normal (6-9 hours), insufficient (<6 hours) and excessive (>9 hours) for the migrant parent sample. Child separation is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the parent has at least one non-resident child <15. Control variables include age and sex of parent, marital status, migration status, children ever born, employment status, educational attainment and income. Lastly, to examine the moderating effect of gender and remittances on the sleep effects, we will run models with interaction terms for gender & separation and remittances and & separation, respectively.

### Preliminary Findings

Table 1 presents selected sample descriptives of both migrant and non migrant samples in Wave 2.

Table 1. Sample Descriptives, MHFUS Wave 2

	Migrants	Non-Migrants
Mean Age of Respondent	29.78	29.58
% Female	42.3%	58.1%
Highest Educational Attainment		
No schooling	0.2%	1.01%
Primary (3-6)	0.68%	2.95%
Secondary (7-9)	4.67%	10.09%
Pre Matric (10-11)	16.16%	32.13%
Matric	53.41%	42.58%
Post Matric	23.66%	9.58%
Other	1.22%	1.59%
Employment Status		
Formal employment	44.5%	13.33%
Informal employment	17.7%	13.54%
Not Employed	37.9%	73.05%
Number of children given birth to or fathered		
0	30.1%	24.9%
1	32.9%	31.3%

2	24.0%	23.0%
3+	11.9%	20.4%
Mean age of youngest child	4.6	4.6
Co-resident with all children < age 15	15.3%	51.37%
Sleep hours		
Less than 6	3.9%	2.2%
6 – 9	77.7%	66.7%
More than 9	18.4%	31.0%
Sends remittance	45.4%	N/A
Amount remittance (Category 3)		
Less than R1500	21.6%	N/A
R1500- R4499	14.9%	N/A
More than R4500	56.3%	N/A
Don't know	7.3%	N/A
N	1,481	1,388

Consistent with expectation, migrants skew slightly towards males, are better educated and more likely to be employed, particularly in the formal sector, compared to non-migrants. There are also significant differences in children ever born in the expected direction. In terms of sleep, a much higher percentage of non-migrants report oversleep (31% vs. 18.4%) whereas more migrants report normal sleep compared to their non-migrant counterparts (77% vs. 66%). Lastly, more than half of all migrants report sending a monthly remittance of more than R4500.00.

Table 2 shows results of logistic regression model predicting the odds of being separated from a child under the age of 15 controlling for migrant status.



Table 2. Odds of being separated from at least one child < age 15

	Odds Ratio
Respondent's age	0.921 *** (0.011)
Female (vs. male)	0.151 *** (0.019)
Education (Ref. Matric)	
No schooling	0.678 (0.587)
Primary (3-6)	0.777 (0.372)
Secondary (7-9)	1.118 (0.256)
Pre Matric (10-11)	1.006 (0.150)
Post Matric	0.607 ** (0.103)
Other	0.767 (0.390)
Employment (Ref. Unemployed)	
Formal employment	1.401 * (0.212)
Informal employment	1.720 ** (0.304)
Total number of children < 15	1.170 * (0.088)
Migrant vs. non migrant	8.988 *** (1.178)
N	1903

p < 0.001 \*\*\*, p < 0.01 \*\*, p < 0.05 \*, and p < 0.1 +

Increasing age lowers the odds of being separated as is being female as expected. Respondents whose education level is post-matric have lower odds of being separated compared to those with matric level education. Formally employed and informally employed respondents are 1.4 times and 1.7 times respectively, as unemployed respondents, to be separated from at least one child under 15. Having more

children under the age of 15 marginally increases the odds of having one of them separated. Finally, and not surprisingly, migrants are about 9 times as likely to not live with at least one child under 15 as non-migrants.

Table 3 presents the results of logistic regression model predicting the odds of experiencing problematic sleep (too much or too little). The key explanatory variable is separation from at least one child <15 in 4 categories: non migrant/no separation, non migrant/separation, migrant/no separation and migrant/separation. Because employment and migration are so highly correlated, we show Model 1 including employment and Model 2 without.

Table 3. Odds of experiencing problematic sleep

	Model 1 with employment	Model 2 without employment
Separation (Ref. Non-migrants with all children)		
Non-migrants who have at least 1 separation	1.248 (0.225)	1.225 (0.216)
Migrants with all children	1.104 (0.205)	0.873 (0.157)
Migrants who have at least 1 separation	0.876 (0.128)	0.624 ** (0.085)
Respondent's age	0.992 (0.011)	0.970 ** (0.010)
Respondent's gender		
Female	0.985 (0.131)	1.268 + (0.159)
Education (Ref. Matric)		
No schooling	1.464 (0.981)	1.627 (1.079)
Primary (3-6)	1.857 + (0.676)	2.146 * (0.766)
Secondary (7-9)	0.884 (0.185)	0.904 (0.186)
Pre Matric (10-11)	0.852 (0.113)	0.879 (0.115)
Post Matric	0.736 + (0.127)	0.607 ** (0.101)
Other	1.066 (0.430)	1.229 (0.488)

Employment (Ref. Unemployment)		
Formal employment	0.307 *** (0.048)	
Informal employment	0.456 *** (0.076)	
Total number of children (<15yrs)	0.938 (0.064)	0.952 (0.064)
	N	1903
		1903

p < 0.001 \*\*\*, p < 0.01 \*\*, p < 0.05 \*, and p < 0.1 +

The only significant effect in Model 1 is employment status. Respondents with formal and informal employment face much lower odds, .31 and .45 respectively, of experiencing problematic sleep compared to those who are unemployed. When we remove employment in Model 2, we find many more variables attaining significance suggesting that employment is a key mediator for sleep effects. The most interesting result is the child separation which shows that migrants who are separated from at least one child < 15 face lower odds (37% decrease) of experiencing problematic sleep than non-migrants with all children co-residing with them. When we switched the reference category to migrants with all children co-resident, we found a similar result though with significance attenuated. This early result does not lend support to our hypothesis but instead underscores the critical role of employment. It suggests that being employed can compensate for any stress associated with being separated from young children.

### Next Steps

We will continue refining the models with particular attention to employment, conduct sensitivity tests using alternative measures of both dependent and independent variables. In addition, we will test for moderation effects of gender and remittance.

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