

Lived Experiences and Coping Strategies of Nigerian Immigrants Facing Xenophobia in South Africa: a Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. This Xenophobia towards the African migrants is a constant social problem in South Africa, where Nigerian immigrants are often discriminated against, stereotyped and socially excluded. This qualitative phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrants regarding xenophobia and the strategies they use to cope with daily life. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 Nigerian immigrants living in Johannesburg and Cape Town, the study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine participants' meaning-making processes. Four interrelated themes emerged: (1) everyday experiences of xenophobic hostility and marginalisation, (2) psychological and emotional consequences of discrimination, (3) institutional and structural constraints, (4) resilience and adaptive coping strategies. The findings show that xenophobia is not confined to episodic violence, but is implicated in routine social and institutional interaction. Coping strategies involved dependence upon ethnic networks, religious faith, entrepreneurial self-reliance, emotional control, and future-aimed hope. The study adds phenomenological insight into the subjective realities of Nigerian immigrants and underscores the need for inclusive migration policies and psychosocial support interventions.

Keywords: xenophobia, Nigerian immigrants, phenomenology, qualitative research, coping strategies, migration.

Introduction

Trends in international migration within the African continent have advanced significantly in recent decades, and this process can be explained by the uneven nature of developmental trends, frequent political crises, and the growth of transnational networks (Castles, de Haas and Miller, 2014). In this scenario, South Africa is one of the most economically developed polities on the continent, thus being a key destination for migrants across sub-Saharan Africa due to employment opportunities, security, and social progress (Crush and Ramachandran, 2014). However, the nation has also experienced a series of Xenophobic violence and everyday discrimination against African immigrants, which in turn creates a situation of paradox wherein South Africa is both a place of opportunities and the enforced mechanisms of extreme exclusion.

The xenophobia phenomenon is an extensive one in South Africa and is well documented as a long-term social construct that has its basis in historical, political and economic imbalances. Scholars, including Crush (2008) and Neocosmos (2010), argued that the socio-economic restructuring that occurred in the post-apartheid period, the high rate of unemployment, and limited access to national resources have intensified the perception of competition between citizens and non-nationals. In general discourse, migrants are often depicted as a danger to the economic stability and social order. This hostility has, at times, culminated in massive violence, displacement and loss of life with long-term psychological and social impacts on the migrant communities (Landau, 2011).

Nigerian immigrants occupy a very stigmatised role in popular and institutional discourses among the African migrants in South Africa. Oftentimes, they have been stereotyped as criminals, drug dealers and fraudulent economists, stereotypes that are spread through media images and in day-to-day encounters (Neocosmos, 2010). Such images influence people's sentiments and the policies of institutions such as policing, labour, and the provision of housing and social services. Empirical analysis indicates that Nigerian migrants often face racialised surveillance, verbal harassment, and lack of access to social and economic opportunities in urban social settings like Johannesburg and Cape Town (Crush and Ramachandran, 2014). These events add to the sense of insecurity and alienation as well as psychological distress, which complicate social integration and belonging.

In spite of the fact that structural factors of xenophobia have been studied in a rather profound manner, there is a relative lack of studies that focus on the subjective experiences of migrants regarding discrimination and exclusion. The extant literature, to a large extent, relies on macro-level attitudes that focus on policy failures, economic competition, and nationalistic visions (Crush, 2008; Landau, 2011). Although these methods offer significant contextual explanations, they usually hide the way in which xenophobia is practised in normal life by its victims. The constructionist approach to xenophobia should not only dismiss it as a burst of violence or rhetoric but also undermine its everyday forms, such as micro-aggressions, social distancing, and everyday institutional obstacles. An increasing body of qualitative research indicates that these daily experiences become a core part of migrants' well-being, their identity negotiation, and their obligation to belong to host societies (Adjai and Lazaridis, 2013).

Phenomenological methods provide a methodological and epistemological approach to filling this gap by preempting lived experience and meaning-making. Inspired by the philosophical tradition of Martin Heidegger, interpretive phenomenology focuses on how people give meaning to their experiences in particular socio-historical circumstances. In this sense, xenophobia is not a remote and external social phenomenon but a process, which is given a meaning by the embodied experience of hostility and exclusion along with the ability of migrants in daily life to resist such experiences. Therefore, phenomenological enquiry will facilitate a subtle discussion of the perceptions, interpretations and reactions of Nigerian immigrants to xenophobia in South Africa, and will unveil the affective hues and existential resonances of marginalisation, most frequently overlooked by quantitative surveys and policy investigations.

Current empirical research on the African migrants in South Africa has shown that the xenophobia experiences are not limited to incidences of extreme violence but are entrenched in the daily social and institutional relationships. Migrants often argued that there is discriminatory treatment in the labour market, policing, access to health care, and the housing market, which, in

totality, adds to structural vulnerability (Adjai and Lazaridis, 2013). Such daily exclusions shape what can be called a chronic feeling of precarity, as well as how migrants navigate city life and interpersonal relations. Such experiences are further enhanced by racialisation stereotyping that makes Nigerian immigrants hyper-visible as foreigners and immoral outsiders (Neocosmos, 2010). The combination of racialisation, nationality, and migrant status, therefore, generates a particular type of social marginalisation, which is worth a particular scholarly interest.

Although the topic of xenophobia in South Africa has become increasingly popular, few studies have considered the issue using the phenomenological approach when addressing the lives of Nigerian immigrants, in particular. This is a profound place of ignorance, considering the high presence of Nigerians in the publicity about migration and crime, as well as their notable presence in the economic sectors of urban settings. With the focus on the accounts of the Nigerian immigrants, the current work adds to a more refined perception of how xenophobia is practised, negotiated and challenged in daily existence. These findings are a crucial source of information concerning the migration governance framework, social cohesion programs, and psychosocial support interventions designed to support inclusivity and wellbeing among migrant communities.

Based on the aforementioned, this study intends to provide answers to the following research questions: (1) How do the Nigerian immigrants experience xenophobia in South Africa in their daily lives, and (2) What coping mechanisms do they use to manage and make sense of these experiences? The study will use a qualitative phenomenological approach to produce in-depth, context-based knowledge that will supplement current macro-level examinations and form part of arguments on migration, belonging, and social exclusion in modern societies worldwide.

Literature Review

Of Xenophobia, Patterns, Impact And Coping Strategies

Xenophobia, often defined as the fear or hatred of that which is perceived to be foreign or “other” has become a central concept in migration research, particularly in contexts where host populations interpret immigration as a threat to economic, political, or cultural stability (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014). The research on xenophobia explains that it is not only part of episodic violence, but rather takes root in the everyday discrimination, stereotyping, and institutional prejudice experienced by migrants (Mpofu, 2020). Several scholars, including Mpofu (2020), Osunkunle (2023) and Mgogo & Osunkunle (2023), have argued that xenophobic attitudes are developed and strengthened by discursive processes that portray migrants as economic risks or moral annoyers. The common depictions by the media are that immigrants are illegal, criminal or a burden, and thus, the exclusionary attitudes are normalised. These accounts perpetuate the existence of xenophobia by instilling biased views into the discourse and policy discussions, making xenophobic exclusion a product and a perpetuator of structural injustices in host communities.

The modern xenophobia in South Africa is determined by the socio-historical context. Apartheid left behind its legacy of deep structural inequalities that have remained central in the migration policies and the general attitude of people towards non-nationals (Crush, 2008). Historical reviews indicate that the post-apartheid identity politics were characterised by attempts at tightening the citizenship borders, and migrants, especially African-Other immigrants, were often formed as outsiders (Akinrinde & Tar, 2020). These processes have influenced institutional practices, policing and attitudes of the communities, thus creating a repetitive xenophobic hostility.

Empirical reviews show that xenophobic activities in South Africa are not only the result of individual social tensions but are also supported by systemic variables like lack of employment, poverty, uneven development, etc. The disregard of structural differences contributes to the scapegoating discourse, which makes migrants easy targets of the wider socio-economic discontent (Ngcamu, 2025; Crush and Ramachandran, 2014). The xenophobic riots that hit the non-nationals in May 2008 are still historic in the contemporary history of South Africa, and violence broke out in major urban centres, leading to deaths, displacement, and destruction of migrants-owned property (South Africa Riot, 2008). The following outbreaks and periodic conflicts depict that xenophobia is not a historical oddity but a repetitive theme in post-apartheid South Africa. Patterns of habitual discrimination against migrants in relation to housing, policing, employment and access to basic services are always established in the literature. Such daily omissions accumulate to form a social atmosphere of othering and marginalisation (Ngcamu, 2025; Mgogo and Osunkunle, 2023). Migrants complain of not being treated equally in certain areas, including hospitals, where healthcare providers and officials are biased, and in workplaces, where they experience unfair layoffs or restrictions (Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2023).

Even though the topics of African migrants to South Africa are researched on a variety of nationalities, Nigerian immigrants tend to become a highly stigmatised group, both in society and in scholarly literature. This is based on problematic media representations that Nigerians are associated with criminality and illicit activities, although evidence shows these generalisations have not been empirically proven. There has been a lot of propagation of stereotypes regarding the participation of Nigerians in organised crime, which reinforces the xenophobic ideals (Ngcamu, 2025).

The research on Nigerians in South Africa maintains that xenophobia of this group is more of a socio-political panic than a factual evaluation of the input of immigrants (Olaniyi, 2009). The continuation of negative stereotypes weakens migrants' access to social capital and economic opportunities. It is also shown in literature that xenophobia is not just manifested against Nigerian migrants in the form of violence, but it is also manifested in the form of microaggressions, institutional mistrust, and social marginalisation. Research on the reactions of the Nigerian immigrants reveals that migrants are taking proactive measures to struggle with xenophobia rather than passively as victims (Lombard, 2023).

The xenophobic consequences of migration on migrants go beyond the physical damages to include the long-term emotional and psychological health consequences. According to qualitative studies, lack of protection by the law enforcement is one of the factors that record discrimination, fear, uncertainty, identity crisis and vulnerability as some of the psychological outcomes (Nyikadzino, 2023). The findings are also in line with the psychological studies on acculturative stress that have found the tension of coping with hostile social environments to be a predictor of anxiety, depression, and low levels of life satisfaction in migrants. Literature on acculturation demonstrates that it is the state of marginalisation, which is the absence of attachment to host or origin cultures, that is linked to the worst mental health outcomes (Guvercin et.al., 2024).

Sociological research on xenophobia has a focus on its role as an identity boundary maintenance mechanism. Even when faced with political and moral obligations regarding human rights, host populations can resort to exclusion to strengthen a sense of national belonging and social solidarity (Mpofu, 2020). This process is consistent with general intergroup relations

theories, in which out-group threat to superior group status elicits protective reactions towards out-groups. Media and everyday discourse on culture are important element that contributes to the development of xenophobic attitudes. A study of South African university students demonstrates the spread of negative stereotypes in print media and social discourse, where immigrants are portrayed as undeserving of existence as others, and these impressions affect younger generations (Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2023). Such xenophobic discourses, which are propagated by the media, legitimise exclusion and ascribe socio-economic issues to the existence of migrants.

Due to the high levels of xenophobia in host settings, studies have also focused on the process of coping with exclusion and hostility among migrants. The conceptualisation of coping strategies among immigrant populations is situated within the acculturation framework, with a focus on how individuals negotiate identity, belonging, and cultural participation in new settings (Berry, 1997). It has been found that social support, religion, community entrepreneurship, and emotional regulation strategies can serve as protective measures against the adverse outcomes of discrimination.

Adaptive coping strategies are associated with better psychological well-being and longer duration of migration. Research on immigrant populations indicates that integration, which is defined as participation in the host society while retaining cultural affiliations, produces the most positive psychological outcomes (Guvercin, 2024). Nevertheless, endemic xenophobia poses serious obstacles to integration, which in most cases compel the migrants to engage in other modes of resilience that give more priority to the survival of the community, rather than general socio-cultural integration.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to probe the life experiences and coping mechanisms of the Nigerian immigrants in the South African context when faced by xenophobia. Phenomenology provides a powerful means of exploring how people experience, interpret, and give meaning to their corporeal and socio-cultural experiences, especially within limited socio-historical tapestries (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Gbadeyan and Osadola, 2023; Gbadeyan et al., 2024). The study was informed by an interpretive-phenomenological position and presupposed the emergence of meaning-making in the quotidian lifeworlds of the participants, drawing on the philosophical tradition of Martin Heidegger. This orientation allowed a penetrating analysis of xenophobia as a socio-psychological rift in the daily practice, but not a series of violent events.

Purposive sampling was strategically used to sample the Nigerian immigrants who were staying within the metropolitan centres that have a historical record of xenophobic conflict, especially in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Inclusion criteria required that one be a citizen of Nigeria, aged at least 18, and a resident of South Africa for at least 5 years. This criterion ensured that the subjects were well attuned to the host sociopolitical setting, enabling meaningful consideration of xenophobic experiences. Hence, 30 respondents were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, in line with the traditional breadth of sample recommended for interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), which emphasises depth rather than numerical breadth. Recruitment was done through community organisations, migrant associations and informal snowballing networks.

The rich data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. Interview questions were carefully designed to elicit descriptions of xenophobic encounters, emotional and psychological reactions, perceived consequences for everyday life, and coping strategies. The use of open-ended questions encouraged reflexive discourse and enabled participants to express their experiences in their own words. The sessions were conducted in English, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed word-for-word. Field notes and reflexive memos were recorded alongside observations of the environment and emerging analytical impressions, thereby enhancing methodological transparency (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The collected data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the systematic protocol outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The methodology stages included iterative reading of the transcript, line-by-line coding, theme emergence, thematic clustering, and cross-case interpretative synthesis. The idiographic orientation of IPA helped examine each participant's meaning construction in a granular manner before developing themes. Peer debriefing and reflexive journaling were established to enhance the rigour of analysis and address the possible research bias. Analytical decisions were carefully documented in an audit trail and this enhanced the credibility of the study.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the empirical results of the phenomenological investigation conducted through in-depth interviews with Nigerian immigrants living in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The results directly address the research objectives stated in the study: to examine the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrants facing xenophobia in the South African sociopolitical context, and to investigate the coping mechanisms they have adopted to manage the negativity. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) identified four superordinate themes, which were interrelated; (1) quotidian manifestations of xenophobic hostility; (2) affective and psychological sequelae of exclusion; (3) institutionalised discrimination and structural vulnerability; and (4) resilience, coping, and meaning-making. These themes summarise the short-term and long-term effects of xenophobia on the lifeworlds of participants, as well as how they interpret their lives to find a way to navigate hostile social environments.

Theme 1: Day-to-day experiences of Xenophobic Hostility and Othering.

Respondents who participated in the research described xenophobia as an omnipresent element in mundane practices, as opposed to a deviation. Instances of hostility were reported across a range of social spaces, including transit centres, workplaces, residential neighbourhoods, and commercial areas. Stories revealed the frequent verbal harassment, the usage of derogatory epithets, and suspicion that was based solely on national origin or accent. These types of interactions developed a long-standing sense of being marked as an outsider in the routine social interactions.

Some of the respondents narrated how their everyday activities, such as shopping, using a transport system, or even conversation, were nascently marked by exclusionary cues. Indicatively, many participants complained that service staff often ignored them, spoke to them in an arrogant manner, or told them they were stealing their jobs. A respondent noted that

“Sometimes even you do not need to say something. As soon as they listen to your accent, they change their face. Before you open your mouth, they scrutinise you as if you are trouble”. Male-34-Years Old

The respondents also explained how xenophobia became practised by hegemonic stereotyping, especially the connection of the Nigerians with crimes and fraud. These stereotypes were seen as highly dehumanising, reducing people to one stigmatised identity and disregarding personal histories, qualifications and aspirations. Another respondent also revealed that Nigerians are not viewed as other humans or migrants who have come to earn a living; they are seen as Nigerian, and that is it. Then you are already condemned. Another notable trend in the interviews was the prevalence of verbal harassment and microaggressions. Respondents claimed that they were being given pejorative epithets, mocked because of their accents or scapegoats for socio-economic woes and problems. These interactions were usually carried out openly, such as in the street, on transport, in shops, and at the workplace. One participant recounted:

When I go out and have to greet, or when they come to my shop where I sell, some of them (South Africans) change their voices as soon as they hear my Nigerian accent. They say things like, You Nigerians are the cause of the majority problem here. The number of such utterances is such that I can look forward to them every time I go outside”. Female-42-Years Old

The humiliation and verbal aggressions, according to the Nigerians, have been characterised as normal insults which have entered the social fabric in the country. Most respondents revealed that it is not necessarily about screaming and fighting, but the everyday indirect comments and verbal abuse. For instance, when somebody passes derogatory comments such as “it is time that you go back home, we are losing our jobs to you people”. They may actually offer it as a joke, but it is no longer a joke when it is heard on day to day basis. The cumulative effects of such microaggressions create a sense of unwelcome. The fact remains that even when comments are made in a joking manner, they still carry an underlying aggression as they assert their outsider status. Some respondents observed that such statements are especially painful when made openly, thereby exposing them to humiliation and social stigma.

Importantly, Nigerians living in South Africa have stressed the chronic nature of daily xenophobia; as a result, numerous behavioural changes in social settings were documented to prevent conflict, such as minimising social engagements, avoiding specific neighbourhoods, or concealing aspects of self. These adaptation strategies are representative examples of how xenophobia reformulates the embodied presence of migrants in the host society, forcing them to work out the issues of safety and belonging in everyday situations. Similarly, they also face consistent labelling as foreigners in their everyday interactions, often before any substantive interaction has occurred. Accent, skin tone, and mannerisms are signs that others may classify as outsider traits, a participant explicated that:

They already know that I am not one of them, even before I reveal my identity. The moment they noticed this, everything changed. You may not be seen as an ordinary person again, but as Nigeria, which should not be given an opportunity to excel. Male-Postgraduate Students 40-Years Old

Most of the time, the instant classification determines the direction and content of subsequent communication. The participants explained how they are regarded as being Nigerian as a trigger to suspicion and emotional isolation. Being labelled a foreigner also involves constant doubts about belonging. Even years after living in the country, respondents reported that they

were repeatedly questioned about how long they intended to remain or when they would return home. These types of inquiries are viewed as a symbolic expulsion of the social community. The unremitting othering reinforces participants' social identity, reinforcing the view that their existence in South Africa is contingent and temporary, regardless of their legal or unlawful status or social contributions.

Theme 2: Xenophobia Emotional and Psychological Impact.

The psychological and emotional impacts of xenophobia have emerged as widespread and highly reflected dimensions of the realities of the lives of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa. Through the participants' storylines, xenophobia does not only express itself as external social enmity but also as an internal mental load that shapes a sense of self, emotional management, and relationships with the host society. Instead of isolated episodes of discrimination or even violence, xenophobia is lived as a chronic illness, which builds up emotional tension over the course of time. This chronicity lies at the core of respondents' descriptions of distress, who, in the course of frequent exposure to hostility, have had their resilience eroded; this becomes a slow destruction of emotional strength and personal sense of safety.

A strong emotional expression is the fear, or affective orientation, that organises daily behaviour and expectancy plans for how to meet someone. Nigerian migrants explained fear not only as a response to previous events but also as an anticipatory condition that shapes future interaction expectations. Although it is not an explicit aggression, Nigerians mention that they still experience a feeling of some form of unease in social places, which is based on the uncertainty of xenophobic interactions. One of the respondents indicated that: "You no longer wait until something bad occurs. It is already preparing you with your mind". This anticipatory fear helps create a constant state of psychological tension in which every daily activity, such as commuting, seeking services, or meeting strangers, becomes infused with emotion. The sustained vigilance of the social settings to notice any dangerous situation creates a certain hypervigilance, which, according to the participants, is mentally fatigating.

In addition to fear, the Nigerian migrants describe the humiliation and shame resulting from instances of denigration in the public as psychological tensions. Xenophobic experiences are seen as attacks on dignity, especially when the victims are humiliated in the presence of other people. These instances cannot be readily dismissed as mere insults, but they are internalised as symbolic messages of social value and inclusion. According to one of the interviewed respondents in Johannesburg:

"it leaves an imprint when they call you names in front of people. You begin to wonder whether this is the way they think of you or it is who you are"

Such humiliations in experiences interfere with the sense of social legitimacy of Nigerian migrants and add to the sense of reduced self-worth. In the long run, habitual exposure to demeaning treatment weakens self-concept, leaving participants with a sense of perpetual need to explain their existence in the host society.

Emotional exhaustion is also among the effects that the respondents report about being exposed to xenophobia. The emotional strain required to control responses, repress anger, and stay calm and composed during aggressive interactions causes exhaustion. Some of the participants report feeling tired on the inside or feeling numb, and this conveys that they have developed coping strategies that entail distancing themselves from emotions as a result of lengthy

exposure to discrimination. Although emotional withdrawal serves as a protection mechanism against instant distress, it has psychological expenses in the long run. The majority of Nigerians admit that when they suppress emotional reactions, their ability to empathise, trust, and be emotionally open in social relations is limited. One of the participants comments that “you begin to seal your heart a bit, since when you experience everything, it becomes too bulky to bear”. Although this emotional withdrawal is an adaptive mechanism in the short run, it risks increasing social isolation and limiting the prospects for productive interpersonal interaction.

Management of anger, therefore, becomes another emotional burden that supplements the psychological xenophobic burden. Along with short-term emotional reactions, Nigerian migrants report more lasting effects related to identity and sense of belonging. The experiences of xenophobia confront the Nigerians with their self-comprehensions as befitting the social community, and a negotiation of identity in relation to exclusion continues to take place. Most of the respondents claim to be caught between belonging and non-belonging, physically present there in South Africa, but symbolically located outside the ethical confines of social inclusion. The liminal status creates a state of existential distress, with the participants grappling with the desire to stay stable and have a place in the world, and with the constant reminders of unbelonging. This identity conflict has affected them emotionally, as evidenced by the respondents' descriptions of loneliness, disillusionment, and rootlessness. To others, the long-term exposure to xenophobia also makes one wonder whether long-term residence in South Africa can be done emotionally.

The experiences of the Nigerian migrants in South Africa also indicate the role of xenophobia in interpersonal mistrust and relationship openness. Recurrent instances of antagonism lead to widespread suspicion among members of the host community, which in turn prompts them to adopt defensive social stances. Such a loss of trust is not only within the context of a one-on-one deal but also within a broader view of the social institution, in which players say they no longer believe the authorities or service providers will be able to help them in times of need. The psychological implications of the loss of trust include the constriction of social worlds and Nigerian migrants finding themselves increasingly dependent on co-ethnic networks as sources of emotional security. As important as such networks are, the shrinking of social horizons also imposes restrictions on cross-cultural interaction and social assimilation, further consolidating patterns of social division.

Although they are all emotionally and psychologically overwhelming, participants' accounts also include instances of resilience and emotional meaning-making. Other participants define reframing xenophobic experiences as expressions of structural injustice and not personal failure, which helps them to defend their self-esteem. One interviewee notes, “I remind myself of the fact that this is their issues, not my worthiness”. This cognitive reframing can be considered a significant emotional coping mechanism as it enables the participants to dissociate personal identity with stigmatising accounts. Some say they had to rely on their religious beliefs, life ambitions, or future aspirations to remain hopeful amid perpetual misery. These meaning-making activities do not remove the emotional suffering but offer interpretive resources by which the sufferers may place their plight in a wider discourse of survival and meaning.

Theme 3: Institutionalised Discrimination and Structural Vulnerability.

In addition to interpersonal aggression, respondents revealed that they experienced xenophobia at the institutional and structural levels. The experiences of Nigerian migrants are

clear testimonies indicating that xenophobia is not just a hostility levelled at an individual level, but is actually interwoven with the institutional edifice and wider structural framework that determines the day-to-day life of the Nigerian immigrants in South Africa. Institutionalised discrimination manifests itself in interactions with employers, law enforcement, landlords, and those who provide public services, which creates a feeling of total vulnerability and precarity. These are not singular anomalies but structural exchanges in which a systematic restriction on socio-economic progress and entrenched marginalisation within the host society are sustained. Nigerians reported being treated discriminately by employers, landlords, and law enforcement officials. These experiences were found to be more harmful than typical verbal animosity, as they had a direct impact on livelihoods, housing security, and individual safety.

In the labour and employment sector, the majority of respondents narrated experiences of unequal treatment amounting to structural injustices, not just single-handed prejudices. Many Nigerians claimed that they were not engaged in formal jobs, even with relevant qualifications, or were marginalised into precarious employment characterised by low wages and poor job security. In similar cases, Nigerian immigrants were paid less than their South-African counterparts when doing the same jobs, some were not given the appropriate promotion or were sacked without adhering to the due process. Some others said they were exposed to extra scrutiny during hiring or were asked to submit more paperwork than their domestic counterparts. A participant narrated that:

“When they (South Africans) need hardworking people, they are eager to recommend us(Nigerians); however, when a problem arises, they tell you that it is because you are a foreigner. When a promotion comes around, then you are not really needed anymore.”

These statements reflect empirical evidence that migrants in South Africa are overrepresented in precarious industries and face discriminatory employment opportunities, thereby increasing their economic vulnerability (Crush and Ramachandran, 2014). Institutional reproduction of inequality as a means of market exclusion continues in a cycle in which migrants become disposable labour, thereby hampering long-term stability and socio-economic integration.

The experiences with law enforcement agents were reported as especially traumatising; over time, Nigerians' encounters with law enforcement officers turned out to be a highly relevant point of institutionalised discrimination in South Africa. Many Nigerians reported regular checks of identity, harassment, and a sense of profiling due to nationality or accent. Such experiences instilled in people a sense of precarity in the law, even among individuals who had legitimate documentation. “Even when there is nothing wrong about your papers you still feel scared when you see the police,” stated one of the respondents. He narrated further that “You never know whether it is going to be another problem today.” This kind of testimony aligns with the extant literature in South Africa and depicts policing as coercive and exclusionary, thereby exacerbating fear of protection (Landau, 2011). The feeling that governmental bodies, supposed to protect the population's security, act as sources of danger increases participants' mistrust and makes them more susceptible.

Structural barriers also manifested in housing and access to basic services. Nigerians were denied accommodation or charged exorbitant rents when they provided information about their nationality. There was a sense of discrimination in public service, especially in healthcare facilities, which restricted access to care. One of the participants in the study revealed categorically that in healthcare facilities, they take longer to attend to you or address you in a

manner that you should not have been there. These testimonies align with studies that reveal that migrants often face obstacles to accessing essential services due to bureaucratic procedures and a negative attitude toward other people in institutions (Adjai and Lazaridis, 2013). These exclusions also act as structural processes that control migrants' access to resources, thereby strengthening social marginalisation outside interpersonal interaction. The accrued effects of institutionalised discrimination create structural vulnerability, which is a situation characterised by an increase in the level of exposure to economic insecurity, legal precarity, and social exclusion. Respondents explained how bureaucracies limit their ability to plan, invest, or participate fully in community life. The instability of employment, housing, and legal recognition creates long-term stress and limits agency. This tendency repeats larger theoretical arguments according to which xenophobia is ingrained in structural structures that actively marginalise migrants so that they become outsiders of social and institutional hierarchies (Neocosmos, 2010).

Theme 4: Strength, coping mechanisms, and resilience in the face of Xenophobia in South Africa

In the face of unrelenting exposure to xenophobic enmity, institutionalisation of exclusion, and psychological distress, the Nigerian immigrants in South Africa have been seen to have exhibited a continuum of coping mechanisms to help them navigate ordinary life. The resilience practices we capture in the current research are not about the absence of suffering, but rather a dynamic, continuous process of meaning-making, emotional regulation, and strategic adjustment within constrained social environments. The coping strategies operate at individual, relational, and collective levels and demonstrate participants' concerted efforts to maintain dignity, psychological well-being, and a meaningful sense of agency in the context of chronic marginalisation and xenophobia.

One of the salient coping strategies is emotional regulation, involving selective disengagement and emotional distancing. Respondents reported a conscious restriction of emotional investment in aggressive interactions as a protective measure for their psyche. Instead of confronting discriminatory behaviour, most of them embrace silence, avoidance, and emotional withdrawal. A female participant commented, "When you respond to everything, you will be broken. I could go away sometimes and defend my peace." Such forms of self-regulation are also consistent with previous studies suggesting that marginalised populations often resort to emotional suppression and disengagement as adaptive mechanisms to long-term discrimination (Pascoe and Richman, 2009). Even though these strategies can buffer the short-term emotional damage, the respondents admit that prolonged disengagement can lead to the development of emotional isolation.

Religiosity was also revealed as a key pillar of support and spiritual survival. Religious practices, including prayer and participation in religious communities, provide interpretive schemes that help individuals negotiate suffering and uncertainty. According to a respondent, "faith is a mediator of hope, a moral basis, and reassurance in the face of fear and despair". Another participant revealed that, when life becomes difficult, he prays and remembers that he is in the process of a mission. In this case, religion serves not only as a coping tool but as a medium to existential meaning, as an opposition to internalised accounts of rejection. This observation resonates with research highlighting the importance of spirituality in enhancing resilience among migrants facing structural challenges (Connor, 2010).

Co-ethnic and migrant networks are another key coping arena based on social support. Those involved emphasise the importance of connection with other Nigerians and other African migrants who have had similar experiences of rejection. These networks provide emotional support, practical help, and a sense of belonging, which can be lacking in host-community interactions. One of the respondents noted that when you communicate with people who can empathise with your plight, you do not feel alone. These solidarities serve as protective social spaces, allowing the expression of vulnerability without the threat of punitive judgment. In line with previous research, ethnic networks are used as a safeguard against discrimination and as a strategic tool to bypass structural constraints, such as employment and housing (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

Cognitive reframing is another pivotal approach in which participants reframe their xenophobic experiences to maintain self-esteem. Instead of making the hate treatment personal, the respondents interpret the xenophobic behaviour as a symptom of the larger socio-economic problems in South Africa. One participant commented that it is not the fact that I am useless, but that the system is broken. These reframing externalisations shift blame and oppose stigmatising discourses which describe them as undeserving outsiders. These cognitive strategies are fundamental aspects of resilience, helping one maintain positive self-concepts despite recurrent discrimination (Major et al., 2002).

There is also economic perseverance and future oriented goal set. A great number of respondents express strong adherence to long-term goals involving financial security and family duty, including family duty across borders. These objectives serve as motivation anchors that help one stick through tough times. One of the participants cited the reason as, I continue going because my family relies on me. Giving up is not an option." This futuristic stance situates the current affliction within a framework of sacrifice and improvement, sustaining effort even in the face of structural limitations. These results are consistent with the reports that project future and goal orientation as drivers of migrant resilience (Silove, 2013).

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings presented herein, it is clear that responses to xenophobia must be multi-level, going beyond the individualistic perspective that views the phenomenon as structural and psychosocial. Accordingly, we offer a series of recommendations regarding policy reform, institutional practice, and community-level interventions, as well as opportunities for future research. National and local governments should strengthen and implement anti-discrimination frameworks that make it clear that migrants cannot be excluded institutionally from the labour market, housing sector, policing bodies, and service provision arenas. To reduce legal precariousness and the testing of unjust standards, it is indispensable to ensure coherence between migration policy and social inclusion policy. Officials should be educated on the issue of implicit bias and xenophobic stereotyping in institutional cultures. Empirical evidence suggests that anti-discrimination policies are most effective when they are accompanied by a system of accountability and independent oversight agencies to enable migrants to report abuses without fear (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014; Landau, 2011).

Furthermore, Governments should implement migrant-friendly service policies in public institutions, such as law enforcement agencies, healthcare services, and other municipal service providers. Such practices can be optimised through culturally responsive training, information

dissemination in languages other than English, and migrant liaison officers, all of which help build trust between migrants and institutions. Healthcare protocols must guarantee non-discriminatory care regardless of nationality since restricted access to basic services further builds structural vulnerability and worsens mental health (Adjai & Lazaridis, 2013). Institutions are also encouraged to work with civil society organisations to set up legal aid clinics and rights awareness programmes, empowering migrants with the knowledge to navigate bureaucratic systems.

Host community and migrant group dialogues are important community-based programmes should also be encouraged. The sustained, facilitated interaction between host communities and migrant groups is aimed at breaking down xenophobic narratives and creating an understanding based on contact. Intergroup contact organised on an equal-status, mutual-interest basis has been empirically associated with decreases in prejudice and increases in social cohesion (Allport, 1954/1979). Credible channels for psychosocial support, conflict mediation, and information dissemination must be buttressed by faith-based organisations and migrant associations. The harmful effects of discrimination on mental health can be overcome by investing in community centres that offer counselling, peer support and skill-training (Williams & Mohammed, 2013).

Finally, given the documented emotional and psychological sequelae of xenophobia, there is an exigent need for trauma-informed migrant-focused mental health services. Interventions should include culturally appropriate counselling, group support and referral to social services. Distress may be reduced by programmes to enhance coping resources, such as cognitive reframing, peer support, and future-oriented goal setting as long as structural reforms are made to avoid the undue shifting of adaptive burdens onto migrants (Masten, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2014). Together these suggestions emphasise the fact that meaningful change needs to be based on institutional reform, community involvement and psychosocial support in a rights-based arrangement that takes into account the structural origins as well as the experienced effects of xenophobia.

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