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Is New Zealand the Right Choice?  
The Psychological and Social Factors Influencing the Decision for German Immigrants to New Zealand to Stay in New Zealand or to Return to Germany

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

Petra Topaz Bürgelt

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has developed a local theory of German immigration to New Zealand by exploring the experiences of migrants throughout the whole migration process, the particular meaning they assigned to their experiences, and how these experiences were influenced by cultural and historical context. This local theory identifies the psychological and social factors, and the interrelations between them, that contribute to resilience and adaptation or to vulnerability and poor adaptation, and that influence the decision whether to stay in New Zealand or to return to Germany.

To gain these insights, this research drew on the theoretical perspectives of the salutogenic paradigm, social interactionism, and social constructionism in narrative theory; and adapted a grounded theory methodology. The study sampled social artifacts, with particular emphasis on actions/interactions, narratives, and answers to concrete questions. Eight German immigrant couples, four who live in New Zealand and decided to stay in New Zealand (stayers) and four who had immigrated to New Zealand, but decided to return to Germany and live now in Germany (returners), were interviewed in-depth via episodic interviews. The interview data was complemented with data from participant observation, the latest census, and the history of German settlement in New Zealand in order to capture the context of the immigration experiences. The data gathered was analysed by using grounded theory analysis strategies.

The processes that underpin decisions to migrate, decisions to remain, and decisions to return are discussed. The most important psychosocial process influencing the experiences of German immigrants to New Zealand was 'Living the Dream'. The migration process presented many different and substantial challenges simultaneously. Thus, stress was an inevitable aspect of the migration process. Each sub-phase of the migration process influenced, and was influenced by, individual characteristics and values, beliefs/attitudes, strategies, and the social conditions in Germany, New Zealand, and Britain. These psychosocial factors, in turn, interacted with one another also. Taken together, these psychosocial factors either increased the likelihood of staying or of returning. Regardless of whether German immigrants stayed or returned, dealing with the challenges and the associated stress acted as a force for exhilarated evolvement, which was linked to the characteristics that prompted their initial migration decision. The experiences, interpretations, and outcomes of female and male German immigrants were remarkably similar. However, some gender differences were identified.
The study provides detailed recommendations that aim at providing resource structures that assist German immigrants to unfold their potential, to learn as much as possible, and to evolve and adapt.
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This thesis presents the outcome of an important part of my journey. This project has been by far the most challenging experiences of my life. I am very grateful that many precious people made this journey possible and/or travelled with me along my path enabling me to master this part of my journey, and to learn and evolve. Each of you made this journey so much more enjoyable.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .................................................................................................................. iii  
Acknowledgements & Appreciations ........................................................................ v  
Tables of Contents ...................................................................................................... ix  
List of Tables ............................................................................................................... xv  
List of Figures ............................................................................................................. xv  
List of Appendices ....................................................................................................... xvi  

Prologue ..................................................................................................................... 3  

## Chapter 1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 7  
Theoretical Paradigms ............................................................................................... 9  
  Pathogenic versus Salutogenic Approach ............................................................... 9  
  Positivist versus Interpretive Paradigm .................................................................. 11  
  Symbolic Interactionism ......................................................................................... 12  
  Social Constructionism in Narrative Theory ........................................................... 16  
  Implications of the Assumptions of Salutogenic Paradigm, Symbolic Interactionism, and Social Constructionism in Narrative Theory for Present Study ........................ 19  
Gaps in the Migration Research .................................................................................. 20  
The Present Study: Research Aims, Questions, and Intended Outcomes .......... 23  

## Chapter 2 Research Methodology & Design ......................................................... 25  
Overall Mode of Social Inquiry: Qualitative Research Paradigm ......................... 26  
Methodology of Study: Grounded Theory ............................................................... 27  
  Key Characteristics ............................................................................................... 29  
  Essential Components of Grounded Theory Methodology .................................... 30  
  Role of the Researcher ........................................................................................... 32  
  Outcomes ............................................................................................................ 33  
  Advantages and Disadvantages ............................................................................ 33  
Research Methods of Collection and Analysis ......................................................... 34
### Chapter 3 Method

Participants ........................................ 50
- Purposively Sampling ......................... 50
- Recruitment ..................................... 51
- Negotiating Access ............................ 55
- Participant Characteristics .................. 55

Data Collection Methods ......................... 55
- Ethnography: Participant Observation .... 57
- Episodic Interviews ............................ 60
- Reimbursement ................................ 67

Data Analysis ........................................ 67
- Data Management .............................. 67
- Analysis ......................................... 69
- Writing Up ...................................... 74

My Position in the Research .................... 75

### Chapter 4 Historical, Statistical, and Environmental Context & Conditions

Historical Background ............................ 78
- German Migration Worldwide: A Brief Historical Overview .................. 78
- The History of German Immigration to New Zealand ......................... 79

Statistical Background ............................ 83
- Migration Flows of German Immigrants to New Zealand .................... 83
- Characteristics of German Immigrants Living in New Zealand ............. 87

Physical Environment .............................. 92
- The German Embassy .......................... 93
- The Goethe Institute in New Zealand ........................................... 94
- The New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils (Inc) ....................... 95
- The New Zealand Immigration Service and Current Immigration Policy 96
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Higher Power &amp; Insignificance</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Outcomes of Stayers</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am Happy, Proud, Stronger, and More Myself</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendent Inner Sense of Self: I am Me &amp; I am a German New Zealander</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Outcomes of Returners</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was Worth it: I am a Richer Person</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendent Inner Sense of Self: I am Me &amp; I am Different</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not Feel like a Failure</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 9** Weighing up: Choosing the Path most Conducive for Fulfilment of Future Dreams 267

| Stayers: Reasons and Conditions for Staying                            | 268  |
| Difficult to Find Point to Return                                      | 270  |
| Invested too Much into Migration to New Zealand                        | 271  |
| Feel Happier in New Zealand                                            | 271  |
| ‘Sense of Love’ in New Zealand                                         | 272  |
| Increasingly Difficult to Return after about Three Years               | 273  |
| Could not Afford Similar Living Standard in Germany now               | 274  |
| Germany Remains Unattractive                                           | 275  |
| Returners: Reasons and Conditions for Returning                        | 275  |
| Decisive Experiences                                                   | 278  |
| Push Factors: Reasons and Conditions Pushing them Away                | 279  |
| from New Zealand                                                       | 279  |
| Pull Factors: Reasons and Conditions Pulling them to Germany          | 291  |
| Beliefs/Attitudes that Increased the Likelihood of Returning           | 296  |
| New Dreams                                                             | 300  |
| Returning to New Zealand                                              | 301  |
| Living in Another Country                                              | 301  |
| Combining the Best of Both Worlds                                      | 302  |
| Continuing an Interesting Life full of New Experiences                 | 303  |
| Future Concerns                                                        | 303  |
| Summary                                                                | 304  |
# Chapter 10 Discussion: Living the Dream

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Theory: The Experiences of German Immigrants to New Zealand</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Category: Living the Dream</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Migration Process</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular Issues of the Migration Process</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of Study</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Future Research</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1. Overview of Overall Characteristics of Participants .................................. 56
Table 3.2. Overview of Data Collection ........................................................................... 58
Table 4.1. Total Number of Germans usually Living in New Zealand ....................... 87
Table 4.2. Marital Status of German Immigrants in New Zealand ............................ 88
Table 4.3. Highest Qualifications of German Immigrants in New Zealand .................. 89
Table 4.4. Occupations of German Immigrants to New Zealand ............................... 89
Table 4.5. Work and Labour Force Status of German Immigrants to New Zealand .......... 90
Table 4.6. Sources of Income of German Immigrants to New Zealand ...................... 90
Table 4.7. Comparison of Personal Income (Median) of German Immigrants to New Zealand with Other Countries ......................................................... 92
Table 10.1. Overview of the Psychological Factors that Increase the Likelihood of Staying and of Returning .......................................................... CD
Table 10.2. Overview of Positive Health/Growth Outcomes of Migration .................. 327

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. The Conditional Matrix .................................................................................. 32
Figure 3.1. Assumptions Regarding Migration Process Before Analysis ....................... 72
Figure 4.1. Number of Germans Approved for Permanent Residence ........................ 84
Figure 4.2. Total Numbers of German Long-term Arrivals and Departures ................ 85
Figure 4.3. Percentage of German Long-term Arrivals Returning to Germany ............... 86
Figure 4.4. Total Personal Income of German Immigrants to New Zealand .......... 91
Figure 5.1. Overview Local Theory: The Experiences of German Immigrants to New Zealand ................................................................. CD
Figure 5.2. Preparation Process: Developing the Dream and the Readiness .......... 133
Figure 10.1. Evolvemental Spiral Towards Higher Levels of Awareness/Consciousness .................................................................................. 311
Figure 10.2. Migration Phases and Corresponding Selective Categories .......... 313
Figure 10.3. Overview of the Interaction between Migration Phases and the Psychosocial Factors that Increase the Likelihood of Staying and Returning ............................................. 324

REFERENCES

References ................................................................................................. 341

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A Ethics Protocol ........................................................................... 360
Appendix B Information Sheet ........................................................................ 369
Appendix C Consent Form ............................................................................. 374
Appendix D Phone Checklist .......................................................................... 377
Appendix E German Original Quotes ............................................................ 381
Appendix F Reflections: Ethical, Power, Methodological & Political Issues .................................................................................. 412
Appendix G Overview of Specific Beliefs/Attitudes and Strategies that Increased the Likelihood of Staying ............................................. 417
Appendix H Ethnic Centre Brochure .............................................................. 424
Appendix I Recommendations: Detailed Version ............................................ 427
TO
MY MUM & DAD
AND PURZEL
PROLOGUE

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let's work together.

(Lilla Watson, Methods and Methodologies)
The processes underlying immigration and the decision whether to stay in New Zealand or to return home have influenced my life in substantial ways. I migrated from Germany to New Zealand myself and the immigration process presented me with many challenges. Coping with these challenges has been a tremendous struggle for me: my self-confidence took a deep dive, I questioned who I was, often I was frustrated and depressed, and I was very homesick. If my partner had not loved living in New Zealand and if I had not wanted to finish my studies, I would have returned home. It took me more than four years to work my way out of this emotional valley and to start to feel happy about living in New Zealand. In addition, the issue of whether to stay or return to Germany put much strain on my long-term relationship. My partner and I migrated together to New Zealand, but our experiences were the opposite. I struggled to cope with the changes created by the New Zealand culture and thus was very unhappy and dissatisfied. As a result, I wanted desperately to return home. My partner, in contrast, coped better and thus was happy and satisfied with his life in New Zealand. Accordingly, he wanted to stay. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a satisfactory solution for both of us. This discrepancy was one factor which led finally to our separation.

Because of my adverse experiences and the experience of other German immigrants living happily in New Zealand, I started wondering. Had they done something differently? And if so, what did they do differently? These questions made me curious – I wanted to find out more about these issues. Moreover, I hoped that exploring the experiences of other German immigrants would challenge me. I hoped that the resulting experiences, knowledge, and insights would contribute to my liberation – that they would assist me to make better sense of my own migration experiences and to contribute to the development of myself into a person who is better able to adapt to potentially adverse events.

Although I was sure that I would find deep and satisfying meaning in investigating the described topic and although I started to care very deeply about it, studying German immigrants only to satisfy my own thirst for knowledge did not seem sufficient justification for the study. To see real purpose in the study and to make it worthwhile for the participants to become deeply involved, the research needed also to be of immediate practical value for 'my' participants and to generate outcomes that would contribute to the betterment of German immigrants to New Zealand – a migrant group about whose experiences not much is known. Reflecting on conversations with and the experiences of many other German immigrants to New Zealand over the last four years made me realise that my experiences are not unique, many of the German immigrants have had similar experiences, and the issue of staying or returning is very much part of the life of many German immigrants. Interestingly, it seems as if often men are happy and
want to stay, whereas women want to go back home after a while, suggesting that men and women deal differently with immigration and that they have different salient issues. As with my relationship, these gender differences put much strain onto the relationships of many German migrant couples and they struggle to find solutions to this dilemma.

In addition, many German immigrants encouraged me to investigate this topic and strengthened me in my belief that knowledge of the specific issues which might come up for German immigrants during their immigration process to New Zealand and of specific strategies that German immigrants use to deal with potential difficulties would greatly help other German immigrants to cope more successfully and would make the occurrence of the question whether to stay or return less likely. Even if this question came up, some knowledge about how other couples dealt with the decision whether to stay or to return might assist German immigrants to find a better solution than breaking up. The realisation that my experiences were representative of the experiences of other German immigrants to New Zealand and that other German immigrants were greatly interested in the experiences of other German immigrants convinced me that the research holds some potential for the liberation of present and future German immigrants to New Zealand.

As a result of my training in critical psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and as a result of key personal experiences, I began to identify with the interpretive assumptions regarding the nature of the world and about how to generate knowledge about the world. Accordingly, I was convinced that only a qualitative research methodology based on interpretive ontological and epistemological assumptions could achieve the above stated objectives. Hence, I decided to draw upon interpretive ontological and epistemological assumptions for the study and to adopt a qualitative research methodology which goes along with the interpretive assumptions.

As I entertained the idea of studying German immigrants, I became aware that being a German migrant and a psychology student is a rare combination. Not many psychologists would be interested in studying German immigrants and, even if they were, they would not be in such a unique position as I am for studying German immigrants. Coming from the same cultural background, speaking German, and having migrated to New Zealand myself gives me an insider status. This status is of crucial importance for the research of a minority group which is culturally different from the dominant culture. Being an insider allows me to use experiential data: the experiences I have had myself during my four years living as a German immigrant in New Zealand and the knowledge of experiences of other German immigrants. This experiential data can not only add important data to the study, it can also make the data collection and
analysis easier, more accurate, and deeper. Speaking German and coming from the same cultural background should facilitate the attraction of and access to potential participants, the willingness of potential participants to participate, and the establishment of trusting relationships with the participants. Further, my background should enable me to understand the nuances in what the participants say; to relate well to the participants’ feelings, thoughts, and opinions; and to establish trusting relationships with my participants. In short, having been a “long-term participant” should facilitate the research process and give me “a peculiar kind of ethnohistorical depth” (Ortner, 1997, p. 63).

Studying German immigrants is important and satisfying for me for another reason also: it gives me the opportunity to give some useful knowledge back to New Zealand, the country which has given me the opportunity to advance my education and has generously supported me in my studies. As will become obvious, knowledge about the psychological and social factors that influence the well-being and adaptation of immigrants, and thus their decision whether to stay or to return, is of paramount importance for New Zealand’s society.

For these reasons together, I chose to investigate systematically the experiences of German immigrants to New Zealand in the course of my Master’s thesis. Because the research topic is of high personal interest to me, I care deeply about this research, and find deep and satisfying meaning in it. Thus, I am “in the work” emotionally and intellectually. Although the starting point for selecting this research topic was my own personal experience, it is my great hope that the research findings will serve the minority group of German immigrants to New Zealand: that my research meets their needs - that our liberation is bound up with one another. Only through this joint liberation, as Watson (Methods and Methodologies) points out in the quote in the beginning of the prologue, will this project be able to reach its overall objective: the working together of German immigrants to pool their knowledge in order to assist one another and future German immigrants to New Zealand.