

# The psychology of emigration

How does the soil upon which we take our first steps define the core of our being? Do we bond with our early surroundings the way we bond to significant others? Does our cultural worldview emanate from our interactions with kinsfolk or from our direct experience with our environment? What genetic material and what kind of learnt behavior facilitate adaptation to a new environment beyond the borders of our birthplace?

These are merely a sample of questions with which I have grappled over the past years. My personal experience of immigration into South Africa as a twelve year old and immigration to the USA as an adult in my forties, have afforded me a plethora of experiences to inform my work in this field. In addition, I naturally draw on the theoretical framework that accompanies me in my daily work as a clinical psychologist.

The angst that accompanies the first thoughts of international relocation finds its source in the primeval need for self preservation. The very core of our being fights against what we instinctively know to be a very threatening experience. We intuitively sense that to leave all that is familiar and start over in a place that feels foreign in every way is tantamount to self annihilation. We may be brave enough to explore foreign places that appeal to us in terms of relocation, with the thought at the back of our mind, that we are simply having a 'look see'. Most of us hide behind the option that if we do not like what we see, we can nestle back into the familiar, possibly strengthening our defense mechanism of denial, ignoring the very factors in our familiar environment that alerted us to the need for exploring alternative environments in the first place. The power of denial cannot be underestimated. As children we draw on numerous coping mechanisms in order to deal with stressors that threaten and overwhelm us. Ideally, adults would cope with stressors in increasingly mature ways, such as resolving conflict constructively and solving problems by carefully and realistically assessing possible solutions and reaching well researched and deliberated decisions. Sadly, even as adults it is all too tempting to resort to early learnt mechanisms such as denial and projection to 'wish away' uncomfortable situations that are placing undue demand on our psyche.

Exploring new environments for the purpose of holidays is ever so appealing. Doing so for the purpose of assessing new environments in the event of relocation brings with it a totally different fear factor. We are acutely aware of differences and wonder how we will ever assimilate into this strangeness. Words spoken with a different accent pierce our eardrum and we anger when we are misunderstood.

Processes of every kind are a challenge since we don't have all the answers required line upon line of countless forms that need to be completed. We are daunted by the unfamiliarity of almost every aspect of life. So much so, that we are blinded to the similarity of people and environments all over the world. As we learn to reach out bravely to our new surroundings, we are encouraged by small accomplishments that allow us to feel a sense of control over the environment. Much like the experience of toddlers bravely leaving their mother's side, to explore and master the world that is opening up to them. Great is the sense of achievement as we stretch ourselves in every way to conquer and claim our stake in this new place that we choose to call home. The family unit is strengthened as members rely on each other for comfort and support. The personal growth that emanates from the process of relocation is immeasurable, and could be likened to climbing Mount Everest, a feat that begins with fear and trepidation, is interspersed with moments of excitement and exhilaration, encounters numerous trials and unexpected problems, draws on gratitude for the safety ropes that allow us to take the next step, demands courage, family support and a strong sense of self, and culminates with an indescribable euphoria that no money or drug could possibly provide.

Emigration out of South Africa is further complicated by the socio historic and political factors that necessitate high functioning South Africans to face the reality that a long-term future in their country of origin may well not be a reality. As the factors of a long history of oppression are redressed, many non black South Africans are questioning their future in a political climate that voids and negates the talents and aptitudes of persons on the basis of race. Ironic, in the face of a long and brave struggle against oppression, to remove all but one color of the rainbow, paying no credence to the phrase coined at the birth of democracy 'there shall be richness in diversity'. Such displacement comes with a great deal of anger and hurt. It is this anger that interests me rather than the political faux pas bringing a beautiful country to its knees. White South Africans have benefited from Apartheid whether they wanted to or not. There is a responsibility to address the wrongs of yesterday. The question is whether it is appropriate or beneficial to make co existence impossible due to a severely unmanaged climate of violent crime coupled with a gross lack of opportunities for young South Africans on the basis of race. How do these feelings of anger and hurt impact on the process of immigration and assimilation?

Unresolved anger around the 'loss of our country of birth' can only complicate assimilation into the host country. Such anger may be projected onto citizens in the host culture, manifested by hostile behavior toward such citizens who have not experienced the upheaval of 'forced relocation'. It is extremely important to process and resolve emotions and feelings associated with the loss of the country of origin in order to embrace our new surroundings.

It is helpful to realize that the world is indeed a global village, we are no longer confined to a life within our borders, advanced technology has closed the chiasm between cultures and languages; we are just people wherever we are born, with very similar goals, dreams and aspirations. In the end it is a choice to assimilate and pursue a meaningful existence in a country gracious enough to welcome newcomers or to hold onto senseless grudges borne of a time that was fraught with struggle for more South Africans, black and white, than just you or me.

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