

Chapter 15

Navigating Borders: Communication and Language Experiences of African Migrants in South African Public Health Facilities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the communication and language experiences of African migrants in Cape Town public health facilities in South Africa, exploring strategies they employ to navigate language and communication challenges they may encounter in the healthcare system. About 2.9 million migrants, predominantly Africans, live in South Africa, and their movement to South Africa has brought linguistic diversity and linguistic and cultural complexity, creating unique communication dynamics in health-care settings. This mainly qualitative research draws on the responses of African migrants from various African countries purposively selected and surveyed to explore their lived experiences and perspectives. The study explores how African migrants experienced language use and communication, considering differences between migrant experiences in South African health institutions and their home countries and offering recommendations to improve communication in health facilities and, consequently, enhance the experiences of African migrants in South African health institutions.

INTRODUCTION

It has been estimated that South Africa is home to 2.9 million immigrants, which would account for about 5% of the overall population. 68% of African migrants come from the 16-country Southern African Development Community (SADC), with Zimbabwe alone accounting for about 24% of all immigrants. Besides the SADC region, South Africa hosts migrants from countries in other zones of the continent, such as Somalia, Congo, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and, in fact, from most countries on the continent. South Africa attracts many immigrants from Europe, North America and other world regions (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – OCHA, 2021). Still, the focus of this

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chapter is African migrants. African migrants have received positive and negative responses from the South African public and institutions. They have been reported to impact society both positively and negatively, and their condition and experiences in South African society have also been portrayed in both a positive and negative light, depending sometimes on who is portraying them. African migrants have reported positive and negative experiences when accessing and using different institutions in South Africa. The rationale for this study is that healthcare is the most essential need of all members of society, local or migrant, and the material conditions of most African migrants only allow them access to the public health sector, where there seems to be a mismatch between the language competencies and language needs of African migrants and the language reality they encounter in the facilities, resulting in communication challenges that determine levels of service dis/satisfaction. These are critical issues that demand exploration.

Based on the background above, this chapter has as its primary objective to investigate the communication and language experiences of African migrants in South African public health facilities, considering how they navigate the language boundaries and create opportunities for communication. The study deals with the question, *how do African migrants experience communication and language use in public health facilities, and how do language challenges or opportunities respectively hinder or promote access to effective and efficient health care?* The study explores aspects such as how African migrants experienced language use and communication at South African health institutions, languages that they commonly used or are expected to use in communicating with health practitioners at the institutions, challenges that they have faced in communicating with health practitioners, whether cultural differences and expectations affect communication and interaction with healthcare practitioners, strategies that African migrants have employed to overcome communication challenges, the possible exposure of African migrants to discrimination, cultural insensitivity or bias in public health facilities, possible similarities and differences between migrant experiences in South African health facilities and experiences in their home countries and critically, recommendations from African migrants' perspectives on how language use and communication can be improved to enhance their experiences in South African public health facilities.

The implications of this research could be far-reaching. The findings can inform the development of policies, interventions, and training programs to improve communication, enhance cultural sensitivity, and reduce healthcare disparities for African migrants based on language and communication challenges. By understanding the language and communication challenges that African Migrants may encounter in public healthcare facilities and by engaging with suggestions (from the migrant perspective) on how to deal with the challenges, this research strives to suggest ways to create more inclusive and patient-centred healthcare environments for African migrants in public health facilities in Cape Town and South Africa broadly – through effective communication practices.

THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is grounded in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which emerged in the 1970s as a valuable framework for predicting and explaining the many adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, and decrease social distance in social interaction. CAT offers scope for critical engagement with interpersonal communication and communication in larger contexts of intergroup encounters such as the two intergroups in this study – African migrants on the one hand and healthcare practitioners on

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