

Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The act of leaving all behind for foreign lands has had significant emotional and psychological effects on the ageing parents. While research on the implications of migration has mostly focused on the ones who travelled and the opportunities and challenges, they face, this paper narrates the emotional and psychological challenges faced by ageing parents who are left-behind. This paper with the support of the narrations of five cases of parents in Nigeria that have been left-behind explained that they faced feelings of anxiety, depression and loneliness. This research revealed that the emotional and psychological effects of migration of ageing parents may ultimately result in the death, and in some cases, the children will not be available to pay their final tribute to their parents. Some coping mechanisms identified for these parents in this study include involvement in religious organizations/activities, community service, family support, use of technology, and close relation with other children. Although these measures do not replace the physical presence of the child, it provides some level of help and reduces the psychological and emotional impacts of migration on ageing parents. For the government and policymakers to safeguard the health and well-being of the aged in society, it is advised that there be establishment of community-based care initiatives to offer emotional support and lessen feelings of loneliness.

KEYWORDS: Migration, Japa, Health psychology; Loneliness, Ageing parents.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is the movement of people from one geographical location to another on a temporary or permanent basis and mostly fuelled by personal reasons (Schewel et al., 2024). Migration of people (internal and international) is an underlying feature of the civilisation of man and often results in stable demographics and economic trends (Aral, 2020). The driving force behind migration has been categorised into push and pull factors (Urbański, 2022), of which the push factor refers to any forceful reason why a person decides to leave his home country, mainly due to factors beyond his control, including (but not limited to) disaster, terrorist attack and famine, while the pull factor refers to an attraction of the individual to a destination country which drives him to leave his country (Mohammed, 2016). According to the International Organisation for Migration (2019), 15% of the world population are internal or international migrants, and there are an estimated 272 million international migrants who account for 3.5% of the global population (United Nations, 2019). This practice of migrating has been in existence from the earliest time of life on earth and has been fuelled by factors such as search for food, shelter, pasture, avoidance of famine, war and natural disaster. In modern times, people migrate for several reasons such as pursuit of academics, economic reasons, and medical reasons (Millock, 2015). Other factors which may be considered as pivotal in modern migration include technological advancement, increased international trade relationships, political instability, inflation, unemployment and poverty, and economic instability (ILO, 2006; Akanle et al. 2021; Arhin-Sam 2019).

According to Démurger (2015), there are positive and negative effects associated with the migration of a family member on left-behind family members, and this is dependent on the circumstance surrounding the individual. Research indicates that migration and the resulting financial remittance by those who have migrated are very important sources of income for poorer households in developing countries, including Nigeria (Clemens 2011). Although these financial remittances are a positive effect of the migration of a family member because they help to build investments, alleviate poverty, and support the household among other reasons, migration of a family member also predisposes left-behind family members (especially parents and children) to psychological problems (Ojuri & Akanle, 2025). In more specific terms, households whose children have migrated out to another country, leaving only older adults, are called 'empty nests' (Gao et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019). Empty nests are characteristically places of loneliness, depression, guilt, anxiety' (Chaukhar, 2009).

The emotional and psychological effects of a child migrating could cause parents to fall sick due to loneliness and depression; this is worse if the child is an only child and could effectively water down any perceived advantages of the migration of the child (White

Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

et al., 2019). The psychological and emotional effects are worse if the child is the primary carer for the parent. White et al. (2019) also argued that left-behind parents (especially fathers) explore various types of behaviours due to the depression and severe loneliness as a result of separation from their children; such behaviour as drinking alcohol has been shown to be detrimental to their health and could lead to death if not adequately managed. International migration has been shown to impact heavily on those who leave as well as families left behind, in most cases, parents (often called “left-behind parents”) being the worst hit (Falicov, 2005). “Left-behind” parents are parents who reside in their native countries and have at least one biological child who has emigrated (Mount, & Moas, 2015). According to a report (United Nations, 2002), emigration of children (especially young adults) has far-reaching negative impacts on ageing parents who are left behind. Research from different countries shows that these effects may indeed be applied universally. Emigration of young adults from Mexican households has been associated with poorer mental and physical health of ageing parents, and these symptoms have been linked to the lack of physical close contact and emotional cohesion between children and their ageing parents (Antman, 2010). Among households in the Netherlands, lack of contact between parents and emigrated children was shown to have negative effects on the parents (especially mothers), such as emotional and social loneliness (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2010). It has been shown that amongst European parents, symptoms of depression and mental health conditions were improved when there was at least one phone contact with their children once a week (Buber & Engelhardt, 2008). In China, the mental and psychological well-being of left-behind parents was greatly improved when they resided with immediate family members (Chen & Short, 2008).

On the contrary, some reports have also indicated that left-behind parents may enjoy better health outcomes. For instance, left-behind parents in the United States of America were found to have better health conditions compared to households with children intact (Waite and Hughes, 1999). Another study also showed that left-behind parents lived emotionally and socially stable lives, mainly because they had the opportunity to pursue new interests, make new friends and reconnect with activities which may not have been possible when the children were living with them (Wenger et al. 2007; Dennerstein et al. 2002; Bohme et al. 2015).

A study by Adhikari et al. (2011), showed a strong association between poor mental health conditions with emigration of children, but no association was observed with the physical health of elderly left-behind parents. Moreover, Gibson et al. (2011) showed that emigration of children may not have a negative impact on the psychological and mental health of left-behind parents. According to Thapa et al. (2018), risk factors of severe mental and psychological health effects of emigration on left-behind parents include sex, education, age, place of residence, underlying mental health issues, level of education, social support, physical exercise, access to healthcare services, level of social ties, extent of community engagement and interactions. It must also be noted that younger left-behind parents do not feel these psychological and emotional issues as much as their older counterparts (Ye et al., 2017). Although the desire of every parent is to see their children leave home and live successful lives, when children move from a multigenerational system to a foreign country, the parents are exposed to some level of solitude which has impacts on their physical, psychological and emotional health as well as quality of life (Seiffe-Krenke, 2006).

Angel et al. (2017) assert that the mental health and quality of life of left-behind parents may be harmed further because the physical absence of their child may hamper traditional intra-family support systems. Furthermore, adult children provide major support to older persons, especially in low- and middle-income countries; hence, their departure to foreign countries has serious effects on their physical health (Thapa, 2021). Mental health, quality of life and well-being are also affected (Liang & Wu, 2014; Yahirun & Arenas, 2018). Research has also identified left-behind older parents as being at higher risk of reduced cognitive ability and reduced happiness (Cheng et al., 2015; Song, 2017; Wang et al., 2017; Zhai et al., 2015; Scheffel & Zhang, 2019). Parenting is a universal language, although slight differences exist from one country to another, the emotional and psychological impact of parental separation from children are similar across the globe.

In the days after the end of the colonialism in Nigeria, there was an exchange system whereby nationals from other countries came to Nigeria to study, work or do business, while Nigerians also went abroad for similar reasons. Usually, they returned to their home country after conclusion of such pilgrimages. However, in this present reality and in the face of severe economic hardship occasioned by poor leadership, most Nigerians started seeking economic and academic succour abroad and made these countries their permanent homes, giving rise to the concept of *japa* (“*jakpa*”).

This paper aims to explore and critically analyse the impact of migration on the mental, emotional and social health of ageing parents in Nigeria. *Japa* is used to represent the phenomenon of migration for this country, and this paper answers the question of how migration of Nigerian youths affects the quality-of-life and well-being of ageing (or aged) parents that are left-behind.

***Japa* phenomenon and the Nigerian Youth**

The term “*Japa*” (“*já-kpa*”) has become emblematic of the current wave of Nigerian youth’s migration. *Japa* is a Yoruba words which means “to run” or “to escape”. In essence, *japa* may be defined as an act of fleeing from unpleasant or unfavourable conditions in one primary place of existence to a new location more peaceful and suitable for existence (Okunade, & Awosusi, 2023). This slang has since become a very popular amongst Nigerian youths to describe the act of migrating from the country in pursuit of better opportunities and a better life. *Japa* has become widely known all over the world due to the widespread and far-reaching nature of the internet. *Japa* became even more popular after the year 2020 as Nigeria witnessed a heightened desperation by young people to

Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

leave the shores of the country in pursuit of greener pastures abroad while escaping the poor living conditions in the home country, Nigeria. This trend was initially observed to be prevalent among the middle-class, however it has since spread across lower class to even the highly placed in society. The European Commission (2000) identified major factors of migration to include the search for better access to economic and educational opportunities, superior living conditions, family-related reasons, and civil war and conflict. In many developing countries of the world, underdevelopment has been identified as a common cause of migration of young persons out their home countries (Adedokun & Karzanova, 2019).

Japa has been seen as a means of survival rather than a mere choice among the youths of Nigeria (Duru 2021). For the peculiarities of the Nigerian situation, factors identified as being major triggers for the *japa* phenomenon include perceived better educational and economic opportunities, better security and well-being in foreign countries such as United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Canada. Other factors identified include poor salaries and working conditions, communal crises and religious crises, terrorism (Van Den Bersselaar, 2005; Ojo, et al. 2011). *Japa* can thus be viewed as a phenomenon which originates from the survival instincts of the youths ignited by worsening conditions in Nigeria.

The initial *japa* wave witnessed youths flocking to English speaking countries such as USA, UK, Canada (mainly due to ease of settling in without having to struggle with language barrier). However there has been upsurge in *japa* to non-English speaking Western and non-Western countries such as Germany, (pre-war) Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Northern Cyprus (Besenyő & Kármán, 2022; Ezel & Arasli, 2021; Goodman, 2019; Oni, 2023).

Japa has been observed to have the potential of causing national crisis because the bulk of young people who leave are among the productive age of the country typically aged between 15 and 35 years, an age-range which constitutes about 45% of the total population of the country (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development 2021; Nnoruga and Osigwe 2023).

While migration (or more specifically, emigration) in most civilized nations of the world is a product of natural disasters, wars or trafficking, among Nigerian youths it is more of survival migration (Liu, 2024). According to Liu (2024), *japa* is a short-term impulsive escape mechanism without proper consideration of longer effects. Furthermore, Cheung (2023) added that *japa* is more prevalent among young unmarried young people because older married couples who have children tend to critically analyse the future long-term impact of *japa* on their families. Odimegwu & Joe-Akunne (2023) also mentioned that there were more males who *japa* compared to their female counterparts. Although there are several *migration* routes abound, education and work routes are the most popular, mainly because in countries such as UK and Canada, it provides the opportunity to travel with a dependent (Okunade & Awosusi 2023). Despite the reality of the cost of *japa* and inherent immigration issues (in the countries of destination) yet, these resilient youths choose to invest their time and resources to see it through (Offor et al. 2022). *Japa* phenomenon also echoes the reluctant nature of the youths to continually endure undue deprivations, poor living conditions, poor standards of education and their desire to make a living outside the country of their birth (Liu, 2024).

Although there has been extensive discourse on the motivations for *japa* and experiences of young people abroad, little attention has been paid to the psychological and emotional impact on parents (especially ageing parents) who are often left-behind as a result of their children *japaing*. The astronomical rise in *japa* has had significant psychological and emotional impact on ageing patients which often results depression, loneliness, sadness and altered family dynamics. Although technological advancement has revolutionized treatment and management of diseases, older populations are still very vulnerable and this may lead to lowered quality of life and poor mental and psychological health (Thapa, 2021). A higher prevalence of mental health disorder has been observed among older people with up to 15% of adults of age 60 and above living with mental conditions such as depression, anxiety, dementia, post-traumatic stress and substance misuse (Thapa, 2021). The Nigerian society holds family cohesion to high esteem, modernization has led to significant decline in family support for the elderly (Jiloha, 2009; Ting, 2012) especially when they are not one's biological parents. This trend also places parents on the edge when sending their children abroad because they feel they may experience low levels of care from children who are not biologically theirs and this result in low level of well-being. Parents who receive financial assistance from their children have been shown to have better psychological well-being (Sanuade, et al., 2014). One of the most important factors which causing an upsurge in youth migration out of Nigeria is the economic challenges facing the over 210 million Nigerians with majority living below the poverty line. Other factors have been identified to include limited job opportunities, inflation, corruption, rising insecurity and injustice.

EFFECTS OF MIGRATION (*JAPA*) ON AGEING PARENTS

One question that comes to mind when considering the *japa* phenomenon is the impact it will have on the ageing parents who are left behind. Ageing left-behind parent's face challenges such as:

Societal disruptions/misfits' status: Although, *japa* has proven to be a very productive and profitable decision for most Nigerian youths especially in terms of opportunities and repatriation of foreign exchange to cater for their loved ones back home, it often creates an unfillable void in the lives of ageing parents who have to live with the reality of not seeing their children. Nigeria has a rich tradition of family bond and intergenerational support in which parents are catered for in their old age by the children they bore. When these children *japa*, the parents are left like misfits in their own societies, this often disrupts their lives and alienates them from the norms of society. It may become challenging and tasking when these children do not contact their parents or come home

Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

for considerable lengths of time. Depression sets in when parents recall the times when the children were around them. Beyond loneliness and depression, issues relating to physical care, clothing, feeding and companionship also arise. It is worsened as they grow older because parents cannot enjoy the company of others more than they enjoy the company of their children. This is particularly so because with old age comes certain life issues which only one's biological children can manage. The evidence is thus glaring that initially, parents will be happy to have their children migrate but in the long run, they will have a longing for companionship especially when they are alone at home.

Aged left-behind parents often have a tough time relating deeply and sharing things about their lives with people other than their children.

Psychological and emotional effects: Parents often experience episodes of anxiety, loneliness, abandonment and depression as a result of sudden physical separation from their children. Traditionally, in Nigerians societies, parents and children rely on daily interactions and support, thus, when there is a separation as a result of *japa*, the mental health of parents may decline and this may affect their overall quality-of-life. It should be noted that the children also have their own share of feelings but the focus of this paper is on the parents. According to Song et al (2014), migration of children resulted in significantly lower psychological well-being of parents. Parental emotions are further compounded by feelings of uncertainty about the welfare and health status of the children in the foreign country.

Culture of dependency: In a typical Nigeria society, children are a blessing from God who are expected to take care of their parents in their old age. Thus, ageing parents who have children who have migrated tend to develop dependency on these children abroad. Left behind families attach much dependence on remittances from those who have *japa* and this creates a high level of dependence (Akanle & Adesina, 2017). In some instances, these remittances are so substantial that left behind parents live lives of luxury to the envy of others (Odorige, 2016; Akhigbe, & Efevottu, 2023). However, when there is a shortfall or stoppage of remittances, serious challenges set in. Most Nigerian youths living abroad are faced with a high expectation of repatriating large amounts of cash to cater for their ageing parents back home. It is not uncommon to see ageing parents live a life of luxury off the efforts of their children who reside outside the country. This dependency may result to hypertension, sadness and psychological trauma if the parents lose contact with the child.

Economic and Societal Challenges: Social isolation may also result from *japa*. Parents may find it difficult to cope due to the physical absence of the child. They may as a result avoid social gatherings especially those involving the children of their friends, relatives or colleagues. The parents might become increasingly vulnerable due to lack of direct assistance and support from the child; these cannot be compensated for by financial remittances.

TALES OF WOE: CASE STUDIES OF AGEING LEFT-BEHIND PARENTS

Having a child relocate is often a source of pride, but it frequently backfires after a few years. Here are a few real-life examples to better understand the emotional and psychological effects of *Japa* culture on elderly parents.

Case 1-A sad 75th Birthday: This is a true story of a 75-year old Nigerian parent, Mr. Omisore, who shed some light on the emotional and psychological impact of children migrating (*japa*) abroad. Mr. Omisore, a politician in Lagos state, Nigeria, lamented that although he had 15 biological children, only 2 or 3 of them will be physically present to celebrate his 75th birthday (8th July every year was his birthday!) because they all resided abroad having migrated some years earlier. In the words of the septuagenarian (an elderly person aged in the 70s), *japa* will ultimately do more harm than good to Nigeria if left unchecked. Highlighting on some specific harmful effects, Mr. Omisore noted that the *japa* trend was leading to diminishing of culture as well as norms and languages of Nigerian society. In his candid submission, if all the youths *japa*, the job of nation building will be abandoned. Recalling his childhood and youthful life, he reminisced how he grew up with his parents, helping out in his father's cocoa business but regrettably, in his own old age, all his kids were in the diaspora. He pointed out that *japa* syndrome had loosened family bond between them and despite having 15 children, he could not recall the last time he saw them all together with him as a family. He lamented that most children who *japa* even end up being absent at the funerals of their parents as a means to save cost. He also noted that when it was time for the children to send money for upkeep to parents they tend to be calculative and put into serious considerations the exchange rate. Remarking on his forthcoming birthday, he noted that all he would get from his children abroad would be a video call wishing him a happy birthday. Although, he felt some connection with his children when having soccer discussions, he asserted that it wasn't enough to fulfil the joys of fatherhood. Citing another scenario when he underwent a surgery, he had only one of his children to stand by him and see him through that period. An experience he noted wasn't good enough. However, he pointed out he consoled himself from the pain and sadness of his children being mostly abroad by building a school which had helped him get closer to kids whom he now saw as his (Olabiya, 2023).

Case 2-The lone doctor: A 77-year-old medical doctor Dr Olubunmi Sanyaolu tells of his experience as a left-behind ageing parent. He recalled that watching his son, Bunmi (who was now 27-years old) grow was a source of immense joy for him. His son was manning his father's business as a young university graduate but as a father he had desired his son to see the other side of the world.

Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

According to the septuagenarian, his son's plan to *japa* did not come as a child but as a young adult after graduation from the university and spending a few years. Despite having all the resources for a comfortable life here in Nigeria, his son opted to migrate. Although Dr. Sanyaolu had feelings of solitude and loneliness, he was positive that his son would do better in a foreign country. As a way to cope with his son's absence, Dr. Sanyaolu pointed out that he speaks to his son a minimum four times per week so as to fill in the gaps of missing him. This though, was still insufficient to fill the void. He had also planned a visit for a later date to have some physical contact with his son (Titilola, 2024).

Case 3- Papa and Mama Oye: At the time of passing of 76-year-old Pa Oye, only his youngest child (daughter) and maid were around to bid him farewell to the great beyond. Pa Oye had five biological children in all, consisting of two girls and three boys, but only one (girl) resided in Nigeria. Due to the absence of his sons, upon his death, his relatives moved in swiftly to bury him and share his properties without recourse to the widow he left behind. At this action, the widow of Pa Oye, Mama Oye was thrown into even deeper mourning and sadness. Her sorrow and sadness were because of the fact that if her sons were around such treatment won't be meted on her. It should be noted that in Nigerian culture, wives do not have legal rights to fight for or protect the properties of their deceased husband. The widow always spoke about her children who were working abroad but could not return to bury their father nor protect the properties he left behind. Her emotional and psychological health may eventually lead to her death, if the children do not return on time to do the needful. According to the story, the children had some difficulty raising funds to sponsor their trip back home hence it is possible that they were not doing so well in the abroad after all (Titilola, 2024)

Case 4-Mama Oluwadamilare: This story tells of a sixty-year-old woman, Oluwadamilare whose son had left the country about four years earlier. She had lived all her life with her son and when he left she was in a state of constant mind battle and the reality of living without physical contact with her son. Mama Oluwadamilare stated that due to her fondness of her son, an hour of life had been difficult to live without thoughts of her son. She confirmed that she could only cope with his absence via regular video calls to him. According to her, it had not been easy since he migrated and she missed him a lot, with the hope of seeing him very soon. Indeed, the absence of her son had placed emotional and psychological stress on her as well as warranting lifestyles changes to enable her cope without her son (Titilola, 2024).

Case 5-Abiola, the footballer: In 2021, a young talented Nigerian boy, Abiola made the decision to relocate to Kingdom Bahrain with a dream of becoming a footballer. Recalling his joy at the prospect of *japa*, he stated that his parents received the news of his departure with mixed feelings of happiness and sadness. They were happy he was pursuing his dreams of becoming a footballer but were sad at the fact they will so greatly miss him. Although Abiola stated that he missed his parents, friends, relatives and community in Oyo, he had no choice but to leave everything behind to chase his dreams. At the time of telling his story, Abiola who was now 22 years old (he migrated when he was 19 years old) told of his parent's sadness and emotional instability occasioned by his decision to migrate. Nowadays, due to time-zone differences and work schedules, Abiola stated that he was able to speak to his mother three times during weekdays and on the weekends, he speaks to the entire family. Although he asserted that it was never sufficient for his mother, he felt it helped her emotional and psychological well-being. Even after two years of leaving the country, Abiola's father was yet to face the reality that his son had left the country (Titilola, 2024).

WHAT CAN LEFT-BEHIND PARENTS DO TO MANAGE THEIR EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH?

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that there are advantages inherent in children migrating but there are also heavy consequences especially on the emotional and psychological health of left-behind parents. *Japa* as a phenomenon has come to stay in contemporary Nigerian society especially with the realities on grounds in which there is little or no improvement in the country over spans of several years. The desire of every parent is to see their children excel and succeed in life and *japa* has proven to be a very useful tool in this regard. With most parents giving in to it, there is need to develop coping strategies to mitigate the unpleasant effects of absence of children. According to Thapa (2021), loneliness, limited social relations, societal deprivation may exacerbate the psychological and mental health of parents and reduce their quality of life. It is therefore necessary that parents who have been left-behind develop and adapt to coping strategies. One popular coping mechanism for left-behind parents has been the practice of not letting either the oldest or youngest child (irrespective of gender) to *japa*. Rather, the chosen child is supported by the others who migrate to take care of the ageing parents and also, their own personal families. This practice of ensuring that all the children do not leave home at once ensures the ageing parents do not go into emotional breakdown.

Other coping mechanisms include involvement in religious organizations/activities, community service and family support. Also, updating their knowledge of technology has led to leveraging on social media tools to feel closer to their children abroad and keep track of their lives giving them the feelings of being fully involved. Although these measures do not replace the physical presence of the child, it provides some level of help and reduces the psychological and emotional impacts of *japa* on ageing parents. In addition, for the government and policymakers to safeguard the health and well-being of the ageing in society, it is advised that there be establishment of community-based care initiatives to offer emotional support and lessen feelings of loneliness. Other approaches include to teach local health professionals how to recognize and help parents who are left behind who are experiencing mental distress.

Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

CONCLUSION

The *japa* phenomenon has become an integral component of Nigerian society for as long as conditions within the country do not improve. Although this syndrome has some inherent positive economic and cultural gains, there is significant impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of ageing parents whose children reside abroad. Feelings of loneliness, social disconnection, depression and others are prevalent among left-behind parents. These effects have been buttressed by the accounts some of these left-behind parents which further serve as a reminder that ageing left-behind parents carry an immense emotional and psychological burden due to the absence of their children in their lives. Conclusively, this paper emphasizes the need for a broad view of the *japa* phenomenon considering both the aspirations of young adults and the psychological and emotional well-being of the ageing parents they leave in Nigeria. By developing, adopting and adapting to effective coping strategies and systems, ageing left-behind parents can mitigate and manage the consequences of living without their children.

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Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

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Impact of Migration on the Psychological Well-Being of Ageing Parents in Nigeria

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