

# EURASIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

[www.eurasianpublications.com](http://www.eurasianpublications.com)

---

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF DISTANT PARENTING ON MOTHERS: SCOPING REVIEW

**Katlego Magdeline Rantho**

University of Limpopo, South Africa  
Email: rantho.magdeline@gmail.com

**Frans Koketso Matlakala** 

North-West University and University of Venda, South Africa  
Email: fransmatlakala@gmail.com

**Witness Maluleke**

University of Limpopo, South Africa  
Email: Witness.Maluleke@ul.ac.za

Received: April 17, 2023

Accepted: June 14, 2023

---

### Abstract

The involvement of parents in the lives of children is of paramount importance. Parents' responsibility of ensuring the wellbeing of children should be taken into cognisance. Of late, some parents find themselves parenting from a distance as they leave in pursuit of employment. As a result, these parents experienced different challenges. The problem is that most researchers tend to focus on challenges experienced by children and leave out those experienced by parents. Hence, this paper aimed at synthesizing existing literature on the psychological challenges of distant parenting on mothers. In doing so, the researchers used a scoping review. The documents, which were used in the study, were purposively sampled from ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. From the literature, the researchers found that parents experienced stress and guilt as a result of leaving their children behind. Some of the parents experienced loss of connection with their children due to the distance and were stigmatized in the community/societies. It can be concluded that long-distance parenting remains high with severe implications for the lives of parents. The researchers recommend a phenomenological study on the lived experiences of fathers providing care to their distant children.

**Keywords:** Stress, Emotional Disconnection, Scoping Review, Mothers, Psychological Challenges

---

### 1. Introduction

The separation of parents and their children is a global issue and South Africa is not an exception. Although migration is apparent in single individuals, Ambrosini (2015) signposted that in countries such as Italy and Southern Europe, parents abandon their children with other family members to stay at another place. In addition, Srivastava and de Guzman (2017) aver parents leave their

children with grandparents as a distribution of childcare and for grandparents to teach them vital social and emotional behaviours. Although that is the case, these parents do not overrule the importance of being physically present for their children. In corroboration, Puspitasari *et al.* (2021) reiterated that family is important in providing psychological, emotional, social, and physical support to its members. This suggests that the role played by the family system is important to the day-to-day functioning of its members. Thus, parents need to remain present in their children's lives and vice versa.

Parents' decision to leave behind their children is influenced by various factors. To begin with, Srivastava and de Guzman (2017) highlighted that leaving children at home owes to the cultural motivations of parents. In a study conducted on Indian immigrants, it was revealed that parents sent their children home to be raised in a context that is consistent with the parent's beliefs of child-rearing and family (Amos, 2013; Srivastava & de Guzman, 2017). For example, parents send their children home because they believe that the attention offered by relatives such as grandparents is more sufficient than that offered by daycare services. On the other hand, Puspitasari *et al.* (2021) underscored that other parents leave their children home because of economic, career and educational reasons. These researchers emphasize that although circumstances force these parents to stay far from their children, they are still compelled to continue playing their roles as parents.

Amid navigating the difficulties of parenthood, Rantho and Matlakala (2021) provided that parents find themselves being swamped with a plethora of psychological, social and emotional challenges. Furthermore, Seepamore (2016) postulated that long-distance set the relationship between parents and children in danger because parents fail to reprimand their children from a distance. This does not only affect parents and children but also the community at large as social ills such as violence emanate due to the separation. With that said, the researcher undertook the study to unearth mainly the challenges that are faced by parents who are staying far from their children. In doing so, the researchers primarily looked at the secondary data drawn from the ScienceDirect and Google Scholar databases. The design was chosen as researchers wanted to find the gaps and open doors for future research.

## 2. Problem statement

There is a continuous increase in parents who are rearing their children from a distance. Non-residential parenting can negatively affect the relationship between parents and children (Foley, 2020). Non-residential parent is a parent who resides in the same city or another city but not in the same house with their children (Kartch, 2013). Researchers in this study have noted with keen interest the dearth of information on the challenges faced by parents raising their children from a distance. This is supported by Van der Walt (2018) who stated that research on parenting focuses on mothers as sole carers because they are more emotionally attached to their children than fathers. Although that is the case, fathers suffer from emotional and social stigma when separated from their children. Earlier, Pieterse (2009) blamed the exclusion of fathers in research on cultural background. To Pieterse (2009), culture expects mothers to nurture their children hence they are an easy target for psychological distress posed by long-distance parenting. Moreover, Ercan and Uçar (2021) revealed that females define themselves in the context of relationships, they are susceptible to losing their self-concept and identity when they lose their relationships. In other words, when women are separated from their children, they can lose how they see and define themselves, which leads them to attract judgment from society. This is due to the societal perception that women should be primary providers for children. In a study conducted in the US by Glass *et al.* (2021), it was established that mothers were seen as the breadwinners or primary providers for children. Thus, this paper was aimed at synthesizing existing literature on the psychological challenges of distant parenting on mothers.

## 3. Methods

The researchers adopted a scoping review to describe the psychological challenges of distant parenting. A scoping review is seen as a review that 'aims to map rapidly the key concepts

underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available and can be undertaken as stand-alone projects in their own right, especially where an area is complex or has not been reviewed comprehensively before' (Mays et al. 2001, p. 194). The researchers opted for a scoping review because the issue of distant parenting is a new phenomenon for mothers. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) proposed a framework that consists of five stages; namely, (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying the relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) data charting, and (5) summarizing data. According to Arksey and O'Malley (2005), the framework is applicable when conducting the scoping review and, in this paper, the researcher combines the data charting step with summarizing data.

### 3.1. Identifying the research question

To develop a research question, Muka et al. (2020) advise researchers to draw down the research aim of the study. If the research aim is not clear, then the research question will not be offering researchers an opportunity to build the search strategy. In this study, the study aim was to unearth the psychological challenges faced by distant parents. Based on the aforesaid aim, Muka et al. (2009) further advise that a good research question is formulated when the researcher uses either PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparisons, Outcome), PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome), or SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) which are defined by the research analysis type. Because this was a narrative descriptive analysis, researchers used PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome) to develop the question (see Table 1). The research question was, *what are the psychological challenges faced by distant parents?*

**Table 1. PEO framework**

<b>P – Population</b>	<b>E – Exposure</b>	<b>O – Outcome</b>
Mothers	Distant parenting	Psychological challenges

### 3.2. Identifying the relevant studies

The researchers relied on ScienceDirect and Google Scholar to identify the relevant articles. The search engine were customized with the year search from 2012 to 2022, developed inclusion and exclusion criteria and used keywords used to search the database. The inclusion criteria were articles published in journals, articles which were published between 2012-2022 as the authors were looking for latest data on the phenomenon. Moreover, researchers' inclusion criteria also included grey literature in terms of conference proceedings, books and book chapters. As for the exclusion, all articles which were not published in peer-reviewed journals were omitted to ensure the credibility of the data and so were the review papers. Lastly, the keywords were: "distant parent" or "parenting from distance" and "psychological challenges" or "psychological effects" and "mothers". Researchers did not specify which research approach or the country of publish as they wanted to get a wider range.

### 3.3. Study selection

Apart from the above-mentioned study inclusion and exclusion criteria, the researchers had to ensure that they select relevant articles in the study. To do so, researchers used the PRISMA (see figure 1 attached) to sample articles which were going to be part of the study.

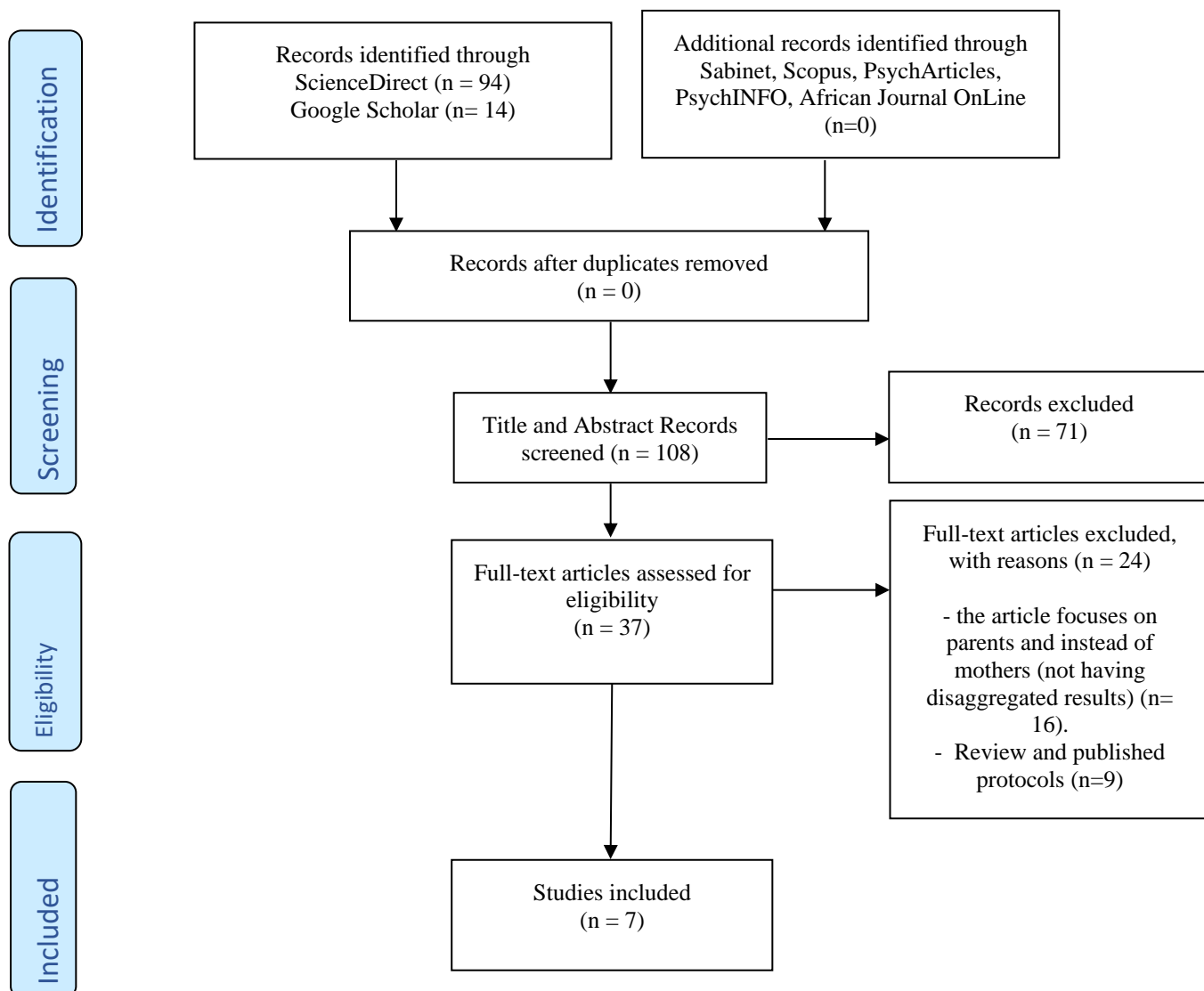


Figure 1. Flow chart of study selection  
Source: Liberati et al. (2009)

### 3.4. Charting and summarizing the data

The researchers relied on the data charting to extract the selected data from the PRISMA for scoping review (see Table 1). The data charting looked at the author of the article, year, topic, research methodology and the main findings. To clearly summarize the collected data, the researcher closely looked at the main findings to develop themes of this paper. The data was then analyzed thematically using inductive content analysis.

**Table 2. Data charting**

Source	Title	Methodology	Findings
Jensen (2012)	Do labour market opportunities affect young women's work and family decisions? Experimental evidence from India	Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher found that women want to work more, push their careers and have fewer children</li> <li>• The economic opportunities pull women to join labor force;</li> </ul>
Kariuki (2014)	The impact of long distance marriage on the family: A study of families with spouses abroad in Kiambu county	Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children were emotionally depressed due to the absence of one parent;</li> <li>• Due to the absence of one parent, the family experience financial handicaps;</li> <li>• The study found that some partners were not ready to be left alone</li> </ul>
Lavee (2016)	The neoliberal mom: How a discursive coalition shapes low-income mothers' labor market participation	Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mothers in the study linked labor force to positive motherhood;</li> <li>• The participation of mothers in labor is to ensure that children do not experience poverty;</li> <li>• The participation of women in labor force to guard against symbolic poverty does cause a conflict with other maternal obligations;</li> <li>• Being committed to their work, women are often seen as neglectful mothers</li> </ul>
Louie & Cromer (2014)	Parent-child attachment during the deployment cycle: Impact on reintegration parenting stress.	Mixed methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The study found that time demand from military base place enormous pressure on families which have young children;</li> <li>• Parents do not discuss their deployment issue as they believe that their children are too young to understand;</li> <li>• Parents maintain their communication with their children using modes such as Skypes; and</li> <li>• Majority of the participants encountered stress and conflicts with their spouses on parenting duties.</li> </ul>
Meyers & Rugunanan (2020)	Mobile-mediated mothering from a distance: A case study of Somali mothers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa	Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The study found that mothers experience feelings of guilty when they consider that they had to migrate and leave their children behind;</li> <li>• Although they left their children behind, migrant mothers also shared their affection for their children and do maintain contact;</li> <li>• Migrant mothers take on the responsibilities of breadwinners when they get opportunities in the host country</li> <li>• Migrant mothers leave their country of origin for the survival of their family;</li> <li>• Migrant mothers leave their children with caretakers in order to ease their guilt conscious when in the host country;</li> <li>• Most of the migrant parents made use of technology in order to deal with their emotions when they miss their children.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Continued**

<p>Pineros-Leano et al. (2021)</p>	<p>Depressive symptoms and emotional distress of transnational mothers: a scoping review.</p>	<p>Qualitative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a scarcity of recent literature on the transactional motherhood especially on the issue of mental health and emotional distress;</li> <li>• Mother experience psychological challenges when separated with their children;</li> <li>• Most of mothers live their children with their grandparent in their country of origin</li> </ul>
<p>Srivastava &amp; de Guzman (2017)</p>	<p>'Why I Sent My Child Away' Culturally Structured Motivations for Long-distance Parenting.</p>	<p>Qualitative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents have a busy schedule wherein they are focusing on their demanding jobs and hardly have time for their children</li> <li>• Other parents express their safety concern in as for as placing their children in day cares;</li> <li>• Parents prefers leaving their children with their grandparents as compared to leaving them in day cares;</li> <li>• Some parents prefer leaving their children in their country of origin so that they could learn their own language and not the language of the host country</li> </ul>

#### 4. Findings

The researchers have noted that some parents experience the feeling of stress, shame and guilt when they leave their children in pursue of opportunities in another area (Lavee, 2016; Louie and Cromer, 2014; Meyers and Rugunanan, 2020; Pineros-Leano et al. 2021). For these parents to feel a lot better and ease their guilt, it has been discovered that mothers prefer leaving their children with their grandparents as they do not trust day cares (Srivastava & de Guzman, 2017; Meyers and Rugunanan, 2020). Even though, parents leave their children for opportunities in other areas, they still show affection and love for their children. It has been apparent that mothers parenting from distance make use of technology in order to keep contact with their children (Louie and Cromer, 2014). It is unfortunate that other parents, due to the demand of their work, they even fail to contact their children (Louie and Cromer, 2014; Srivastava & de Guzman, 2017) as a result end up getting into conflict with their spouses (Kariuki, 2014; Louie and Cromer, 2014; Lavee, 2016).

The situation is also exacerbated by the remarks from the community or society. It has emerged that when parents battle the psychological stress of leaving their children behind, the society does not come to their rescue. Instead, the society see parents who are committed to their work as being neglectful mothers (Lavee, 2016). This has led to some parents deciding to have fewer children so that they could focus on their careers (Jensen, 2012). This is due to the fact that some mothers are more concerned about the wellbeing of their children and ensuring that their families do not experience symbolic poverty. On that score, to access opportunities in other areas, some parents do distant parenting due to financial handicaps (Jensen, 2012; Kariuki, 2014; Meyers and Rugunanan, 2020).

#### 5. Discussion

In this section, researchers discuss the themes that emerged from the literature with the aid of the selected study theory. This section will present the following themes, distorted mental health, loss of connection and toxic parental behavior.

### 5.1. Distorted mental health

Mental health problems among parents who stay and work far from their children is an issue of concern. Although there is a dearth of information focusing on family relationships from the perspective of parents, it is worth noting that parents experience turmoil amidst the separation from their children. To Bassey (2018), it is not common to witness parents in rural areas leaving their children in the care of their grandparents in pursuit of labor in other provinces. The authors do not dispute that parents are in dire need of money to be able to provide for their children.

Other authors are appraising the mental health of children whose parents left them for months in the quest to find employment. In accentuating those mental challenges suffered by children, Meyers and Rugunanan (2020) and Pineros-Leano *et al.* (2021) established that the distance between parents and their children leads parents to depression and anxiety as they long for physical interaction with their children. This resonates with the chosen framework as it shows that parents who were insecurely attached in their childhood risk having insecurely attached children as compared to those who were securely attached. Due to the instability or inability to create a secure relationship with their parent, Steinberg *et al.* (2011) stated that when reaching the adolescent stage, those children will fail to establish intimate relationships.

### 5.2. Loss of connection

The notion of parenting entails the philanthropically character of providing love and care to children. To Seepamore (2016), parents are obligated to provide support, warmth, and protection to their children. In other words, parents must connect with their children and raise them in an environment that offers good social support. The findings of this study reveal that separation of parents and children impairs the bonding capability and leads to an unstable relationship. This is in line with the study theory that the environment that children grow up in determines their character as adults. Furthermore, Rosli (2014), Behere *et al.* (2017) and Lionetti *et al.* (2022) reiterated that childhood studies unearthed the importance of the first five years of a child's life wherein it was found that unsupportive environmental conditions affect the cognitive, behavioral and social development of children.

In connection to the above paragraph, Handron (2017) agreed that the absence of parents during their teenage years' makes it difficult for children to vent and share their problems with parents at the same time impairs parental ability to reprimand their children. As a result, the number of uncivilized teenagers increases leading to social ills such as crime and teenage pregnancy. It can be deduced that when parents are staying far from their children, they fail to connect or communicate with their children and become emotionally detached.

## 6. Conclusion

The fact that parents need to be involved in their children's life cannot be disputed. Due to the underlying factors such as poverty and/or lack of employment in one's own area have seen the involvement of the parent in their children's life distant. This article has shown that although parents leave their children to look for employment, they experience some psychological challenges. Of course, it cannot be debated further that long-distance parenting remains high with a severe implication in the lives of parents.

The majority of the consulted studies perused in this paper were focusing on the impact of long-distance on children and alienating those of the parents. In this paper, the authors found that parents are also at risk of suffering from various problems such as mental disorders and loss of connection with their kids. Moreover, the researchers have also noted that when attempting to understand parental challenges, most researchers use the mother's lens instead of both. Thus, for future studies, the researchers recommend a phenomenological study on the lived experiences of fathers proving care to their distant children.

The study was limited to one database, ScienceDirect as other databases that is, Sabinet, Scopus, PsychArticles, PsychINFO and African Journal Online were not able to provide results using the identified keywords.

## References

- Ambrosini, M., 2015. Parenting from a distance and processes of family reunification: A research on the Italian case. *Ethnicities*, 15(3), pp. 440-459. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796814547059>
- Amos, P. M., 2013. Parenting and culture – Evidence from Some African communities. In: M. L. Seidl-de-Moura, ed., 2013. *Parenting in South American and African contexts*. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/56967>
- Arksey, H., and O'Malley, L., 2005. Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), pp. 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Bassey, A. I., 2018. The impact of communal child-rearing approach on the prevalence of teenage pregnancy in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. *Doctoral dissertation*. University of Venda. <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566608.2018/61.1-3.2976>
- Behere, A. P., Basnet, P., and Campbell, P., 2017. Effects of family structure on mental health of children: A preliminary study. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 39(4), pp. 457-463. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0253-7176.211767>
- Ercan, E. U., and Uçar, S., 2021. Gender roles, personality traits and expectations of women and men towards marriage. *Educational Policy Analysis and Strategic Research*, 16(1), pp. 7-20. <https://doi.org/10.29329/epasr.2020.334.1>
- Foley, D., 2020. Fighting for power: class conflicts in political participation. *Doctoral Dissertation*. Old Dominion University.
- Glass, J. L., Raley, R. K., and Pepin, J. R., 2021. Children's financial dependence on mothers: Propensity and duration. *Socius*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/237802312111055246>
- Handron, D., 2017. How does a parent's absence affect teens? [online] Available at: <<https://howtoadult.com/parents-absence-affect-teens-17368.html>> [Accessed on 14 January 2023].
- Jensen, R., 2012. Do labour market opportunities affect young women's work and family decisions? Experimental evidence from India. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 127(2), pp. 753-792. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjs002>
- Kariuki, J. W., 2014. The impact of long distance marriage on the family: A study of families with spouses abroad in Kiambu county. *Doctoral Dissertation*. University of Nairobi.
- Kartch, F., 2013. Nonresidential parenting: Parental roles and parent/child relationships *Doctoral dissertation*. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
- Lavee, E., 2016. The neoliberal mom: How a discursive coalition shapes low-income mothers' labor market participation. *Community, Work & Family*, 19(4), pp. 501-518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2015.1078288>
- Liberati, A., Altman, D. G., Tetzlaff, J., Mulrow, C., Gøtzsche, P. C., Ioannidis, J. P., ... & Moher, D. (2009). The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions: explanation and elaboration. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 151(4), W-65. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-151-4-200908180-00136>
- Lionetti, F., Klein, D. N., Pastore, M., Aron, E. N., Aron, A., and Pluess, M., 2022. The role of environmental sensitivity in the development of rumination and depressive symptoms in childhood: a longitudinal study. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(11), pp. 1815-1825. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01830-6>
- Louie, A. D., and Cromer, L. D., 2014. Parent-child attachment during the deployment cycle: Impact on reintegration parenting stress. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 45(6), p. 496. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036603>



- Mays, N., Roberts, E., and Popay, J., 2001. Synthesising research evidence. In: N. Fulop, P. Allen, A. Clarke, and N. Black, eds., 2001. *Studying the organisation and delivery of health services: Research methods*. London: Routledge. pp. 188-220.
- Meyers, C., and Rugunanan, P., 2020. Mobile-mediated mothering from a distance: A case study of Somali mothers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(5), pp. 656-673. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920926645>
- Muka, T., Glisic, M., Milic, J., Verhoog, S., Bohlius, J., Bramer, W., Chowdhury, R., and Franco, O. H., 2020. A 24-step guide on how to design, conduct, and successfully publish a systematic review and meta-analysis in medical research. *European Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, pp. 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10654-019-00576-5>
- Pieterse, J. T., 2009. Parenting from a distance: Illuminating the lived experiences of non-resident divorced mothers. *Doctoral Dissertation*. University of the Witwatersrand.
- Pineros-Leano, M., Yao, L., Yousuf, A., and Oliveira, G., 2021. Depressive symptoms and emotional distress of transnational mothers: a scoping review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, 182. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.574100>
- Puspitasari, I. P., Rachmawati, Y., and Purnamasari, I., 2021. Long distance parenting in early childhood. In: *5th International Conference on Early Childhood Education (ICECE 2020)* pp. 33-36. Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210322.009>
- Rantho, K. M., and Matlakala, F. K., 2021. Psychological and socio-economic challenges faced by teen fathers: A narrative review. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 9(5), pp. 62-67. <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2021.9510>
- Rosli, N. A., 2014. Effect of parenting styles on children's emotional and behavioral problems among different ethnicities of Muslim children in the US. *Doctoral dissertation*. Marquette University.
- Seepamore, B. K., 2016. Distance parenting-implications for social work practice. *Social Work*, 52(4), pp. 571-588. <https://doi.org/10.15270/52-4-531>
- Srivastava, D., and de Guzman, M. R. T., 2017. 'Why I sent my child away' culturally structured motivations for long-distance parenting. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 29(1), pp. 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971333616689201>
- Steinberg, L., Bornstein, M.H., Vandell, D. L., and Rook, K.S. 2011. *Lifespan development: Infancy through adulthood*. Boston, M.A.: Cengage Learning.
- Van der Walt, G., 2018. Alternative care in South Africa. *Obiter*, 39(3), pp. 615-651. <https://doi.org/10.17159/obiter.v39i3.11327>