



**UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO PRESS**

The Impact of Labor Migration on African Families in South Africa: Yesterday and Today

Author(s): RIA SMIT

Source: *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, AUTUMN 2001, Vol. 32, No. 4, IMMIGRANT AND ETHNIC MINORITY FAMILIES (AUTUMN 2001), pp. 533-548

Published by: University of Toronto Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41603777>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Toronto Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*

The Impact of Labor Migration on African Families in South Africa: Yesterday and Today

RIA SMIT*

INTRODUCTION

In debating the issues related to families in general, and African families in particular, family sociologists have two general points of view: the first being an alarmist view, according to which both the individual family as well as the family as institution are in a process of decline (Mabetoa, 1994: 90). The second approach perceives the family as displaying flexibility despite an environment characterized by uncertainty (Viljoen, 1994: 95). One thing that does seem clear is the fact that most family sociologists in South Africa are of the opinion that family life in this country must be viewed in the context of a rapid changing social reality. Therefore the family may be seen as an institution undergoing a constant process of (necessary) change.

Due to the fact there is no single picture of the nature of family structures in South Africa, especially in as far as the different ethnic groups in the African population are concerned, it is important that the Parsonian picture of extended families evolving into western nuclear families due to urbanization must be seen as an oversimplification of the reality. This is especially true when taking into consideration the impact of the migrant labor system on the family and domestic life of the African population of this country.

In this article I briefly elaborate on several of the major foci regarding the possible impact of labor migration on the family life of African people in South Africa. By way of introduction, a historical picture of the migrant labor system in South Africa will be sketched. Thereafter, some findings of two recent qualitative studies on family life and the migrant labor system will be discussed, in trying to address the question: Does labor migration have an impact on family life and relationships of African people, and if it does, to what extent and in what way?

The concept *migrant labor* refers in this context to “a process involving people [both men and women] who work too far away from home to be able to commute (i.e. return home on a regular and relatively frequent basis, e.g. at least once daily or weekly)” (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 257). This process involves both the temporary migration of unskilled and semi-skilled workers as well as the phenomenon of so-called ‘brain drain’ (or skilled labor migration) (Matlosa, 1995: 1). Labor migration may also be either internal (where migrant workers remain in their country of origin) or external in nature (where migrant workers move temporarily from

* Department of Sociology, Rand Afrikaans University, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa

one country to another) (Cobbe, 1994: 2). These characteristics of labor migration have been evident since the beginning of the migrant labor system in South Africa.

THE MIGRANT LABOR SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Up until 1870 subsistence agriculture was the predominant economic feature in South Africa. This changed however with the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886, bringing about not only an economic explosion but also initiating an era of political and social transformation (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 68). The impetus in economic activity, especially in terms of the growing mining and secondary industry sectors as well as commercialized agriculture led to an increasing demand for (cheap) labor (Stahl, 1981:7). This process was accompanied by the incidence of widespread urbanization.

According to Gelderblom and Kok (1994: 68) two characteristics of the South African society had a profound impact on the nature of urbanization in this country. In the first place, it is important to note that colonialism heralded the domination of the indigenous population. White people in South Africa therefore held the monopoly on political power. In the second place ownership of land was organized in terms of racial classification which led to the division between so-called platteland farms owned by white people and the rural reserves owned by African people. The largest component of the unskilled labor force destined for the expanding mining and secondary industries came from these reserves. Most workers from these reserves did however not migrate permanently to the urban areas of employment but became involved in the migrant labor system, making this system one of the most distinctive features of economic development the past 150 years in South Africa. When giving an overview of the origin of labor migration in South Africa, the question arises as to how African people became involved in the migrant labor system.

Reasons for African people's involvement in labor migration: A historic picture

In view of the problems associated with the sufficient supply of unskilled labor in especially the mining industry, the government of the day instituted (coercive) measures in order to encourage labor migration. The introduction of hut and poll taxes forced African people to supplement their subsistence economic activities with money earned by selling their labor (Viljoen, 1994:5). Another measure encouraging labor migration was legislation instituted by the state, such as the Land Acts (Act 27 of 1913 and Act 18 of 1936) that declared squatter farming illegal and thus placing restrictions on the farming activities of African people, that ultimately led to the collapse of African agricultural production (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 71).

The increase in the rate of involvement of African people in the migrant labor system cannot only be contributed to the measures instituted by the South African government. A number of other factors can also be identified in this regard. Poverty in rural areas for instance played an important role in encouraging people to become involved in labor migration (May, 1990: 176). Cattle diseases and droughts in poverty stricken areas of Mozambique 'forced' men to seek employment in the South African mining industry (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 72). Another factor that pulled African men into the migrant labor system was the

existence of recruiting agencies such as the Witwatersrand Native Recruiting Corporation (Omer-Cooper, 1987: 170). These agencies were hired to recruit African men as cheap labor from both the South African rural areas and countries bordering South Africa, such as Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana (Head, 1995: 96; Matlosa, 1995: 6). As a result of the factors mentioned above, many African men found themselves, in the years after the turn of the century, within the migrant labor system. Omer-Cooper (1987: 154) mentions for example that by 1909 an estimated eighty percent of all adult men in Zululand were migrant laborers.

The discussion up to this point focused on the reasons why labor migration occurred in South Africa. It is however necessary to ask why so many African people remained involved in the migrant labor system rather than migrating permanently to the urban areas of employment. It is therefore imperative that the oscillating nature of migrant labor in South Africa must also be taken into consideration.

Reasons for the oscillating nature of labor migration

Gelderblom and Kok (1994: 73) identify two categories of reasons (viz. internal and external factors) explaining why the migrant labor system manifests an oscillating character. The internal factors refer to those factors internal to the precolonial African societies that may have had an impact in motivating people to become migrant laborers. One of these factors was the norm that stated that it was expected from the migrant worker to pay a levy of a tribute on his/her wages to the elders of the tribe. In this way chiefs and tribal elders ensured that members of the tribe who were involved in labor migration returned after a given period of employment related absence (Harries, 1983: 323).

A further factor is related to the land tenure system in African rural areas. In terms of this tenure system, men are at risk of losing their land if the land is not cultivated. In order to retain ownership of their ancestral land, men leave their wives (and children) behind to cultivate the land while they themselves become migrant laborers (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 74).

The **external factors** refer to government policies that may have contributed to the increase in the occurrence of labor migration, such as the policy that regarded African people as only temporary residents of white urban areas. Due to state interference in the urbanization of Africans, preventing them from establishing permanent residence in cities, the involvement in the migrant labor system remained one of the only ways in which rural-based African people could ensure their economic survival. The Apartheid policy of the temporariness of Africans as urban residents was embodied in the system of influx control (Viljoen, 1994: 6).

The racially based 'closed-city' policy was comprized of various kinds of legislation controlling the movement of African people in South Africa and which made it virtually impossible for them to migrate as a family unit to the breadwinner's urban area of employment. The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1937 for example prevented African people from owning land and/or buying a house in an urban area.

Under the Black Labor Act of 1964 and the Black Labor Regulations of 1965, Africans also required permission to be employed in white urban areas (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 84).

The era of the 1970s was characterized by widespread political demonstrations and protests against the violation of human rights in South Africa. It was ultimately the Soweto uprising of 1976 which propelled the government to change the Apartheid urban policy, making provision for the permanence of the urban African population.

Changes in labor migration: the impact of the breakdown of Apartheid urban policies

The recognition that African people have the right of freedom of movement and that they may establish permanent residence in urban areas, culminated in legislation (the Abolition of Influx Control Act of 1986) stipulating that the policy of influx control must be scrapped (Russell, 1995: 12). Although the act did away with a multitude of discriminatory laws, it did not guarantee absolute freedom of movement for African people in cities, and neither did the act make provision for women to reside legally in the hostels in urban areas (Segar, 1991:43). The act did however present the option to African people to 'escape' the confounds of the migrant labor system and move permanently to the urban enclave.

This led to the debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which theorists such as May (1990: 175) and McGrath (1990: 105) were of the opinion that the abolition of influx control will bring about a situation where the oscillating migrant system will give way to rapid urbanization and an increase in the number of Africans commuting on a daily basis. This argument was strengthened by the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) call for the abolition of the migrant labor system "owing to its exploitative and dehumanizing nature" (Matlosa, 1995: 12).

Today however, ten years later, the migrant labor system continues to be a reality affecting African family life extensively. It seems thus, that despite the breakdown of Apartheid urban policies, a number of factors predispose the perpetuation of the system of labor migration in South Africa.

REASONS WHY AFRICAN PEOPLE ARE INVOLVED IN LABOR MIGRATION: A CONTEMPORARY PICTURE

One of the most important reasons why Africans remain as participants in the migrant labor system is the housing shortage in urban areas. This makes it arduous for families to migrate permanently to cities. It is noted in the White Paper on housing (1995) that the South African housing backlog in 1995 was estimated at 1.5 million units and that a further 2.8 million units will be needed by the year 2000 to accommodate population growth. Although informal settlements and squatter camps, housing the urban poor, are expanding by the day, many rural based Africans prefer to refrain from moving permanently to their urban places of employment, finding it repelling to call an environment characterized by overcrowding and slum conditions their home.

The high rate of unemployment in South Africa, currently estimated at 25% but may even

be as high as 60% (Cunningham *et al*, 1997: 375), is another factor discouraging rural African families to settle in urban areas. Gelderblom and Kok (1994: 115) are for example of the opinion that if employment prospects in cities do not ameliorate, labor circulation between urban and rural areas might well continue. This also links up with the high value many African people attach to (rural) land ownership. Russell (1995: 31) mentions for example that: "As long as the opportunities to obtain rural land exist, people are likely to value a rural base, with its eternal promise of some small supplementary economic return ... Neither in other parts of Africa nor in parts of Europe where active peasant agriculture persisted into the twentieth century, is there any sign of people abandoning rural holdings simply because they have joined the urban wage sector." This land ownership issue is at present very important in as far as the South African government puts a lot of emphasis on the land reform and restitution of land initiative.

All in all it seems that despite the constitutional right of freedom of movement and African people's opportunities to become members of the permanently urbanized population, many still prefer to remain active as migrant laborers. Research initiated in 1995 by the Ministry in the Office of the President (MOP) supports other findings stating that urbanization in South Africa are still characterized by circular migration between rural and urban areas. This does not only affect the family life of internal migrants but also those of external migrants from bordering countries. Despite the decline in the number of foreign African migrant laborers coming to South Africa, foreign-born Africans remain highly motivated to acquire employment in this country. Matlosa (1995: 1) is for example of the opinion that: "The seismic political transformation in South Africa since the early 1990s has enhanced this country's magnetic pull for migration from its resource-poor neighboring states." Notwithstanding nationalistic tensions and xenophobia (Morris, 1999: 308) large numbers of Africans are still involved in external labor migration to South Africa — many of whom are illegal migrants (Head, 1995: 93). Statistics based on a survey done in Swaziland shows that 74.8% of households have at least one member engaged in wage labor in South Africa (Leliveld, 1997: 1840).

It seems thus, that a number of African families and/or households are still experiencing the migrant labor system as a way of life. Therefore, in discussing the family life of Black South Africans, it is important to focus on the possible impact of labor migration on these families.

THE IMPACT OF LABOR MIGRATION ON AFRICAN FAMILY LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The system of migrant labor in South Africa has for many years been criticized for its detrimental effect on family life among Africans, bringing about a spatial fragmentation of the extended family network (Simkins and Dlamini, 1992: 68). Although migrant workers may comprise the young, the very old and all age categories in between, labor migration tends to take place when a person is in his/her twenties, thirties and forties. This brings about, according to Gordon (1981: 115), that migrant workers are for the most part absent during the critical years of marriage and child rearing.

Due to the nature of labor migration, many migrant workers are separated from their

families for long periods of time, where some of them are only able to return to their families in rural areas on a monthly, quarterly or yearly basis (Wilson, 1972: i). According to Gordon (1981: 115), “the erosion of family relationships under such conditions may be substantial.”

It is however important to note that labor migration does not in all cases elicit negative experiences in family life. Many migrant laborers send large amounts of money to their families in rural areas. The recipients of the remittance from the migrant workers use this money to improve their impoverished standard of living and welfare (Gelderblom and Kok, 1994: 175).

The subsequent discussion of the impact of labor migration on the family life of Black South Africans is based, on the one hand, on the results of research initiated and documented of late in South Africa; and on the other hand, the findings of two recent qualitative studies focusing on African families and households. The first of the two qualitative research projects is an explorative study of African people’s perceptions of the impact that Apartheid had on their family life. The second study deals with the survival strategies of households in informal settlements in South Africa. In both these studies labor migration was one, but definitely not the only, of the key issues related to African family life. For the purpose of this discussion only the results pertaining to the impact of labor migration on family life will be discussed. All the subsequent verbatim quotations are also taken from these two studies. In trying to assess what the impact of labor migration on African people’s family life may be, the focus fell on two relationships, i.e. the husband-wife relationship and the parent-child relationship.

The impact of labor migration on family life: The husband-wife relationship

Many theorists argue that due to the long-term absence of migrant workers from their families, the effects of migratory labor on the marital relationship can be detrimental in nature contributing to the incidence of conjugal breakdown and desertion. Stichter (1985: 151) found for example in her research that one of the most profound effects of migratory labor is a decline in marital quality. This is especially true for husbands who are migrant laborers and whose wives remain in the rural areas.

The husband as migrant laborer

For many years the majority of migrant laborers were residents of migrant labor hostels. Even today, hostels are an euphemism for single gender compounds for laborers. In most of these hostels a policy of the exclusion of families is emphasized and therefore denies hostel dwellers the reality of the hostel becoming a domestic environment (Ramphela, 1993: 4). This results in a situation where the married man is compelled to live in a “bachelor” barrack, becoming an absent husband/ father, leaving their wives (and children) behind in the rural areas of origin in order to protect their property rights (Russell, 1995: 32).

These wives are responsible for taking over their husbands’ agricultural responsibilities, in addition to their own work (Gelderblom en Kok, 1994: 174). Within the context of the impoverished state of many of the rural areas, some wives, in the absence of their husband,

find it extremely difficult to take care of their families. Although husbands send money home, wives in rural areas still bear the majority of the economic brunt of poverty. The wives of migrant laborers who remain in the rural areas have become, according to Mabetoa (1994: 92), more marginalized and destitute due to confinement to the rural area characterized by the absence of sufficient education and employment opportunities.

However, in cases where wives of migrant laborers live within the context of the broader kinship system, the members of (family) support networks collaborate in coming up with household survival strategies such as sharing in the responsibility of taking care of the children (Erasmus, 1977: 17). This may lead to a situation where two or more mother-child/ren family units form larger woman-headed households. Jackson, a migrant laborer in his early forties, expressed for example his peace of mind, knowing that his parents are keeping an eye on the well-being of his wife and children.

The husband's long period of absence may also have an impact on the division of power in the marital relationship. African families in South Africa, being traditionally patriarchal of nature, see the position of the man as the head of the household. The migrant labor system, however, brings about a decline in paternal authority, which in turn contributes to the disintegration of what Viljoen (1994: 30) refers to as "the traditional marital relationship."

Male absenteeism in families does not only mean more family responsibilities for wives. These women also tend to gain greater *de facto* decision-making power in the day-to-day existence of the family. This has a profound impact on the way in which both the husband/father (as migrant laborer) and the rural-based wife/mother define and interpret their own and one another's role contents and obligations (Stichter, 1985: 75). Emily, whose father was a migrant worker in Johannesburg, remembers her mother as the family's pillar of strength:

"My mother was a very strict but loving woman. I can't say that I ever really missed my dad because my mother did everything for us. If we wanted something or to go somewhere, we had to ask her — she was the one that had to say 'Yes' or 'No'."

Conjugal infidelity is another problem associated with the migrant labor system (Clark and Van Heerden, 1992: 44). Mabetoa (1994: 91) is of the opinion that 'unofficial' polygamy has been encouraged by the migrant labor system and those men who migrate to the urban areas of employment start second families in the city. Wilson (1972: 183) states for example that: "So many men when in town for long periods of time away from their families, ... have develop[ed] new relationships, new commitments, and found it increasingly difficult to save money to send home." Apart from the economic implications of infidelity, the impact of adultery on the quality of marital life may be of a detrimental nature:

"When my mother heard that my father had an 'ishende' [mistress] in the hostel, it broke her heart."

The migrant labor system may also bring about the experience of a cultural gap between the spouses. In leading an independent life for long periods of time away from his family,

husbands may find it difficult on returning to the rural environment to readapt to the traditional way of family life (Erasmus, 1979:9). This may be conducive to the perception that husband and wife have become strangers to one other.

As mentioned before, migrant workers are not in all cases men leaving the rural area to earn a living in the urban area of destination. In many cases, women leave their families behind in order to make a contribution to the survival of the household. This may, as in the case of the husband being a migrant worker, have an extensive impact on the marital relationship,

The wife as migrant laborer

Although women as migrant workers are employed in a wide range of areas in both the formal and informal economic sectors, these women have historically found themselves within domestic service. Many of these domestic workers are often compelled to 'live in' (residing on the premises of their employers) due to a lack of sufficient housing and conditions set by employers (Preston-Whyte, 1991: 36). These domestic workers who live at their place of work are more than often not in daily contact with their families and may therefore experience a high level of deprivation of family life (Cock, 1980: 52).

Le Roux (1998: 113) found in her study that domestic workers find it difficult to maintain a marriage. Although none of the respondents in her study experienced a limitation on visits by their husbands, some employers did not allow their employees' spouses to stay for a long period of time. This relates to what Maggie, a married 'live in' domestic worker had to say about her relationship with her husband:

"My husband works in the Freestate and it is difficult for him to come and visit me often. I am always worried that he may take a new wife or a girlfriend."

At one given point in time many African families may experience a situation where not only one but both the spouses are involved in the labor migration process. This may also have a significant impact on the marital relationship.

Both the husband and wife as migrant laborers

It is often found that once the migrant worker husband is established in the urban area, he will act as a pioneer who facilitates the (temporary) migration of his wife (and sometimes other family members). Although the nature of the accommodation used by migrant labor couples varies (Russell, 1995: 29), researchers are of the opinion that a special case is to be made regarding family life in migrant labor hostels.

The social organization within hostels has changed noteworthyly since the entry of women and children into the hostel environment in the 1960s. Since the abolition of influx control in 1986, the numbers of women joining their husbands in the urban milieu increased even more dramatically. Many of these women, despite the policy of the exclusion of families in hostels, are even at present moving into the hostels to share a single bed with their husbands in a room occupied by three or four other hostel dwellers (and their families). Their

legal existence depends, according to Ramphele (1993: 20), on their attachment to a bed — thus creating the notion of men, women and children being members, not of a household, but a *bedhold*.

Many of the wives, who reside temporarily in hostels, oscillate between the urban and rural areas. According to Ramphele (1993: 72): “They are torn between the responsibilities of looking after the rural ‘home’, bringing up children and fulfilling wider family responsibilities on the one hand, and maintaining a personal relationship with their husbands on the other.” It seems therefore that these women do not only migrate to the cities to reduce the period of separation between husband and wife, but also to earn the much needed money (mostly in the informal economy) to support their rural-based families.

The reality of physical space constraints in the hostel environment places a lot of strain on the marital relationship. Spouses are in some cases unable to discuss private matters without being overheard by the other occupants of the hostel room. Couples are furthermore compelled to have sexual intercourse in rooms filled with other people due to the fact that privacy is in most cases non-existent (Segar, 1991: 41).

In contrast to women who remain in the rural area while their husbands are employed in the city, and who have gained greater *de facto* decision-making power, women in hostels are very much in a subordinate position. Ramphele (1993: 76) is of the opinion that this may be due to the dependence of women on male bedholders for accommodation, which enhances men’s power over their wives. In order to prolong their stay, women adopt a submissive role as a vital survival strategy. In some cases women in migrant labor hostels are addressed as *amabhinqa*, a term used in Xhosa to refer to women, but in such a connotative sense that they are reminded of their inferior status in relation to that of men (Ramphele, 1993: 61).

When focusing on the impact of labor migration on the marital relationship of African families, it seems thus, that the migrant labor system may be partially responsible for the existence of a set of complex situations that may either (to a smaller extent) empower people economically and/or socially, or, as seen in the research of Stichter (1985: 151), contribute to a decline in marital quality. It is however not only the spousal relationship that may be (negatively) influenced by the migrant labor system, but the parent-child relationship may also be affected by this way of life.

The impact of labor migration on family life: The parent-child relationship

The family life of migrant workers and the way children are affected by their parents’ involvement in labor migration have been a matter of concern for both insiders and outsiders of the migrant labor system, for many years. A large number of children, whose lives are influenced by this system, are children of *male* migrants.

Children of male migrant laborers

For most children of migrant workers, family life is associated with being a member of a woman-headed household and who therefore grow up in an environment where the absence of their fathers is part of their conception of reality (Russell, 1995: 18). Absenteeism among

fathers may have an unsettling impact on their children's lives. It may for example, according to Viljoen (1994: 5), contribute to the prevalence of poverty and the disruption of the domestic life, which can ultimately result in problematic father-child relationships and fractured or unstable families (May 1998a: 30).

This impact of the absence of fathers on the lives of their children is even more alarming when taken against the background of the research conducted by Jones (1992: 264), who found that the children of male migrants had been separated from their fathers for a mean period of 55 per cent of their childhood years. Precious, a sixteen-year-old girl mentioned the following when she spoke about her relationship with her migrant worker father:

"I don't know my father well. Since I can remember he has always been working in the mine at Carletonville — coming home only now and then. I always have so many things that I would like to tell him, but it is difficult to talk to this man I do not know so well."

Due to their work-related absence, fathers are furthermore unable to play an active role in the socialization of and being an active role model for their children, as prescribed by their traditional ethnic cultures (Mabetoa, 1994: 92; Viljoen, 1994: 33, 53). This lack of participatory involvement in family life may also be related to the factors contributing to the decline of paternal authority (Viljoen, 1994: 55). One male migrant remarked that his children lack discipline because he is not home often enough to keep an 'authoritative' eye on them:

"My children are disrespectful. They will tell my wife: 'You don't know anything' and 'You cannot tell us what to do'."

Children of *female* migrant workers are in most cases affected in similar ways. It is however important to focus on absenteeism among mothers in as far as theorists such as Le Roux (1998: 104, 120) are of the opinion that "the separation between mother and child is of particular concern, especially as it appears as if the mother-child unit is emerging as the most basic family unit" — "the family nucleus".

Children of female migrant laborers

UNICEF (1993: 77) defines children who are separated from their parents (especially those separated from their mothers) as 'children in difficult circumstances'. They estimate that more or less 1.8 million children in South Africa are living apart from their mothers as a result of maternal domestic service. As in the case of UNICEF, Mabetoa (1994: 92) too is concerned about the impact of maternal absenteeism. She states for example that: "The crucial family social and emotional support which acts as a buffer against the hostile world is not experienced by members of migrant families... [which may even] contribute to delinquency and teenage pregnancies." Children such as Tebogo said for example the following when reminiscing the separation from their mothers in their early childhood:

"When my mother left home to go and work for the madam [employer] in

Pretoria, I was afraid that she would never come back ... It made my heart sad that she wasn't there to hold my hand."

It is not only the children that are affected by mother-child separation, female migrant workers also tend to voice their concern about the state of affairs. For these women, the well-being of their children is of great importance, and as stated by Le Roux (1998: 108) these women are probably motivated to work in order to provide for their children and to ensure a better future for their offspring. Rose, alive in 'domestic worker, mentioned the following:

"I am always worried that my children are not safe and happy. I ask myself: 'Is Herminah [her sister in whose care she left her children] taking good care of my children?' ... It makes me sad to leave them behind."

Some parents, while they are involved in the migrant labor system, are more inclined towards having their children brought up under the guidance of the older rural-based generation. Other parents involved in labor migration are compelled to send their children to relatives in rural areas for lack of space, time and resources to take care of their children themselves (May, 1998b: 78). This residence pattern of migrant workers' children may also have a profound effect on the parent-child relationship.

Both parents as migrant laborers: Rural-based children

Grandparents in rural areas are often responsible for taking care of the young while adult members of the family are engaged in labor migration. Be that as it may, it is important to note that it is traditionally not uncommon for African grandparents to be (co-)responsible for rearing their grandchildren. Although these children may be brought up by loving grandparents, theorists such as Simkins and Dlamini (1992: 68) are of the opinion that some of these older relatives responsible for taking care of younger children do not have adequate resources to nourish, clothe and educate the young.

Children of migrant workers who are left in the care of relatives, seldom experience domestic stability but rather demonstrate relatively high rates of mobility between different members of the greater kinship system (Simkins and Dlamini, 1992: 68). To use the words of Jones (1992: 272), this 'malaise' of shifting care-giver relationships and 'domestic nomadism' may bring about residential insecurity and confusion. Themba, a nineteen-year-old student, was brought up by his paternal kin:

"I grew up with my grandparents, but also lived with my father's sister and his brother-in-law for a while. It was stressful not to live with my parents. Even now I still feel the effects of not growing up with my parents. Not knowing them that well and being one of many grandchildren being taken care of by my grandparents, I sometimes don't know who to call 'Father' and 'Mother'."

Some rural-based children of migrant workers do, however, not experience the absence of their parents to such a large extent. This can partially be explained by the strong attachment

among members of the extended family and the use of classificatory kin terminology, which evokes a wide range of relatives as father, mother and siblings (Jones, 1992: 274). A migrant laborer's own father or brother may for example fulfil the role as *pater* of the migrant worker's rural-based children (Erasmus, 1977: 17). These children will also be likely to address their *pater* as 'father' and attach themselves emotionally to this person. Siphon for example, who grew up in a rural area under care of his paternal grandparents while both his parents were working elsewhere, spoke with great fondness about his childhood years, often referring to his grandparents as 'mother' and 'father'.

Not all children of migrant workers are left in the care of rural-based relatives (may that be under deplorable conditions or an environment characterized by sufficient funds and love). Some children move with their migrant laborer parents to the urban enclave.

Both parents as migrant laborers: Children in hostels

Although not all children accompany their migrant laborer parents to the urban areas of employment, the reality is that there have been children living in migrant labor hostels since the 1960s. Despite the outcry that hostels are not 'places for children' (Ramphela, 1993: 36), a surprisingly high number of children call these hostels 'home'. Due to spacial constraints, children sometimes have to share a bed with their parents or sleep on a makeshift floor-bed next to the parents' bed. The lack of privacy may, according to Ramphela (1993: 84), inhibit the expression of love and emotional attachment between children and their parents. These constraints may limit the members of the family to function socially as a coherent unit.

Children are, for example, forced to spend their time outdoors during the day in order to allow workers on night shift to sleep during daytime hours. Noisy children may cause friction and animosity between parents and children, other hostel dwellers and children and even the parents of children and other hostel dwellers (Ramphela, 1993: 59). This situation links up with the fact that a hostel is an unsatisfactory environment for the emotional and intellectual stimulation of children. This was the impetus for the child-care project launched in September 1988 to provide not only wholesome meals to children in hostels, but also to create an atmosphere in which they can be stimulated cognitively (Ramphela, 1993: 95). Segar (1991: 59) reports that it is one of the Hostel Dwellers Association's objectives to lobby for family housing and to create awareness with their motto 'Unite Families'.

From the preceding discussion it seems thus, that the process of labor migration may have a (negative) impact on both the husband-wife and the parent-child relationship. It is, however, imperative not to negate the fact that many African people hold the value of collectivism in high regard (Kotzé, 1993: xiii). Viljoen (1994: 23) confirms this statement in as far as some respondents in her extensive study on the strength and weaknesses in the family life of black South Africans, showed a tendency toward the internalization of some elements of individualism, many still cling to the traditional sense of collectivism.

The considerable high value that many African people attach to their children, family and other kinship ties is not only visible in the research done by researchers such as Viljoen (1994: 37) and Russell (1995: 31), but is also apparent in the two recently conducted qualitative

studies. This is evident not only in the caring responsibilities and obligations between parents and their offspring, but also in the quality of reciprocity in terms of adult children's (regardless if they are married or single) obligations towards their parents and other members of the kinship network. James, a migrant worker in his early thirties, expresses this deep-rooted sense of obligation towards his extended family:

"Although it is sometimes difficult to support not only my wife and children, I still try to send money home to my mother and my father's father."

As already mentioned, the strong relationships among kinship members, creates a family support network, which is often used as a survival strategy, not only to survive economically, but also to strengthen familial ties. Phinias, a young teacher who grew up with his grandparents in a rural area in the Northern Province, said the following about his childhood family life:

"I think my parents [who both worked in Johannesburg] knew that my grandparents will take good care of me. It felt as if I had two sets of parents who all loved me. I called my grandmother, mother... She managed to fill the absence of my mother. I'll always be thankful to them for filling my childhood, despite the hardship, with beautiful memories."

These words link up with Viljoen's (1994: 37) observation that many African families appear to experience their family lives as healthy and happy, despite socioeconomic difficulty and the political turmoil experienced in the past. Many migrant workers, according to Ramphela (1993: 128), report that while they are employed in urban areas, they still experience a sense of 'traditional belonging' within the cadre of their support network. This is seen in the widespread recognition that is given to the importance of traditional values and rural institutions in molding the interests of African people both permanently and temporarily in the urban environment (Russell, 1995: 2), and their friendship with other 'home-people' (*amakhaya*) who, like them, also value the traditional way of life.

Although theorists such as May (1998b: 85) are of the opinion that the much celebrated African value of *Ubuntu*, which implies sharing whatever you have available with others, has been "severely eroded" by poverty, many African people still realize this principle in their lives. These traditional cultural elements of supporting others and taking care of your family, may not only strengthen the migrant workers sense of collective consciousness, but may also, according to Gelderblom and Kok (1994: 28), serve as guidelines for the individual to interpret his/her urban surroundings.

CONCLUSION

In this article I tried to give an overview of the major foci regarding the possible impact of labor migration on African family life in South Africa. Although the findings of the two recent qualitative studies, discussed in this article, were not meant to be extrapolated to all African families whose members are involved in the migrant labor system, it does provide a glimpse of what some of these people's perceptions are concerning the effect of labor

migration on their lives. In listening to the array of voices of different family members who experience the process of labor migration as a way of life, it does seem clear that the migrant labor system does indeed have a significant impact on African family life in South Africa. Although not all African people, involved in labor migration, necessarily experience marital and familial dissolution and breakdown, the research shows that many of these families do experience a lot of strain due to this lifestyle. Notwithstanding the fact that African families in general endure problems such as poverty, conjugal infidelity and paternal absenteeism, it seems that migrant labor families experience these problems in magnified proportions. This is quite ironic, since the rationale behind most people's involvement in the migrant labor process, is to attempt to improve their families standard of living.

Rather than just focusing on the negative impact of labor migration on the marital and parental relationships in African families, it is important to place emphasis on the way in which these families (sometimes unconsciously) utilize cultural values as survival strategies to ensure that the oscillating nature of the migrant labor system does not completely uproot them from their traditional family life. The principle of providing support to those in need and the accentuation of collectivism is best summarized by the Xhosa proverb: "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" — "I am because we are".

It is therefore of great importance that an even better understanding of the impact of the migrant labor system on family life must be developed, in order to inform family policies and programmes. By conducting social research that deals with family related issues in the multicultural South Africa, the social scientist will be in a better position to create social awareness for the importance of policies that not only support families in need, but which would also help to bring about a better work-family fit for families whose lives are intertwined with the migrant labor system.

REFERENCES

- Clark, B. and Van Heerden, B.
 1992 "The Legal Position of Children Born out of Wedlock." pp.36-63 in Burman, S. and E. PrestonWhyte (eds.), *Questionable Issue. Illegitimacy in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Cobbe, J.
 1994 "On the Economic Impact of Migrant Labor on Lesotho." Paper presented at a conference of the African Studies Association, Toronto, 3 to 6 November 1994.
- Cock, J.
 1980 *Maids & Madams. A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Cunningham, P., Boulton, B. and Popenoe, D.
 1997 *Sociology. First South African Edition*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- Erasmus, P.A.
 1977 *Die Mening van die Gewese Trekarbeider insake die Trekarbeidstelsel en Aanverwante Aspekte*. Pretoria: Instituut vir Sosiologiese, Demografiese en Kriminologiese Navorsing.
 1979 *Die Trekarbeider se Vrou se Mening oor die Invloed van Trekarbeid op Haar Huweliks- en Gesinslewe*. Pretoria: Instituut vir Sosiologiese, Demografiese en Kriminologiese Navorsing.

- Gelderblom, D. and Kok, P.
1994 *Urbanization. South Africa's Challenge. Volume 1: Dynamics.* Pretoria: HSRC.
- Gordon, E.
1981 "Easing the Plight of Migrant Workers' Families in Lesotho." pp. 113-130 in Böhning, W.R. (ed.), *Black Migration to South Africa. A Selection of Policy-oriented Research.* Geneva: International Labor Office.
- Harries, P.
1983 *Labor migration from Mozambique to South Africa.* D.Phil. Thesis. London: University of London.
- Head, J.
1995 "Migrant Mine Labor from Mozambique: Employment Prospects and Policy Options in the 1990s." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 13 (1), pp. 91-120.
- Jones, S.
1992 "Children on the Move: Parenting, Mobility, and Birth-status among Migrants." pp. 247-281 in Burman, S. and E. Preston-Whyte (eds.), *Questionable Issue. Illegitimacy in South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Kotzé, J.C.
1993 *In Their Shoes. Understanding Black South Africans through their Experiences of Life.* Kenwyn: Juta & Co. LTD.
- Leliveld, A.
1997 "The Effects of Restrictive South African Migrant Labor Policy on the Survival of Rural Households in Southern Africa: A Case Study from Rural Swaziland." *World Development* 25 (11), pp. 1839-1849.
- Le Roux, T.
1998 "Where are the Men? Black Women's Views on Male Participation in Family Life." pp.95-139 in Ziehl, S.C. (ed.), *Multi-Cultural Diversity and Families.* Grahamstown: Rhodes University Press.
- Mabetoa, M.
1994 "Cycles of Disadvantage of African Families in South Africa." pp. 81-97 in Sono, T. (ed.), *African Family and Marriage under Stress.* Pretoria: Centre for Development Analysis.
- Matlosa, K.
1995 *Labor Migration and the Economy in Southern Africa: A Review of Lesotho-South Africa Relations in a Post-Apartheid Era.* Bellville: The Centre for Southern African Studies.
- May, J.
1990 "The Migrant Labor System: Changing Dynamics in Rural Survival." Pp. 175-186 in Natrass, N. and E. Ardington (eds.), *The Political Economy of South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
1998a *Poverty and Inequality in South Africa. Report prepared for the Office of the Executive Deputy President and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality.* Durban: Glenwood Publishing.
1998b *Experience and Perceptions of Poverty in South Africa.* Durban: Glenwood Publishing.
- McGrath, M.
1990 "Economic Growth, Income Distribution and Social Change." pp. 88-106 in Natrass, N. and E. Ardington (eds.), *The Political Economy of South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

- Ministry in the Office of the President (MOP)
 1995 "The Urban Development Strategy of the Government of National Unity." *Government Gazette* 365 (16679), 3 November 1995. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Morris, A.
 1999 *Bleakness & Light. Inner-City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg.* Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Omer-Cooper, J.D.
 1987 *History of Southern Africa.* London: James Currey,
- Preston-Whyte, E.
 1991 "Invisible Workers: Domestic Service and the Informal Economy.: pp. 34-53 in Preston-Whyte, E. and C. Rogerson (eds.), *South Africa's Informal Economy.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Ramphela, M.
 1993 *A Bed Called Home. Life in the Migrant Labor Hostels of Cape Town.* Maitland: Clyson Printers.
- Russell, M.
 1995 *Parenthood among Black Migrant Workers to the Western Cape.* Pretoria: HSRC,
- Segar, J.
 1991 "Living in Anonymity: Conditions of Life in the Hostels of Cape Town." *South African Sociological Review* 3 (2), pp. 40-61.
- Simkins, C. and Dlamini, T.
 1992 "The Problem of Children born out of Wedlock." Pp. 64-76 in Burman. S. and E. PrestonWhyte (eds.), *Questionable Issue. Illegitimacy in South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Stahl, C.W.
 1981 "Migrant Labor Supplies, Past, Present and Future; with Special Reference to the Goldmining Industry." Pp. 7-44 in Böhning, W.R. (ed.), *Black Migration to South Africa. A Selection of Policy-oriented Research.* Geneva: International Labor Office.
- Stichter, S.
 1985 *Migrant Laborers.* London: Cambridge University Press.
- South African Housing White Paper
 1995 *South African Housing White Paper: 1995.* Pretoria: Central Statistics Services.
- UNICEF
 1993 *Children and Women in South Africa: A Situational Analysis.* National Children's Rights Committee and United Nations Children's Fund.
- Viljoen, S.
 1994 *Strengths and Weaknesses in the Family Life of Black South Africans.* Pretoria: HSRC.
- Wilson, E.
 1972 *Migrant Labor.* Johannesburg: The South African Council of Churches and Spro-Cas.