

Quo vadis: Transplanting Lives of South African Women Settling in Australia

Henriette M. Janse van Rensburg (vanrensb@usq.edu.au)

Anikó Hatoss (hatoss@usq.edu.au)

Faculty of Education

University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba QLD 4350 Australia

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study which explored the emerging difficulties South African women experience while settling in Australia. The aim of the study was to discover whether (and how) South African women maintain their cultural heritage and whether they transmit it to the next generation; how they balance their identity and make cultural adjustments to acculturate in a new country; and how they manage communication difficulties that arise from being speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL). By examining survey and interview data, the paper discusses the complex issue of maintaining a home culture while embracing a new. As one woman explains, *"I will always be a South African. I doubt whether I will ever be a "true blue" Aussie, as there are some cultural aspects connected to the term. I try to acquire the new culture wherever possible...will probably always be a South African Aussie..."* Two main themes of the study are discussed in this paper: (1) What attitudes do South African immigrant women have towards their cultural and language heritage and the maintenance of this heritage in Australia?; and (2) How do they reshape their identities as South African Australian women? In this paper it is argued that "transplanting lives" in a new country might be viewed as having three layers of an immigrant's life: 'uprooting', 'transplanting' and 'preserving'.

Introduction

The study of immigrant communities and their adjustment to a new country with new sets of social and cultural norms has been the subject of much research. This adjustment process has been shown to have numerous social, psychological and cultural challenges (see e.g., Sonderegger, Barrett, & Creed, 2004). Landale and Oropesa (2002) maintain that the construction of a racial and ethnic identity is an ongoing process that involves negotiation between an individual and others. They argue that "self-definitions shift over time and across social contexts" (Landale & Oropesa, p. 2). They suggest that this means that immigrants' identities are flexible, and a change of identity is partly driven by the individual's choices and attitudes, and partly driven by the outside environment. This paper is about South African women in Australia. Since the South African community is growing rapidly, this paper is very timely and relevant to contemporary multicultural Australia.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003), on census day in 2006, the resident population of Australia was projected to be 21,027,803. People born in South Africa form the fourth largest group of settler arrivals (29,000 people). Over the last 10 years, their numbers in Australia have increased by 48%. In 2006, people born in Iraq and South Africa represented the fastest-growing immigrant groups in Australia. The majority (86%) of South African settlers arrive as part of the Skilled Migration Program. As a result, most South African-born females living in Australia are well-educated, with the 2001 Census results showing that 36% of South Africa-born residents held a higher degree, postgraduate diploma, bachelor degree, undergraduate degree or associate diploma, while only 17% of the total Australian resident population held one of these qualifications. The main driving force for this migration trend is that South Africa's political history throughout the last two decades has been turbulent with the application of international sanctions, political reforms and the eventual dismantling of apartheid. In June 1998, 70,800 South Africa-born persons were residents in Australia, representing 0.4 % of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

While a number of studies have addressed language and culture maintenance in immigrant communities in Australia (Clyne & Kipp, 2000), there is relatively little focus on women in migration situations and the difficulties they face. There appears to be an immediate strong need to conduct empirically-based studies in immigrant communities about how they ensure that their heritage culture and language are not lost in the environment of the new country. There is also a clear need to develop our understanding of immigrant communities' awareness of their language issues and their attitudes to the languages they use in everyday communication and in education.

The adjustment of an immigrant group often goes in hand with language shift. Language shift (Clyne & Kipp, 2000) refers to a process of a gradual shift from the use of mother tongue to the use of the dominant language of the host society. Language maintenance can be considered as the other end of the continuum (Clyne & Kipp, 2000) as it refers to the successful maintenance of an immigrant language over generations. Since women may be traditionally seen as being responsible for teaching the "mother tongue" to

their children, the language maintenance prospects of immigrant communities are largely dependent on women's attitudes to and motivations for transmitting their language and culture to the next generation. Therefore, women play a crucial role in the adjustment of immigrant families and the maintenance of immigrant languages.

This paper addresses the role of women in the South African community. The paper presents some results from a study that investigated the emerging difficulties experienced by South African women who recently migrated to Australia, as they try to maintain their cultural identity. A survey, as well as interviews of a small sample of participants, formed the basis of this study. The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. What activities are South African women involved in which help them maintain their first culture and their mother tongue?
2. Which factors impede their culture and language learning in Australia?

The study

The study was set in a regional Australian community where recently a large number of South African families settled. The major innovative characteristic of this project was that it explored women's strategies for cultural and language maintenance in an Australian regional settlement. The study contributes to our understanding of how immigrant families, especially women, adjust to a new country and what cross-cultural attitudes they develop in the new environment. The outcomes of this study identify factors that impede the development of successful acculturation strategies in immigrant communities.

Method

The study explored the complex issue of maintaining an immigrant culture while embracing the new host culture through a survey and a semi-structured interview collected from 17 families including 54 individuals. The approach was a unique combination of sociolinguistics and educational research. Traditionally, in sociolinguistics, researchers "take a broad view focussing on communities, and employing quantificational and ethnographic methods" (Clyne, 2001). This study used a combination of approaches including elements of the well established domain analysis, social network analysis, ethnography, and self-reported language choice and motivation. The exploratory survey aimed to collect background data on migration history, family profile, language use in family and other domains, language preference, language dominance, language proficiency, language attitudes and ethnic identity. The survey data were

processed by using SPSS data editor and they were analysed using descriptive statistical methods. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in parallel with the survey to elicit qualitative data around a number of focal questions.

The approach to sampling in this project was driven by four main considerations: Participants had to (1) be of South African background; (2) be Afrikaans-speaking; (3) have school-aged children older than 10 years, and (4) have been locally settled in the new community within the past 9 years (but have been settled for at least 1 year). Since the project did not aim to draw accurate population parameters, but aimed to collect 'cultural' data, non-probability purposeful sampling was used to select participants (Amara & Mar?i, 2002).

Families were selected and approached through the local South African Club with help from the club secretary. This approach had the potential limitation of not reaching those families which did not have contacts with the South African Club. However, this strategy can be justified as it is fair to say that in Australia most South African families "transplanted" successfully and do not live in isolation from the community. Australia is a popular destination for South Africans, because of the high standard of living, excellent health and education systems, similar climate, political and economic stability (Migration Expert, 2002). The Australian Migration Program creates opportunities for suitably qualified professional and tradespersons.

Families were asked to complete a survey. The quantitative data (from the survey) in this study were subsidiary to the qualitative in-depth interview data. The survey incorporated the following sections: language use, language proficiencies, language preference, social contact with peers and links with home country, use of Internet for community activities locally and beyond, language attitudes, and use of computer mediated communication for language maintenance. The survey was piloted with 5 South African individuals of various age groups.

The 17 South African families were interviewed for in-depth qualitative data. One hour semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, Afrikaans. The interview schedule elicited free speech according to the main themes: migration history; language use and proficiency; attitudes to Afrikaans and English, and motivation to use and maintain Afrikaans. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were allowed to develop relatively freely according to the participants' observations and experiences.

Research Findings

This paper reports some of the findings elicited from 27 female participants. In this sub-group, the average age of adult participants was 41 and the average age for their daughters was 16. Twenty four participants (89%) were born in South Africa and three (11%) in Namibia. Six adult participants were working in the educational field, while four were in the medical field, four were housewives, one worked in marketing and one in law. The majority, therefore, were well-trained and well-educated professionals.

The following section describes strategies that South African women implement in the regional Australian community in order to maintain their cultural heritage. A survey question asked participants to comment on the importance of social contacts and cultural adjustments in Australia. In a response to a question about the importance of South African community programs, 40.7% of the women regarded it as of medium importance and 22.2% as not important at all. Table 1 summarises responses to this question.

Table 1: Importance of SA community programs

	Frequency	%
not important at all	6	22.2
somewhat important	2	7.4
of medium importance	11	40.7
important	6	22.2
very important	2	7.5
Total	27	100.0

Respondents' comments support these accounts:

We enjoy attending South African club activities, the socialising with other people who have a lot in common with ourselves and to do things together, like attending Afrikaans church – to sing together.

Soon after our arrival we made contact with other ex South Africans and definitely felt more at home. It helped us with adjusting to life in Australia.

We love it. We often camp together, visit Afrikaans shops. We like to help new South Africans when they come into town to settle in into all aspects of life.

We definitely attend club activities as far as possible. We have the same background, understand the same jokes. The Australian humour is different to that of South Africa. We are able to express ourselves and understand each other with ease. Afrikaans is a very expressive language, describing and there is a sense of humour specifically related to the language.

Participants described South African culture as old fashioned, strict, with high moral standards and strongly imbedded Dutch Reformed Christian values. In their views, in South Africa, a strong emphasis was placed on people's financial status and materialism. Participants expressed their views of the differences

between South African and Australian culture with the following words:

Many Australians live together with their partners, they are spoilt and don't realise the privileges that they have in their country. We feel that they are less strict and [more] laid back. Wealth is not everything. Cross cultural relationships are common.

The culture is 100% different. The majority of South Africans are raised in Christian homes and blasphemy is not common. The food is different, South African food is more spicy and salty. South African women feel very strongly about their personal appearance.

Afrikaans people understand the culture; my stories and many of my jokes are directly linked to the culture. Australians do not understand South African humour and jokes. It is just so much easier to express yourself in Afrikaans.

South African women expressed a strong link between their culture, their language, traditions and their identity. They were of the view that if culture was not constantly maintained and practised, it would be lost. Forty percent (40%) of the women commented that it was very important for them to keep their South African traditions. One participant described this feeling as follows:

Yes it is important for us to make contact in Afrikaans and keep our traditions. It is good to socialise in your mother tongue around a "braaivleis", as there is a difference between a "braaivleis" and a "barbie". If we have a "braaivleis", we would sit around an open fire and eat "boerewors"(beef sausage) , "pap"(a traditional grain dish).

From the interviews it was evident that respondents wanted to keep their South African identity. Thirty-seven percent felt that it was very important; 33.3% important; 18.5% of medium importance and 11.1% somewhat important. The majority (81.5%) still listen to Afrikaans music – 22.2% daily, 37% weekly and 22.2% on a monthly basis. Although they are proud of their Afrikaans background, it is of medium importance to let people know that they are Afrikaans.

Table 2: Letting people know that I am Afrikaans

	Frequency	%
not important at all	2	7.4
somewhat important	3	11.1
of medium importance	13	48.1
important	5	18.6
very important	4	14.8
Total	27	100.0

South African woman make cultural adjustments to assimilate in their new country. Here are a few

responses to the question of whether they see themselves as South African or Australian:

I see myself as South African-Australian. I think if you're born in another country and you have a different mother tongue, it is difficult to become 100% Australian, but I have no problem socialising with Australians.....actually, when we first came over we barely had any knowledge of Australian history and culture and found it difficult to converse on this subject. With time, we have become acquainted with political issues and local celebrities. We are proud of the fact that we can now give an informed opinion.

In our hearts we are still "Afrikaners", but in our heads we are Australian. We will never be true blue Aussies and maybe not even our children, only their children.

Although we are now Australian citizens, I don't think it is possible for us, born and lived in South Africa for a big part of our lives to now suddenly see ourselves as real Australians.

An important question was to explore the social networks that South African immigrants develop. Table 3 shows the summary of responses to the question: "How important is it for you to have Australian and South African friends?"

Table 3: Importance of South African or Australian friends

Importance	South African friends %	Australian friends %
Not at all	3.7	0
Somewhat	7.4	7.4
Medium	14.8	14.8
Important	18.5	18.5
Very	55.6	59.3
Total	100	100

Migrating to, and acculturation into a new country is not an easy process. South African woman experience many difficulties while trying to grow after resettlement. Most difficulties are work, family, and language related. Participants illustrated the most challenging hitches as:

I had to write exams before I was able to practice in Australia. At times it put pressure on my family life

The Australian people are very friendly, but even people that have been here for an extended time find it difficult to make Aussie friends. We still feel like immigrants.

I feel uncomfortable speaking English with an accent. I think the children find it more difficult as they want to blend in and be part of the Australian society, they don't want to stand out as a foreigner.

I experience problems with the Maths terminology which is totally different from the Afrikaans terminology

I am quiet in Australian company as I find that they have difficulty in understanding me. When I applied for work, I felt that my accent had a negative effect on my application.

In teaching I find that the accent is not a problem, but as an immigrant, you have to prove yourself.

The participants expressed their desire to be like other Australians. They did not want to be seen as immigrants. The following response summarises their common feelings:

I would prefer it if I could speak like the Australian people because I want to blend in. On the other hand, many Australian people have complimented me on my accent. I would still prefer not to be noticed for my accent. It would be so good just to be accepted as an Australian.

Respondents accepted the fact they would gradually lose their identity after uplifing their roots and being "transplanted" in a new country. They will never divest themselves of their cultural baggage. The following comments support these accounts:

You will eventually lose your identity and the South African way of life. All you have left over here is your language; your friends become your family as your real family is still in South Africa.

Our children play in "English", not Afrikaans. We want our children to see how Australians are and how they go out of their way to help new South Africans into Aussie life.

You will loose both your identity as well as your culture. Afrikaans identifies you and people notice through your accent that you're not from Australia. Culture is something you give up voluntarily. You cannot run away from who you are; it will make you a deprived individual.

We are Australian citizens now, but I doubt whether we will ever be "true blue" Aussies, as there are some cultural aspects connected to the term. I try to acquire their culture wherever possible and to become a true Australian. I live here now and I want to live here. Will probably always be South African Aussie.

Language was seen to be central to the adjustment process in a new country. The following section describes strategies that the South African participants implement in order to maintain their language heritage.

It was very important, as reported by 63% of the respondents, to speak Afrikaans in the family and community. Although all the adults indicate that they can still speak, understand, read and write Afrikaans very well, a decline is evident in the children's abilities. The children indicated that only 54.5% can still speak it very well, 63.6% understand it very well, 45.5% can read Afrikaans very well and 36.4% can write it very

well. Nine percent of the children cannot write it at all and 30% only a little. They do not use Afrikaans dictionaries anymore and struggle with Afrikaans spelling. Because their medium of instruction is English, the students feel that they can read and write better in the latter. When asked "How important is Afrikaans to you and do you think that you will lose it?", their responses were as follows:

It is very important to us because we still think in Afrikaans and grew up as an Afrikaans speaking person. I can express myself so much easier. When I speak English, I basically first have to translate my thoughts.

I don't think that we'll lose the language; I don't even think we'll lose the accent. The younger you are when you come over, the easier you'll lose the language as the Australian culture will become your culture in your forming years. Teenagers should be able to at least understand the language.

It is interesting to see in which language women were thinking and dreaming. More women were starting to think and dream in both languages.

Table 4: Language of thinking and dreaming

Language	Thinking %	Dreaming %
Afrikaans	40.7	37.0
English	22.2	29.6
Afrikaans and English	37.1	33.4
Total	100.0	100.0

Participants reported making use of electronic communication in order to maintain their Afrikaans language abilities. Fifty two percent indicated that they read online news papers, articles and magazines. They frequently send emails to their South African family and friends, communicate via mobile phones, Skype, and chat rooms. One participant reflected as follows:

I use the computer to communicate in Afrikaans by sending emails to family and friends; for my work and have lots of electronic communication with Afrikaans speaking South Africans on a daily basis. I often send text messages.

Participants seemed to have a negative attitude towards those families which have opted for not maintaining their original language and identity. They have indicated that this trend had already commenced and were doubtful whether the community would be strong enough to maintain the language in the next generation. Some participants expressed these views as follows:

We have unfortunately met people who are quite willing to leave their Afrikaans heritage behind and

only speak English. In this case, the language will not survive for many years.

I like to look at the Germans and Jews and how their language survived in different countries. I believe it is because there is a strong will on their part that made it happen and it can be done with Afrikaans as well. However, I doubt if there is a strong enough will to do so.

Our children have already lost some of their Afrikaans abilities. They prefer English as all their friends are English.

Conclusion

Respondents reported generally high levels of confidence in their ability to maintain their existing culture. They try to maintain their cultural heritage and transmit it to the next generation. It is often difficult to balance one's identity and make cultural adjustments to assimilate in a new country; and to manage communication difficulties that arise from being ESL speakers. It is evident that there are factors that impede on this maintenance. Participants accept the fact that some will be lost through generations. It is also evident that women surveyed feel sheltered by national identity and co-ethnic ties, but their daughters claims less allegiance to the country of their birth and are planting their roots more firmly in the country of their transplantation. This is in accordance with Landale and Oropesa's (2002) findings.

This study has shown that South African women in Australia experience shifts in identity, language and culture during the process of "transplanting" their lives and settling in a new country. Women need to grow after transplantation and this process might be viewed as the triple layers of an immigrant's life: uproot, transplant and preserve.

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