

# Square peg in a round hole: Migration and romantic relationship troubles in the UK Zimbabwean diaspora

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## Abstract

This qualitative study, in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews which were analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was carried out with divorced Zimbabweans living in the UK. Their stories, presented in this paper, shed light into the interplay between migration, enculturation and divorce. A snowball sample of 30 interviews were conducted over a period of six months in 2019 with participants from across the UK (excl. Northern Ireland). Most of the respondents were middle-aged, [30-45] and all had been living in the UK for at least one year. The research revealed how enculturation tensions are associated with marriage problems, but also how male divorcees were resistant to change as the change was perceived as a threat to their masculinity, leading to conflicts and ultimately divorce. Themes regarding structural inequalities, cultural ideologies, gender and violence are explored. Our findings have important implications for social services and marriage counsellors.

**Running head:** Migration, enculturation, and divorce.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwean diaspora, migration, enculturation, masculinity, gender, divorce.

## Introduction

There are an estimated 110,000 Zimbabweans living in the UK (ONS, 2018) with concentrations in the Greater London and the surrounding areas, but also in major cities such as Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and Coventry. This is partly due to political violence and economic hardship in Zimbabwe that began around late 1990s. Since that time there has been a mass exodus of Zimbabwean people seeking a better, safer life in neighbouring countries such as South Africa and Botswana (Gaidzanwa, 1999). The UK also became a popular destination for Zimbabweans travelling to Europe due to the former colonial connection (McGregor, 2006, Humphris, 2010).

Various scholars have explored the Zimbabwean diasporas (Borraz, Pozoy & Rossi, 2008; McGregor, 2007; Bloch, 2008; McGregor, 2008; Pasura, 2010), and much of this relates to the economic impact of migration. For example, a study by Bloch (2008) highlighted how Zimbabwean migrants lived in poverty as they were unable to work legally whilst waiting for the outcome of their claim for asylum. But despite the increasing interest in Zimbabwean diaspora, and new African diasporas more generally (Glick, 2010, Akyeampong, 2000; Phillips & Sweeney, 2006; Koser, 2003; Zeleza, 2005) there has been remarkably little interest on the impact of migration and enculturation on Zimbabwean diaspora romantic relationships.

Several studies have reported that international migration can aggravate the chances of tensions in intimate relationships (see Andersson & Scott, 2010; Frank & Wildsmith, 2005). For example, Mazzucato (2015) and Grillo and Mazzucato (2008) highlight how the strictness of migration policies makes it harder for couples to migrate together. As a result, many couples are geographically separated and confronted with difficulties maintaining ties. Other factors contributing to intimate relationship tensions include cultural assimilation, changing perspectives, opinions and attitudes, the removal of cultural restrictions such strict fidelity or faithfulness, increased freedom through for example, access to finances once asylum has been granted (Boyle et al., 2008; George, 2000; Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

Boyle et al. (2008) suggest migration to more liberal societies creates a space for both men and women to renegotiate their pre-migration marital status and roles. For example, Hirsch (2003) found that migrant women from more culturally restricted countries challenge previous intimate patriarchal relationship structures if they became employed and/or educated as these roles placed additional pressures on their spouses to contribute more childcare and domestic chores. The study also reported that male spouses were resistant to change as it is perceived as a threat to their masculinity leading and often contributed to conflicts and violence (also see Kufakurinani, 2013 for more on the impact of migration on gender and family).

It is against this general background that this study was conceived to investigate divorce / separation in the growing community of Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK. The specific study aims are: (a) to present an empirical investigation into separation and divorce of Zimbabwean couples living in the UK; (b) to explore the interplay between migration, enculturation and divorce in intimate relationships of Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK; (c) to examine how divorced / separated couples understand their divorce / separation experience. To explore these research aims, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be used to examine the qualitative data retrieved from interviews from 30 Zimbabwean participants.

## Method

### Design

A qualitative approach was adopted, focusing on the personal experiences of Zimbabweans living in the UK. Participants took part in the interviews facilitated by the first author who is Zimbabwean in origin. We thought the first author's ethnicity would encourage participants to talk more freely about their experiences (Oakley, 2000). As previously noted, interviews are an effective means for enabling people who have experienced traumatic events to talk freely about their experiences and have been used effectively by other researchers (Liebmann, 2020). The participants were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences of living in the UK and the impacts they felt contributed to the violence they experienced, and the interview was broadly structured around some key questions which appear in the appendix.

### Participants

Participants were invited through an advertisement placed on a specific Facebook page dedicated to Zimbabweans living in the UK. A total 30 participants were recruited either directly via the webpage or via snowball sampling (Robinson, 2014). Respondents were UK based (excluding Northern Ireland): Manchester 11, Leeds 8, London 3, Birmingham 3, Newport 1, Glasgow 1, Bradford 1, Huddersfield 1 and Wigan 1. Most of the respondents were middle-aged [30-45] and with children. All the participants have been living in the UK for at least one year. The earliest migration date to the UK was 1997 and the latest date was 2016.

Our sample size was influenced by both theoretical and practical considerations (Robinson, 2014, p.29). On a practical level, our sample size was determined by the response rate from the advert. Theoretically, the study had an idiographic aim which sought a sample size in which individual voices and experiences could be located and heard through intense analysis of each interview transcript. Thirty interviews provided enough scope for developing cross-case generalities.

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed using previous literature as a guide. All interviews were conducted via Skype and audio recorded by the first author over a period of six months in the autumn of 2019. The first author conducted all of the interviews as he is of Zimbabwean origin and it was hoped that would encourage participants to talk more freely about their experiences (Oakley, 2000). Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour.

### Ethics

Ethical approval was first gained through (blinded for review) University ethics committee. In line with British Psychological Society (2018) participants were provided with an interview pack before the interviews, which contained a participant information sheet, interview guidelines, consent form and a confidentiality agreement. After arrival, the first author then presented an introduction where he explained the aims of the study, anonymity and right to withdraw. A consent form was then distributed. At the end of the interview, each participant was given a full debrief, and given details of both authors involved in the research and support services in case they wanted to follow these up. In order to maintain participant anonymity, we presented exemplar extracts with pseudonyms and all in-text identifying markers removed such as personal details, vernaculars or references. We have anonymised our dataset as far as possible (e.g. replacing names with R1 [Respondent 1], R2 etc. removing any in-text personal details or references).

### Analysis

We adopted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach (Fairclough, 1989, 2013) to analyse the data from the interviews. CDA, distinct from other methodological approaches such as Thematic Analysis or Discourse Analysis, focuses on social problems and more specifically the relationship between power and language such as "the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination" (van Dijk, 2001:96 as cited by Amoussou and Allagbe, 2018). Through the analysis of how language is used, when it is used, who uses such language and by extension who is excluded from the use of such language, we are able to shine a light on and understand the dynamics that are at play across wider macro-level, societal structures and process. In turn, we can understand how these dynamics are mirrored within the micro-level, interpersonal relationships between people. CDA enables researchers to explore how social practices and cultural norms are legitimised when they function to strengthen existing hierarchies that benefit those who already have access to power; simultaneously CDA enables researchers to examine how, through the use of language, other people within society that have less access to power are problematized when their views, actions and words are counter to the prevailing hierarchical structures.

To embark upon CDA, a deep examination and immersion in the data was required, which involved listening to the audio-recordings, reading and re-examining the whole transcripts along with field notes, sharing observations and developing initial analytical insights between the authors. Themes were often composed of several sub-themes that identified multiple influences of the life of these Zimbabweans living in the UK. After the initial identification of themes, the transcripts were reviewed again to select representative quotes for each theme. The transcripts were reviewed a final time for additional supporting and disconfirming evidence of themes. We identified the following themes which shall be discussed accordingly:

1. *Structural inequalities and the intransigent boundaries of immigration*
2. *Struggling cultural ideologies - the role of violence and subjugation*
3. *Resisting and challenging traditional gender archetypes*
4. *Inequities and battles for power within marriage and relationships*

## Results

Within our introduction, we reflected on the paucity of research regarding divorce and separation amongst migrant couples, despite the central importance of marriage in transnational communities. Although a relatively understudied area within the existing research literature, the continued rates of immigration into the UK in recent years demonstrates a need to understand the processes and ideologies that pervade the transition of men and women from one cultural context to another. This is especially pertinent when migration takes place between two cultures that place different expectations on gender roles, when socio-economic and domestic conditions place gender roles under further strain, and when the status between men and women is questioned by their access to (or lack of) a structural framework that legitimises their position within their new cultural environment: the completed and documented proof of their immigration status.

We will begin to analyse the central themes that emerged from the interviews, commencing with a theme that appeared frequently from several interviews, these extracts are presented as transcribed although some have necessarily been truncated due to journal word limitations.

### *Theme 1 - Structural inequalities and the intransigent boundaries of immigration*

#### Respondent #1

*I think it was the issue of the, the immigration status as that we both had the pressure from the home office, it was just too much... then I had to be moved eh up north so that was a lot of strain*

#### Respondent #5

*When your things are not sorted, immigration documents, it's hard you become a victim because you depend on some else' papers*

#### Respondent #6

*My immigration status er does not entitle me to any public funds so it wasn't something that I could even erm be eligible for but I had like supportive friends, family and even some people from church so it was good yeah they helped along the way...*

#### Respondent #11

*I was forced to, I would walk distance fifteen miles to go and collect some donated food from social workers because I was not allowed to work, he had papers, I did not... Life is hard here if you don't have documents, I was abused because my options were limited.*

#### Respondent #20

*When you don't have your immigration documents, it's hard. So his home office issues played a huge role too*

It is evident from these extracts that the immigration process into the host society is experienced by migrants as a multifaceted journey with different layers of success for different individuals. For some, success will be defined by the most important and consequential outcome which is the receipt of documented papers: these papers represent a material and symbolic validation from an institutional process that has the power and control to prescribe outcomes that will affect the extent to which immigrants can integrate and function within that host society. This symbolic validation in turn validates the individual's sense of self; without which their identity becomes synonymous to that of victim and they become acutely aware of a dependency on others.

The role of the institution in seeking a valid immigration status not only highlights the inherent structural inequalities within the system, as immigrants are subject to different experiences and further hardship, be that deportation or seeking additional support from extended friends or the wider community, but it also plays a fundamental role in within the dynamics of the relationships between men and women. The systemic immigration process impacts the dynamics within the marital and domestic relationship because when the one partner has their position within the system validated, they will leverage their status over the other partner whose position is dependent upon the other person,

which means their options become limited and inextricably linked with their partner. If the process says no to one person and this produces a negative outcome for them, that person will in turn apportion those negative outcomes with their partner, thereby perpetuating a cycle of domination and control.

## *Theme 2 - Struggling cultural ideologies – the role of violence and subjugation*

Respondent #31

*Which I think with him when he realised that I was at that stage it became more like violent in between that stage. He played the culture card so well, he knew in our culture women are taught to endure patiently when there are marriage problems, and poor me, I never reported it to the police, I took it patiently and kept it between us. Culture stupefied me there if there is a word like that.*

Respondent #5

*I was really, it was affecting me, but because in our culture when you grow up as a woman you are taught that you have to be strong, you don't show people outside that something is affecting you,*

Respondent #20

*I knew it was culture but that was daft given the situation... How can you wait for me to come from to work and uni to cook and clean for you just because culture says its women chores*

Respondent #27

*There was a lot of shame and a lot of stigma around the topic when-even when I- even when I finally left the divorce... but I couldn't stand the African discipline anymore. People stigmatised me because I left my marriage, they did not know what that in my house logic was not used to settle disputes but slaps and sometimes kicks were used*

Respondent #30

*This it was how I was taught by my mother never disclose your home problems to anyone you, try to deal with them within even if you had to walk around with a swollen eye you rather say something fell on me, you deal with it in the closest of your family... and when I came to a divorce level later people were so shocked because it was something I couldn't contain within our family unfortunately it spread,*

Within these extracts, it is evident that culture is a powerful framework for both men and women. Within the traditional Zimbabwean culture, women are problematised for their aspirations to adhere to the socio-cultural norms of their new host society, be that aspirations towards education, employment or divorce; these norms are diametrically opposed to the traditional cultural practices that women experienced all their lives and to which men have enjoyed a degree of advantage over women. The remedy for these transgressions are acts of violence; acts that are sanctioned and permitted within the traditional culture that is a site for patriarchal control. Subsequently, there is an interplay and tension between the old cultural practices that men seek to retain and new cultural practices to which women seek to assimilate.

Quite significantly, despite being aware of the support services that are available to them when they become a target for Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), women tend to revert back to their traditional cultural norms and don't avail themselves of the support mechanisms that are available and accessible by other members of society and thereby demonstrative of their new socio-cultural norms, e.g., the police. During these acutely distressing times, there is instead more adherence towards the traditional norms that supports the male position and exacerbates the tension between women assimilating towards new cultural norms and also reverting back towards more traditional cultural norms that supports and substantiates the negative male, patriarchal behaviours.

This is further heightened by the awareness the individuals have of how they will be viewed by other migrants and the wider community from the traditional Zimbabwean culture. There is a strong power dynamic that impacts and motivates the decisions towards either seeking help or remaining with the status quo of the relationship. If the latter

course of action is chosen, it is with the knowledge that their already disempowered voice will be further silenced by the prevailing dominant norms of the traditional culture, i.e., violence and control.

Traditional cultural norms are further legitimized by men, even when they view themselves as victims and not perpetrators of IPV. The prevailing ideology of what constitutes male and female behaviour is demonstrated through the language that is used and the actions that are subsequently taken. Men are no more likely to utilise support available and accessible by other members of society from the new social context than their female counterparts.

Culture functions as a powerful influential factor that drives the discourse; it shapes how these individuals come to understand themselves and make sense of what is happening to them. Caught between the tensions towards the new host culture and the traditions of the heritage culture, the power of this influence highlights the struggle between assimilating towards new cultural norms and retaining a sense of self and identity that is inextricably linked to the traditional cultural norms.

### *Theme 3 - Resisting and challenging traditional gender archetypes*

#### *Respondent #5*

*When people they see you putting on makeup they think everything is OK, but inside it was not perfect, because it was hell... I was thinking that I am the perfect wife, I cook in the house, I make sure that we've got savings in our account, and bills are paid in the right way. And then all of a sudden with all that effort, I am wrong!*

#### *Respondent #6*

*I wasn't saying I won't be there for him. I was there for him throughout, but on the other side, going back to the Mother role, it was more like I'll be [slaps hand] pushing pushing pushing and saying do this, do that, but you just sit there and wait for him, for me, to do it for him.*

#### *Respondent #16*

*If I am a woman, your wife, I go to work as much as you go to work you guys can give the same respect you gonna be able to at least cook dinner, but some African men won't even go there, they don't wanna cook because you are the woman, you are the one to cook so this is my view.*

#### *Respondent #20*

*He had all the time in the world, but he would not cook, clean or do any house chores and his argument was it's a women's job.*

#### *Respondent #27*

*One point I remember my father mentioned that, for you to be a woman, you should have a man in your life*

These extracts reveal a conflict between the self-actualisation of women as they immerse themselves in new cultural practices that exemplify progression and the development of oneself through education and work, and the prescriptive roles that are assigned and designated for them by others within society. This is primarily from their partners with whom domestic responsibilities are not shared but are instead reinforced through the unequal provision of household tasks such as cooking and enacting the maternal role within the relationship, neither of which are reciprocated by their partners.

This is further reinforced by the expectations and attitudes that others outside the relationship, those that are part of the traditional community culture, hold regarding the roles of men and women which again serve to underpin and to some extent strengthen the imbalance between the sexes. The role of women appears to be intertwined with their efforts to cultivate and support a domestic setting; a woman's life is given meaning if she has a man in it and expectations are placed on women, by their immediate partners and others within their traditional society, to fulfil that domesticated role to perfection, to provide nurturing and support. This displaces the notion of what a woman can aspire to be, particularly as she is now part of a new socio-cultural landscape vis-à-vis the migration process. Whatever aspirations there might be will have to be relinquished in favour of domesticated bliss to which she ought to instead aspire. This inequity is further highlighted through the assumed responsibility that women have for creating and sustaining

this domesticated environment; responsibility for which they have without any authority, and that which is not shared by their partners.

#### Theme 4 - Inequities and battles for power within marriage and relationships

##### Respondent #1

*And then, we had some issues of infidelity came in so (...) yeah, then it led to separation..., maybe on his part eh...he got into a relationship with me thinking if I got granted asylum by the home office he would benefit, when he saw it not coming, he decided to see other woman. Many relationships like that out there and they break at the end.*

##### Respondent #2

*Don't fight your spouse, don't leave your kids to marry someone with papers. This too has ruined many families for my fellow homies. You need to hold hands and stand together, do not let the pressure tear you apart, think about your kids.*

*I would revisit the issue in our bedroom or later when kids are away in a traditional way, you know using some physical force but that did not change things until I thought she may brave it and report me to the police. So, I stopped and said let me leave.*

##### Respondent #11

*He would look for young desperate woman without papers, promise to marry them when he knew he was just after sex. He did that to a lot of women because when you an asylum seeker life is hard in this country*

##### Respondent #15

*My husband abused me because I did not have papers, he knew I depended on him for my case to work. So he would cheat on me and beat me all that. As an asylum seeker, he knew I couldn't leave, so he would do as he please. My options were limited.*

##### Respondent #30

*Actually I find myself in a situation where I've broken ribs, I had fractures in my body and the home office was sending letters demanding evidence for my case at the same time. Um, I started to ask myself, how did I get here? You know, how-, how did I let myself to be in this situation, and, um, mental health it played a part as well,*

These extracts provide a unique lens through which the relationship between the couples can be analysed. This theme is distinct from the previous themes because it provides an insight into the relationship dynamics through the choices couples make and the language that is communicated between them. We can see that couples use the immigration process as leverage over one another for status and power within relationship: should the immigration process not achieve the desired results; the woman is abandoned in favour of someone else and that additional person who now, unwittingly, becomes part of that existing marital dynamic. In turn, the additional person may themselves be positioned as leverage by enabling the man to feel empowered and embolden as he becomes systematically disempowered by the immigration process.

Unsuccessful immigration is used to punish, penalize and problematize the other individual in the relationship. Those men that are emasculated and undermined by the system or know that their partners have limited direct access to the system tend to weaken, undermine and use violence and control to overpower and suppress their female partners.

## Conclusion

From this analysis, we can deduce that immigration into the UK has a negative association with the marital relationships of migrant couples. Pressures and tensions emerge that creates opposing forces and unequal power relations between couples which ultimately manifest in negative behavioural patterns. Instead of working together and in unison with each other, couples exert control over one another, which appears to be a consequence of the power and control exerted over them by the inequities of the

immigration process itself. This leaves people, particularly men who were once in positions of control in their traditional culture, without that same level of control in their new host society. The influence of traditional culture is further demonstrated through the language used and actions taken by the couples. The traditional culture either reinforces traditional gender roles or hinders progression, development and self-actualisation towards more equality between the sexes. This serves to heighten the disparity between the two cultures; language shapes the social and cultural structures and norms that exists between the marital couples, creating and reinforcing the destructive social practices of violence and control that permeates, shapes and ultimately leads to the demise of the marital relationship.

With reference to the aims of this research study, we have presented an empirically robust an empirical investigation into separation and divorce experience of Zimbabwean couples living in the UK. Within this exploration, we have examined the interrelationships between different socio-cultural factors, including whether and how the Zimbabwean diaspora represented in this study navigate their assimilation and acculturation processes within their new host society, specifically with reference to the immigration processes that function as their entry into and stability within their new host society. We have explored the role of divorce and the renegotiation and detraditionalization of their marital relationships against a background of socio-cultural tensions. Finally, we have examined how these divorced and separated couples come to understand the emergence and impact of their divorce/separation experience. These results draw attention to wider questions that should be incorporated within future studies: in whose interest does the immigration process serve? What happens to the voices of the dependents of the immigration process? Who listens to these marginalised voices? What role does the host society play in upholding the traditional cultural practices and beliefs of migrants? How does the balance of power shift (or not) as a function of immigration between couples? How does the balance of power shift within the host society as a function of immigration? Are there any elements of patriarchal control that transcend cultural migration? Is the immigration process inherently created by systemic inequalities?

## Implications

Our analysis has shown that a plethora of power dynamics impact and are impacted by the marital and domestic relationship between men and women as a function of their migration and enculturation into the UK. The transition from one culture to another cannot be assumed to take place seamlessly; tensions will be encountered and the nature of the discourse that is prevalent amongst couples will serve to reinforce these tensions, especially when such tensions are manifest by the integration of the new host society and the traditional culture of the migrant communities.

Given the complexity of such relationships, the impact of cultural differences and the significant role this has of well-being, the following implications should be considered as a consequence of this study. Firstly, duty of care must be afforded to those individuals who are undergoing the immigration process, particularly if they are the dependents of those that are the primary applicants within the process. This will ensure that they feel part of the process, that their sense of identity is not further adversely impacted and that they have a direct point of contact within the UK, so that their voice is not relinquished to their partner. Also, it would be worthwhile aligning the various stages of the immigration process to the enculturation process. This will help to improve integration within the host society and to be culturally aware and mindful of how the immigration process may affect different people in different ways.

Paradoxically, this study provides a useful lens through which researchers can begin to analyse the impact that a lack of access to resources has for people who experience different journeys on their path to successful migration status. The current rhetoric is far reaching and all-pervading regarding what migrants can expect when they have successfully completed their immigration process: this study provides us with an insight into what happens to the lives of couples when successfully immigration is absence.

Furthermore, this study highlights that language has a powerful effect of destabilising relationships, continuously constructing and reconstructing cultural ideologies that transcend geography and time and creating destructive patterns of behaviour and ways of living amongst the romantic relationships of the Zimbabwean UK Diaspora.

## Strengths and limitations

One of the main strengths of this study is the rigorous qualitative research design, that focused on a specific cohort of participants whose experiences related directly to the research inquiry. By utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis, a critical approach to the qualitative data has been applied to reflect upon issues of domination, subordination, power, control, violence, struggle and inequality. In doing so, awareness is provided to social and political circumstances and the structural inequities that shape the rhetoric and discourse amongst the interviewees. This is the unique strengths of Critical Discourse Analysis and thusly a particular strength of this study.

Another strength of the study is the specific focus and attention it brings to the cultural experiences of a Zimbabwean diaspora and in doing so presents a detailed and poignant examination of an understudied area within with research literature.

Whilst our data collection pre-dates the onset of the Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, a significant body of researchers (Pietromonaco and Overall, 2020; Prime, Browne and Wade, 2020) have explored the impact of the pandemic on relationships between couples and family well-being, in addition to the increase of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) during lockdown (Barbara, et al., 2020, Jarnecke and Flanagan, 2020). As such, this study can add to the growing body of research that explores the struggles and changing relationship between couples within modern society.

Furthermore, this study highlights the need for future studies to acknowledge the potential impact of the pandemic in adversely exacerbating domestic relationships, power relations, relationship dynamics and whilst simultaneously providing couples with an unique opportunity to self-reflect and express their feelings and frustrations (perhaps previously known or unknown to themselves), within the confidential setting of an interview.

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of longitudinal data; the data sets used in the current study represent a snapshot of the participants recollections at that point in time, during a single interview with the researcher.

## Reflexive statement

As researchers, we have tried to present the participants' accounts as accurately, fairly and disinterestedly as possible. The first author has academic expertise in social and cultural psychology and Zimbabwean cultures both in Zimbabwe and in the UK. The second author has an academic background in social psychology and using critical approaches to explore organizational behaviour, and therefore has expertise in examining the systems, structures and frameworks that pervade the daily lives of others, whilst challenging assumptions about neutrality and objectivity that oftentimes remain unopposed in the mainstream research literature. As a child of parents who had migrated from Commonwealth countries into the UK, the second researcher has an interest in reflecting upon challenges that face migrant couples in our present-day UK society; challenges that do not appear to have lessened with the passage of time.

Both are qualitative researchers. Our analysis has been ratified by those who took part in our interviews. The analysis benefits from including different perspectives on Critical Discourse Analysis, and results shed light on UK Zimbabwean diaspora couple's divorce / separation experiences.

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