

# **Experiences of vulnerability due to loss of support by aged parents of emigrated children: a hermeneutic literature review**

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## **Abstract**

In disrupted families due to migration individual members support each other through transnational care. The care is often reciprocal as the members who are left behind support the members who emigrated and in return receive care from the emigrated family members. Aged parents who get left behind, however, often become vulnerable. The hermeneutic literature review shows that social, psychological or emotional and economic vulnerability are experienced. They have to deal with cultural challenges as their children form part of a new culture in their receiving country. Strong feelings of loss, helplessness and loneliness are experienced. The emigration of their children may also contribute to the financial vulnerability of the elderly.

Keywords: Elderly, emigration, adult children, left behind, emotional distress, loss of support, future concerns.

## **Introduction**

With globalization, many countries experience a high number of young adults emigrating in search of greener pastures. A substantial amount of research has been done on the health and well being of the emigrants in receiving countries, their adaption to new climates and health systems. However, those who stay behind, their health and vulnerability, has not been attended to sufficiently.

When adult children emigrate, the elderly left behind's health and vulnerability is influenced. The outmigration of adult children might impact mental health negatively, although the physical health might be better attended to, due to remittance support form

the emigrants (Adhikari, Jampaklay Chamrathirong, Richter, Pattaravanich & Vapattanawong, 2014 & Böhme, Persian & Stöhr, 2015).

In other studies it was found that the elderly left behind experience very poor physical and mental health including exposure to chronic diseases, had poor perceived health and very poor help seeking behaviour (Adhikari, Jampaklay & Chamrathirong, 2011), they were more susceptible to stress related health impairments such as hypertension, increased coronary syndrome (Burazeri, Goda, Tavanxhi, Sulo, Stefa, & Kark, 2007) and to psychological distress such as depressive symptoms (Lu, 2012). During crisis times of acute or chronic illness, dying or death, the intimate emotional and physical support of the transnational families is required (Baldassar, 2014) but not always available and leads to the increased vulnerability of those who stay behind.

## **Background**

Migration has transformed the fabric of societies (Marchetti-Mercer, 2009) and has disrupted families (McGuire & Martin, 2007). As adult children emigrate, families become transnational families (Zhou, 2012) and are thus not defined by geographical boundaries, or by limited time frames (Baldassar, 2007a). This growing socio-psychological phenomena (Marchetti-Mercer, 2009), affects both the emigrant and those remaining in the sending countries, causing pain for all involved (Mosca & Barrett, 2014). Caring and resource exchange between generations now become complicated (Zhou, 2012). Traditional care support structures have changed and the family is not seen as the reliable safety network (He & Ye, 2014) anymore.

The transnational care that follows emigration includes practical, financial, personal, emotional and moral support (Baldassar, 2007a) and is multidirectional and multigenerational (King, Cela, Fokkema, & Vullnetari, 2014) Transnational care can involve the adult emigrants, (first generation), their children (second generation), the

parents that stay behind and their parents. The focus of this article will be on the zero generation (King et al., 2014) (the parents of the first migrants who stay behind in the country of origin), their vulnerability and experiences. The zero generation may also have caring responsibilities of their own very old parents, the minus-one generation.

As their children migrate and also have possible grandchildren in host countries, the zero generation experiences a possible challenge of deteriorating health and wellbeing (Böhme et al., 2015) poor mental health (Adhikari et al., 2011), changing sense of self-worth and uselessness and feelings of loneliness. The complex process, dynamics and experience of aging (Zhou, 2012) is influenced by the loss of support of their children, and missing the contact with their grandchildren (Minnaar, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2014) which makes them more vulnerable.

With globalization, the zero generation is faced by challenges of disintegration of the three pillars of support (Iris, 2016) work, family and formal collective institutions. They become vulnerable when their reserve capacity to cope successfully with challenges falls below threshold (Hall & Hardill, 2016). The vulnerability is often linked to ill health, frailty and decline of quality of life.

In an attempt to cope with the trauma (Marchetti-Mercer, 2009) (even compared to death (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012)) transnational families (Bacigalupe & Gonzalo, 2012) increase usage of modern communication technology (Madianou & Miller, 2013) to bridge the distance, and stay in touch (Baldassar, 2007b). The quality of the relationship and obligation and expectation of the family (Adhikari et al., 2011) influences the usage of the media and creates opportunity to address the new circumstances (Bacigalupe & Gonzalo, 2012). Not all the elderly are capable to use (Minnaar et al., 2014) or have access to technology. Despite distance shrinking technology, it remains costly to stay in touch across borders (Waldinger, 2013) and creates asymmetrical reciprocal caregiving

(Beldassar & Merla, 2014). The children try to keep in contact with their parents (and vice versa) through telephone and WhatsApp calls, videos and voice notes, Skype, Twitter feeds, Snap Chats, Instagram and SMS messages. The question arises though; does this contact give sufficient support to the aging parent? Does this contact and interaction relieve the feelings of vulnerability for the elderly?

The age structure of the world's population is changing rapidly as medical science improves and people live longer. There is an intergenerational solidarity of adult children and their parents through the exchange of caring, time, space and finances, whether children co-reside, near co-reside or non-co-reside with their parents (Isengard & Szydlik, 2012).

Next to spouse support, the support of children has the most influence on the general wellbeing of the aged (Chen & Feely, 2014). The primary support system of the aged will assist in everyday life as well as in crisis periods. Positive attitude towards aging (Bryant, Bei, Gilson, Komiti, Jackson, & Judd, 2012) influences mental and physical health of the older adult. The aging parent not only deals with physical concerns but also with psychological, financial, safety, social, family and long term care concerns (Hamazaki & Nagai, 2012) where they need support from their children, which they have to find elsewhere when children emigrate (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012).

It must also be noted that the additional support of remittances from the emigrated children can help relieve the financial distress and this generates psychological gains and increased living standards. Improved nutritional status also leads to an enhanced physical health status that in its own leads to better psychological well-being (Lu, 2012). The providing of remittance may also relieve depressive symptoms in the elderly (Cong & Silverstein, 2008).

When adult children emigrate, not only the relationship between the children and their parents are influenced, but the relationship with the grandchildren as well (Ferreira, 2015). The relationship of grandparent – grandchild is mediated and determined by the middle generation (adult children) (Arber & Timonen, 2012). The grandparent role is “stolen” from the parent left behind when the adult children emigrate, and they mourn over the loss (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012) not only of their grandchildren but also their children.

Vulnerable elderly can be seen as those whose baseline capacity to sustain them falls under the threshold when challenged (Grundi, 2013). When the family unit is broken through distance, the elderly can face consequences of insufficient support like the decline of psychological and functional health, unsuccessful aging process and a lower life quality (de Sousa, Pelegrini, Ribeiro, Pereira, & Mendes, 2015).

Elderly people need more support and are seen as being more vulnerable as they are at greater risk of exposure to specific challenges (Grundi, 2013). Not only are the aged at risk from a health perspective, but several other factors like social, intergenerational and family support structures, wealth, personality and coping skills determine their risk and level of vulnerability. Social vulnerability has also a notable effect on the physical health of the elderly (Andrew, Mitnitski, Kirkland, & Rockwood, 2012).

As persons age they become more involved in problems of their own frailty and the frailty of persons close to them (Neikrug, 2003). They worry more about their frailty and need more support and assistance. Their frailty makes them more vulnerable. The aging process might cause deterioration of several physical functions e.g. eyesight, hearing, mobility, continence, loss of vitality and memory (Hamazaki & Nagai, 2016).

The aging process may influence their social interaction skills and opportunities, as well as social environment of the aged. Feelings of emotional distress such as

loneliness, anxiety, depression, worthlessness, may be caused by deterioration of health (resulting in loss of ability to maintain acts of daily living and instrumental acts of daily living independently), loss of independency, social insecurities and financial concerns (Mosca & Barrett, 2016). The elderly will also be concerned about their future, as they are frail and vulnerable and uncertain about who will care for and support them when their needs increase and face difficulties and challenges. In this natural increased state of vulnerability due to aging, are the parents of the emigrated children affected more intensely and more vulnerable due to the loss of support by their children?

## **Methodology**

### ***Design***

The review aimed to explore the experiences of vulnerability due to the loss of support of the elderly parent left behind when adult children emigrate. A hermeneutic approach was followed when searching for literature as more questions arose around the phenomena and the elderly left behind and their vulnerability.

### ***Search strategies through the Hermeneutic circle***

A hermeneutic framework of identification and search refining was used in the literature review (Baeli & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). The Hermeneutics philosophy provides a theoretical foundation of understanding and describing, as well as a methodology for a literature review (Gadamer, 1976). Although Hermeneutics was originally used to interpret Biblical texts, the philosophy was further developed to imaginatively re-think the original meaning of others (Baeli & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014) in all texts. This was challenged by Martin Heidegger and his student Hans–Georg Gadamer who reasoned that self-understanding and world understanding are inseparably interwoven and influence

human understanding in general. Hermeneutics provides a framework for developing understanding and clear meaning. A circular framework for searching for literature, reviewing, and deeper understanding of individual text, and then re-entering the circle and repeating the process until a deeper meaning of the whole and its parts is developed (Baell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

In the hermeneutic circle, to ensure in depth understanding of the phenomena, the whole body of relevant text is explored and parts of the text identified. A movement back and forth from individual text to the whole body of text builds up the enhanced understanding and interpretation through questioning and reasoning (Geertz, 1979). Understanding of one paper is never isolated, and is interpreted in the context that it is written in, but also then influenced by the understanding of other relevant literature of the whole. The whole new understanding of the phenomena is also influenced by each piece of literature that is read, questioned and interpreted (Baell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

As the relevant articles in journals are identified, specific journals seemed to cover the influences of emigration more frequently than others and these journals were researched in depth. In the same way authors were identified that have written more about the topic of emigration and those left behind, and more searches were done on these authors to find their work that covered the phenomena.

Literature from 2000 until 2016 was explored to find new context, understanding and give more insight into the experiences of this phenomena.

### *Searching for literature*

Initially selected databases were searched for relevant articles with the key words: Elderly, emigration, adult children and left behind. Abstracts of 132 articles were read to narrow down to the relevant articles. Articles were found in the following databases: CINAHL (9), Family and Societies worldwide (5), Humanities sources (2), MED line (6),

PsychInfo (14) and Social work abstracts (2). Any duplicates were eliminated from the 38 articles, the remaining 28 abstracts were researched again, and only most relevant articles which referred to any aspect of vulnerability of the elderly left behind after emigration of the adult children were included. 12 relevant articles remained for inclusion in the study.

From the limited amount of literature that was found it was clearly evident that other databases and other key words had to be included to expand the understanding of the phenomena. A new search was done with different search words more specifically to vulnerability and the emotions experienced by the elderly left behind: Emotional distress, loss of support, future concerns, elderly, emigration and left behind.

With the new key words more extensive searches were done and articles were identified in the following databases: PsychInfo (12), CINHALL (2), Academic search complete (2), Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition (1), Family and society studies worldwide (1), elimination of duplication (2), reading of abstracts and selection followed. A further 9 new articles were selected, downloaded and thoroughly researched.

### ***Refinement of the search***

The abovementioned searches shed light on the influence of the loss of support from the emigrated children of the vulnerable elderly that were left behind. Dynamic reflection into the texts refined the literature at hand (Smythe & Spence, 2012) and three major themes were revealed: Social, psychological or emotional and economical vulnerability.

### **Discussion and findings**

There is a strong interplay between the identified influences of emigration of adult children on the vulnerable elderly left behind in a sending country. Although they are



interwoven, there are three major aspects of vulnerability that were identified in the studied literature: Psychological and emotional vulnerability, social vulnerability and financial vulnerability

***Psychological and emotional vulnerability:***

Psychological and emotional vulnerability of the elderly are influenced by the absence of their children and grandchildren (Minnaar et al., 2014). They experience ambiguous loss with a feeling of disillusionment and helplessness, expressed in words like “we raise them to leave us”. The elderly left behind parent experiences feelings of vulnerability even before the children physically leave the country as they prepare and plan their emigration. The children in the decision making process and planning of the emigration might not include them. Thus even before the children (and grandchildren) have left the country, the parents already experience feelings of uncertainty, fear and even may feel unloved and rejected.

In Nussbaum’s central human capabilities, one of the fundamental entitlements to live a life that is worthy with dignity, under the heading: emotions, is to love and be loved and cared for (Nussbaum, 2003). The elderly, whose children leave them behind, may feel that they have failed their children, feel unworthy, unloved and vulnerable.

Parents feel a strong sense of loss and struggle to get closure as the loss is continuously experienced with each separation after telephonic contact or visits, when the children depart and return again to their new home country. They experience feelings of powerlessness, loss of control, abandonment and increased vulnerability (King & Vulltenari, 2006). The elderly feel depressed and worried about the ability to fend for themselves and the possibility that they might die and not see their children again. They have lost an important source of support experiencing emotional distress and a feeling of

loss so intense it can be compared to losing a loved one to death (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012).

Parents like to share in their children's success and this is difficult to experience over distance. When the children are faced with a crisis, the left behind elderly would like to give support and advice, which may be difficult with distance between them. Also when big decisions must be taken, joyful celebrations are held, meaningful cultural and religious ceremonies and rituals are practiced, the elderly would want to join the children. Especially the Zero generation who are deprived from the privilege to care for their children and grandchildren are transformed into orphan pensioners (King & Vullnetari, 2006). This also intensifies the vulnerability shaped by the normal aging process and dependency on family structure.

When the adult children move away and there are grandchildren in play, the grandparent cannot be as involved in the raising of the grandchildren as when they could be if they lived closer. The feeling can be as intense a feeling as a profound outsider with an undercurrent of loss and confusion, as they do not feel part of their grandchildren's daily lives (Sigad & Eisikovits, 2013). They can feel meaningless and even feel that they neglect these grandchildren. When grandparents do not have regular interaction with their grandchildren, it is difficult to form a close bond with them. They do not have the opportunity to play games, do projects, read books, build puzzles, attend their sport events and be involved in their day-to-day lives.

The parent can also feel abandoned (Sudnongbua et al., 2010) and these feelings can influence the quality of life. Feelings of anxiety, despair and depression can rob the "abandoned" parent of the enjoyment of life because their life seems meaningless.

"Empty nest" parents (Goa, Wei, Yang, Shen, & Tang, 2014) experience a higher percentage of depression (8.18%) than non-affected parents, and symptoms can include

self-grief thus reducing the quality of life. There is also substantial evidence that the mental health of the mothers of emigrated children declines, although it seems that the fathers are not so severely affected except for the elderly lonely fathers (Mosca & Barrett, 2014).

New coping mechanisms have to be learned and adopted by the vulnerable elderly. Some of the elderly rationalize or intellectualize while others just deny losses. Projection and repressing of these emotions can lead to further emotional and psychological vulnerability.

On the other hand, some affected elderly develop new support networks, and gain new perspectives. They get involved in new projects and broaden their interests and personal growth and development (Minnaar, et al., 2014).

Although emigrants are separated from their families by international borders or large distances, they maintain mutual care-giving relationships. In a study by Marchetti-Mercer (2012) one of her participants mentioned, “I don’t think because you are far away your love or anything changes” thus, feeling that the distance between them does not change her bond with her children. Reciprocal psychological and emotional support can be present, and even stronger after the emigration of the adult children.

The emigration of the children can benefit the psychological welfare of the elderly who are content with their life and are actively living to the fullest. The sudden loneliness and the change in the roll of the parent and grandparent when the children emigrate, leaves the parents with time to spare and can contribute to an opportunity to personal growth and development. The emigration crisis can have a positive influence where parents reflect on their lives and see the opportunity for personal growth (Minnaar et al. 2014:854).

### ***Social vulnerability***

Nussbaum's capability theory refers to the social basis of self-respect and non-humiliation, to live a life with and towards each other, to recognize and show concern to other human beings and to engage in various forms of social interactions under the heading of affiliation (Nussbaum, 2003). The family disruption when the children emigrate causes reduced social support and interaction (Lu, 2012). Personal relationships, social support and sexual activity can be influenced by the lack of support of elderly left behind (Sudnongbua, 2010).

To maintain a good quality of life, elderly should have good overall living conditions and a safe environment. The Quality of Life score for social relationships and environmental domains of the left behind elderly are significantly lower than standard data (Xie, Ding, Zhong, Yi, Zeng, Hu, & Zhou, 2014). Factors to ensure a good quality life include feeling safe, good overall living conditions, having sufficient finances, access to health services and information for everyday living (Sudnonhbua, LaGrow, & Boddy, 2010). Access to health services, transport and access to information for daily living can become difficult if the children are not close enough to supply in those needs as the elderly become more dependent and vulnerable (Sudnongbua et al., 2010). The left behind elderly become more isolated, watches more TV and interacts less with neighbours, and also need more physical care (Lin, Pingjun, & Loubere, 2014). It is clear that the left behind has less social capital compared to the non-left behind.

The elderly does not want to become a burden to their children and close family, and if they want to stay independent as long as possible, they will have to look for care elsewhere as their children will not be able to look after them. They will look at institutions or facilities to offer this independence from their children. Elderly may have to hire caregivers to attend to their bodily care because distance when children have

emigrated. To prevent the embarrassment that would have occurred between parent and child, the hired caregiver, as an outsider becomes an insider (van der Geest Mul, & Vermeulen, 2004). This changes their sense of belonging, safety and self-worth and makes them more vulnerable than what they already are.

They worry about their health, life functioning in the community and family relations for the future (Hamazaki & Nagai, 2012). The parents looked forward to the natural progression as a pensioner who retired from an active contributor to society, to a grandparent who is involved in the raising of the grandchildren and assisting the adult children with guidance and advice, now can't happen because of the emigration.

As the emigrated children have to accept a new culture of the receiving country, the parents experience cultural alienation from their children and grandchildren (Sigad & Elsikovits, 2013). The grandparents experience an undercurrent of loss and confusion and have to maintain their role as grandparent even if they feel like outsiders in their children and grandchildren's daily lives. Impeded by physical distance and cultural alienation they are forced to participate in a transnational lifestyle as their lives are governed by the imperatives of this mode of existence.

Complex social suffering can be experienced as the traditions and culture in villages and communities are impacted by emigration and the challenges of poverty, alcoholism, homelessness, malnutrition and death could be faced alone by the elderly, without any support of nearby children (Downman, 2012). Cultural rules and concepts have to be adjusted and even broken when adult children emigrate (Miltiades, 2002). Some parents do not expect their children to emigrate permanently as an example, the Hindu culture it is expected for the children to take care of their aging parents. The parents however feel responsible for their children's wellbeing and do not want to limit them. Parents who are not in an extended family system's care, now have to turn to the services

of maids, other care givers or institutions. This shifts their sense of security usually received from their children to the maids or care giver. The fear of rejection of their way of life can motivate the elderly to abandon some of the traditions, as there is less control over and respect from close family members (Coles, 2001).

Unprecedented population shifts change the way the communities' function and results in aged care issues. Social vulnerability is experienced especially in rural and regional communities presenting itself as drug abuse, HIV infections and mental health symptoms. A tremendous impact is evident on social structures and traditional cultures in rural and regional communities as result of emigration (Downman, 2012).

Even in affluent welfare states where the elderly may be well off materially, they suffer loneliness and boredom through the lack of involvement with the absent younger family members (van der Geest et al., 2004).

There are also benefits to some of the elderly as they accept the absence of their children after emigration. The parents get more involved in other activities for which they did not have the time previously, when they were involved in the supervision and care of their grandchildren. Some of the parents got more involved in religious activities and others started hobbies that were neglected previously. Their social involvement in supporting others and doing voluntary work grows and adds to the growth in their sense of worth. Due to the resilience of the families' relations and the power of human narrative the aged are able to make changes and modifications in their later stages of life to their benefit (Coles, 2001).

The emigration of their children is easier accepted and parents adapt faster if they are active and healthy and can visit the children frequently. Some parents are very happy that their children have emigrated, because their children have a prosperous life in their new country and this makes the whole acceptance of the process easier. When your

children are happy in another country, it is easier to accept that they have emigrated (Marchetti-Mercer 2012).

### ***Financial vulnerability***

Nussbaum's central human functional capabilities theory refers to control over one's environment (2003) both political and material environments to be worthy of human dignity. One needs to be able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life and being able to hold property (land and moveable goods).

We have to look at two different scenarios here: firstly, where the emigrated children send home a remittance to assist the parents with their financial needs and secondly where the children do not send home any or insufficient remittance.

The remittances sent to the parents have an influence on the psychological and emotional status of the parents. Depression decreases as the remittance received, are higher (Abbas et al., 2009). The remittance received from children is one of the major factors influencing scores on the psychological domain of the Quality of Life scores. The physical care of the parents can also be better taken care of with expensive privately paid higher qualified caregivers, in contrast of elderly that have little or no care available due to affordability (Adhikari et al., 2011).

The physical safety and security is also influenced by the remittance. This will determine the physical environment (accommodation and neighbourhood) where the elderly stay and spend their time, and what they have access to: e.g. health care, sufficient monies for emergencies, food and transport for daily living (Xie et al., 2014). There could be a collapse of income due to the emigration, where elderly was dependent on the adult children and no remittances are received.

The left behind parent that still works has a higher income but also a higher expenditure while the parents whose children do not emigrate are supported by their

children. Informal care and social capital can unfortunately not meet the care needs of those left behind (Lin et al., 2014).

## **Conclusion**

As people age, they are more vulnerable and become more dependent on family to support and care for them. When the aging parents of adult children (and possible grandchildren) are left behind when they emigrate, they experience even more feelings of vulnerability. In the articles researched three main themes were revealed: firstly, the emotional and psychological vulnerability of the left behind increased when the children emigrate. They experience a strong sense of loss, helplessness, loneliness, increased depression and anxiety and a lower quality of life. The elderly now has to seek care from other sources than their own children. The role as grandparent becomes complicated as they have to build relationships over distances.

Secondly social vulnerability is experienced as their role in the community changes. They have to deal with cultural challenges as their children now form part of a new culture in their receiving country and may have to compromise their own. They become more isolated and lonely in their communities.

Thirdly the emigration has an impact on the financial vulnerability of the elderly. Should they not receive sufficient or any remittances, the access and availability of health care might become problematic, housing and food supplies may not be affordable anymore. Even in affluent establishments, the emotional and psychological effect on the left behind elderly is experienced negatively.



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