

Existential Migration

Conceptualising out of the experiential depths of choosing to leave "home"

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*Why spurn my home when exile is your home?
The Ithaca you want you'll have in not having.
You'll walk her shores yet long to tread those very grounds,
kiss Penelope yet wish you held your wife instead,
touch her flesh yet yearn for mine.
Your home's in the rubblehouse of time now,
and you're made thus, to yearn for what you lose.*
- Andre Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (1994)

Abstract

The following is a preliminary discussion of research that unexpectedly gave rise to the new concept of 'existential migration'. Phenomenological interviews with voluntary migrants, individuals who *choose* to leave their homeland to become foreigners in a new culture, reveal consistently deep themes and motivations which could convincingly be labelled 'existential'. Rather than migrating in search of employment, career advancement, or overall improved economic conditions, these voluntary migrants are seeking greater possibilities for self-actualising, exploring foreign cultures in order to assess their own identity, and ultimately grappling with issues of home and belonging in the world generally. The article offers a sketch of this phenomenon with reference to Martin Heidegger's ontology, thereby indicating alternative understandings of 'home', 'not-being-at-home', 'belonging', which take into account the narratives of these migratory experiences. An example of the conceptual ramifications of this new understanding of voluntary migration is found in the definition of 'home as interaction' rather than the usual 'home as place'. The article offers a cautionary note regarding the potentially profound and mostly ignored psychological consequences of the contemporary push to increasing globalisation. As a summary article, what follows will potentially raise more questions than answers for the reader; further articles will be forthcoming and feedback is welcome.

Keywords

Existential, Migration, Anthropology, Unheimlich, Heidegger, Globalisation, Home, Belonging, Acculturation, Cross-cultural Therapy

* This article is based upon the author's completed PhD research.

The aspirations in offering this introductory article are twofold: firstly to assert the importance of previously unacknowledged existential motives for some individuals who choose to leave 'home' for foreign places, and secondly to offer descriptions of this experience of 'existential migration'. These descriptions are important in themselves since, with the exception of a few evocative autobiographies, notable among them Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989) and Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place* (1999), the lived experience of migration has been largely neglected, especially in mainstream psychological, psychotherapeutic, and social science literature. The literature that does exist, including the autobiographies cited above, focuses upon individuals who have been *forced* into exile by political and social circumstances, or pressed to migrate (as a child in Hoffman's case) in search of a better standard of living or advanced education (as in Said's case). There are few, if any, substantive accounts of those who, for whatever reason, actively *choose* to make themselves 'foreigners'. The assumption seems to be that *choosing to leave* makes the migration less evocative, less distressing, less interesting, and in fact less meaningful. The following article seeks to challenge these assumptions.

Differentiations

At the beginning of the 21st century there is a growing demand for a culturally mobile workforce in response to the escalation of trans-national interventions and corporate globalisation (Baker, 1999; Selmer and Shiu, 1999; Iyer, 2000; Miyamoto and Kuhlman, 2001). So of course there are increasingly diverse economic motivations for choosing to relocate internationally. For example, relocation due to the dictates of a certain international profession (academics, diplomats, military personnel, NGO staff), to enhance career promotion (corporate managers), to earn a living as a migrant worker, these migrations are quite diverse yet all *seem to be* fundamentally motivated by economic concerns. These choices appear straightforward, and perhaps are, or perhaps even these examples of international mobility are more psychologically complex than first meets the eye. And even if the *initial* motivation for leaving is so apparently straightforward, these relocations may still imply profound personal challenges that are not usually anticipated by the individual and rarely acknowledged in the public domain (for example, see Miyamoto and Kuhlman, 2001).

From this *apparent* uniformity of economic motivations for voluntary migration, the following research uncovers what appear to be novel and coherently different motivational themes for migration, clearly prioritised by a sub-population of voluntary migrants represented by many of the study's co-researchers. Though some of these individuals may also initially 'pose' as economic migrants, their choice to leave their homeland is not primarily motivated by a search for an increased standard of living, nor is it tied closely to career advancement or the desire to earn money to send home to support families. These individuals are also not refugees in the accepted sense: they could have stayed and they can return, at least from a spectator point of view. This 'group' of migrants (to which I self identify) delineated as a result of this research study, are motivated at a *different level of need* and it is interesting that in the interviews I will describe below, many of these individuals adamantly insist that they *couldn't* have stayed; they *had to go*, though not as a result of external compulsion or obsession with foreign riches. So, what are the implicit motivations of these individuals, who abandon their familiar place of origin, and in some cases comfortable standard of living, in favour of becoming, 'strangers in a strange land'¹?

In the few cursory glances at voluntary migrants within psychological and psychotherapeutic literature, it is assumed that leaving is a reaction to the particular way in which the intrapsychic landscape has become populated; it constitutes a comment upon the mishmash of psychoanalytic 'object relations' resulting from disappointing early care-giving relationships (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989:178-86; Balint, 1959). Therefore, the 'mental health' difficulties that can arise as a consequence of migration are thought of as 'pathologies' of the person's individual psyche. Consistent with this assumption, Grinberg and Grinberg (1989) have written the seminal text, *Migration and Exile*, applying a psychoanalytic understanding to migration and its 'pathologies'. This approach to understanding 'voluntary migrants' is valuable and compelling, but it is without the phenomenological foundation that is attempted here and not entirely commensurate with the complexities of lived experience summarised below.

¹ I borrowed this term from Harriett Goldenberg, a Counselling Psychologist and herself an expatriate Canadian. Harriett offers workshops entitled 'Stranger in a Strange Land', both in London and Vancouver, to explore the experience of cultural relocation.

The following research attempts to hold in abeyance these meta-psychological theories in order to dwell openly and receptively with co-researchers as they explore for themselves what provoked their initial leaving, what underlies their continuing ambivalence towards 'home', and how their relation to dichotomous themes such as 'freedom' and 'belonging' transforms during relocations. Specifically, questions arise regarding personal orientations towards 'alterity', the 'unheimlich²' or the 'uncanny', as they are exhibited in attitudes toward the foreign place and the home culture. I want to move beyond the apparently psychological processes involved, for example theories of attachment, defence, separation, and acculturation, to concentrate on the underlying existential-ontological bases of these processes. Even if such an endeavour cannot be fully realised, this venture may still point towards *the somewhere* that evokes constituting features of human being, and this may be useful in our understanding of situations as diverse as the refugee experience, the 'global nomad', the international corporate executive, in fact the everyman dilemmas upon which all human life ebbs and flows.

Methodology

As we know³, Edmund Husserl (1977; see Ashworth, 2003; Spinelli, 2005, for useful overviews) proposed the praxis of phenomenology, introducing meticulous conceptual analysis of our basic concepts in order to ground our research inquiries in philosophical rigour. Husserl, in order to examine what science is talking about, requires that we return from premature abstraction into theory and everyday preconceptions back to concrete lived experience. Ashworth (2003) indicates Husserl's premise that for psychology lived *experience* thus properly constitutes the point of departure for our investigations. In counterpoint to science, human experiential agency and its diverse human meanings are key elements to any phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological approaches endeavour to comprehend the full experience of an individual life by making 'a methodological discipline of the everyday communicative experience of understanding oneself and others' (Habermas, 1972:163). To embody this

² Terms such as 'unheimlich' and 'uncanny' will be defined and explored in the discussion section of the paper.

³ In this overview article I will assume some familiarity with phenomenology in order to concentrate on the outcomes of the research rather than the important methodological issues and associated conceptual controversies which are left implicit in the paper.

intention within my study of voluntary migration, it was incumbent upon me to tread lightly in order to encourage the experience to reveal itself on its own terms while acknowledging the unavoidably co-constitutive nature of all experience. I needed a 'method' (or more accurately 'a way of being') that would support both co-researcher and myself to prioritise the implicit intricacy of experience so that we would notice as it emerged into our relationship from the 'inside-out', not as some fixed perception to be studied objectively, but as forward moving understandings, obscuring and clarifying moment by moment. This prioritising was guided by the experiential philosophy of Eugene Gendlin (1973; 1977; 1981; 1995) and its application to phenomenological method (Todres, 2004; 2005). Rather than causal explanations, I was seeking 'unconcealment' - the uncovering of some inherent processes of existence that may have been eclipsed by conventional assumptions and adopted theories of self and other. This disclosing of being 'means the unlocking of what forgetfulness of being closes and hides' (Orr, 1978:5).

Method

The study consists of an attempt to gather in-depth descriptors of voluntary migration⁴ in order to produce thematic narratives that would generally 'ring true' for others who have chosen to leave home to live in a foreign place. Secondly, the study offers an existential analysis of the meanings of these narratives and suggests how such readings might re-configure existing theorising in various disciplines. The research constellates around semi-structured interviews that were pared down to five fundamental and ambiguous questions, allowing each co-researcher to interpret the question idiosyncratically and take the interview in their own direction, within the confines of the general inquiry into 'voluntary migration' and 'home'. This approach to interviewing attempted to remain consistent with the intention not to obstruct lived reality as it emerged, but to remain as intimate as possible with the co-researcher's own way of symbolising their individual understandings, as they recalled their experiences of leaving home.

⁴ Migration refers to geographic mobility from one country to another where the second is *experienced as* significantly different from the first and for a sufficient duration that the person engages in daily activities and is challenged to undergo some adjustment to the new place.

To participate in the study, co-researchers should have been away from their home culture longer than one year and defined their leaving home as *voluntary*. Co-researchers were initially recruited through a notice board advertisement at a psychotherapy institute in London, but the eventual pool of co-researchers was quite varied and broadly based. There was such an encouraging response to the request for co-researchers that the notices were taken down early due to the volume of recruits applying as word of the research spread after the first few interviews. Without exception, co-researchers were attracted to the study because they were already curious and reflective regarding their experiences of migration; consequently the interview dialogues were unusually deep in their subject matter, subtly nuanced and thoughtful. Though the co-researcher cohort *may* represent a particular sub-group of the general population (co-researchers included academic administrative staff, therapists and educators, counselling trainees, and academics from various disciplines), there is no indication that their experiences are unique. Subsequent feedback on the research and a review of comparable research literature supports generalising the themes from the interviews beyond this specific group.

There were twenty co-researchers in total, five of whom were men. They ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-eight years old, with the majority of co-researchers in their mid thirties. The original home countries included England, Scotland, Germany, Holland, the former Yugoslavian states, Australia, Greece, Poland, Ireland, the United States, Argentina, Columbia, Latvia, Sri Lanka, and France. This information is provided for interest only, as there was no assumption, nor later indication, that gender, age, or originating culture had a *significant* impact upon emergent themes, though these variables of course impacted meaningfully upon the specifics of personal narratives. The fact that I am also a voluntary migrant, evident in my Canadian accent, was commented upon as 'helpful' in enabling co-researchers to feel comfortable enough to openly discuss difficult experiences as our perceived similarity was interpreted as an increased ability to understand their stories. Many co-researchers expressed their reluctance to reveal formative aspects of their experiences of leaving and their on-going predicaments regarding 'home' to anyone who hadn't had a similar life experience. The duration of the interviews averaged approximately 1.5 hours and resulted in transcripts of 14-20 pages of dialogue each.

Interviewing

The first question of the interview, 'Could you begin by relating the circumstances of your leaving home?' was designed to elicit an open-ended description of the process of leaving home. Responses to this question frequently expanded to take up half the interview session and after this discussion, the second question was asked, 'As you reflect back to when you left home, why do you think you *really* left your home?' In response to this second asking, many co-researchers experienced an affective shift from recounting biographical details to haltingly presenting the unarticulated edge of more personally experienced urges, for example Peter⁵ initially described how, like most people, he left home for university, but now after a long pause he responds,

I think I would have gone mad (Laughs). I can't imagine not leaving! I don't know. I think I always imagined it would happen. When I go back to my hometown and I drop in to see people who just stayed there, or returned and stayed in that village, I never, ever thought that I would do that *ever*. I always thought that I would leave at some point. In fact, part of it was beyond my choice really, it was just inevitable...

The next interview question was also purposefully vague and concerns an overall review of the time since leaving home, 'When you reflect upon the time since leaving home, what's it been like for you?' Co-researchers often used this portion of the interview to convey in detail their various experiences, usually highlighting both the pain of leaving and living abroad as well as the immensely positive aspects of their choice. Some co-researchers emphasised the difficulties since leaving, for example, regret and loneliness (though interestingly even these co-researchers would make the same choice again), for example Inez,

At times I've felt I wanted to go back, it's not easy for me to live here. And I felt I paid for having left the people who wanted to give me everything... I destroyed them when I said I'm not going to come back. And it makes me realise that people loved me there, but I don't think I will go back. I just can't, it's impossible.

In Inez's response we hear some of the tragic experience of being 'caught' between the difficulty of living in a foreign place, and the perceived impossibility of return. In all but one interview, there was an emotionally intense acknowledgment of the 'unlived life' left behind, sometimes conflated with a sense of living in exile.

⁵ All co-researcher names have been changed and identifying information has been disguised.

The next question was designed to gauge where the person was in reference to their original decision to leave and any future imaginings of return. Again, the responses were diverse and unexpectedly emotional. Without exception each co-researcher had given this substantial thought, with some having unsuccessfully attempted to return, some imagining a return or in the process of navigating their return, while for others it was clear they would never go back. Below are a few responses to the question 'Do you think about returning home?'

Sarah: Yeah. A lot. Short term (we laugh knowingly). I still hold this image of being a perpetual traveller ... Going home would be easy and wonderful, but there's something wrong with easy and wonderful... I have this image of the sunset at home and twilight and a beautiful sunny day, and the people, a wonderful sensuous place. Something about that's easy, and life's got to be complicated, tough.

Graciella: That's my question for the last ten years. That's MY question, my calling, and my mantra. I don't dare think about it. It's always there but I don't think about it... It would be really nice to have someone who speaks the same language, who could tell me the same things my father used to tell me, or I could tell him the words my mother used to tell me when I was a child.

Marta: Hmm. I bet everybody cries here? I bet everybody cries at this question? ...But now I feel I couldn't do that to myself again, what I did then, who would I be? I don't even speak the language anymore (emotional)... but it's such a nice life there.

The final question elicited the greatest depth of feeling and directly challenges the more cursory accounts of voluntary migration in the literature, which suggest that choice equates with unproblematic experiences of migration. Also, these responses overtly attest to the positive impact of having the opportunity to discuss what has remained for most a solitary choice, with little or no affirmation of its personal, and I would argue existential, profundity. It seems to suggest that there is a therapeutic impact to phenomenological explorations of the experience of leaving home and of cross-cultural relocation. Below are sample responses to the last interview question, an invitation to reflect on the interview experience, 'What does it feel like for you to talk about these things?'

Sarah: –Although I think about this all the time, I do feel quite shaky and quite raw, like sometimes when I feel very alienated here, I think I'm in exile. I feel quite teary...

Eva: I feel excited because I've realised something new. It might be more emotional and I don't know it because I've closed myself off, or decided I'm not going to go into that now, so it's more excited than sad or whatever ... A kind of vibrating in a very gentle way, like the sea on a hot day, it feels good.

Patricia: Well, it felt comfortable. I didn't expect it to be. I was worried about being made to intellectualize things a lot. I like the way that you sort of went deeper and deeper to really look at something because I don't think that I've really verbalised those things before. That's a bit frightening to actually say what I was afraid of saying all this time.

Martin: It's quite interesting to talk about it from this point of view, because I have never focused on leaving home, as such. It's made some new connections for me about how things happened. I think we've managed to go quite deep, probably as deep as I could go at the moment. It feels a bit sort of loaded, the whole thing, but it's good to talk about it, good to think about it and get more of the whole picture.

Inez: I never had the opportunity to put all this together, especially the circumstances of leaving ... The language of transition is never anywhere, this language that describes the shift in experience, the sudden shift ... It's impossible to put into language I suppose. I think you managed to get to the core of my experience. It's not easy to tell it, so thank you.

Peter: It's nice to really talk about it in a sort of condensed period of time, the year, and the dates, the chronological order, about various themes and issues. I don't often have a chance to sit down and talk about things in such depth. It was sad... I don't find it upsetting but I find it emotional. I don't find it joyous either; I find it a fascinating conversation.

A Phenomenology of *Existential Migration*

A phenomenological analysis⁶ of the interviews yielded common themes comprising the experience of leaving home to become a foreigner, described under the following headings: issues of self and identity, issues of belonging, valued personal characteristics and sensitivities (need for space, independence, freedom, choice), wider life perspectives (philosophical or spiritual outlook), openness to experiences of difference and foreignness, significance of family relations and home circumstances, explicit issues of home and returning home, an overview of the process of migrating (leaving, adapting to the unfamiliar, unexpected consequences, life paradoxes). Listing themes under separate headings may suggest to the reader that each theme is somehow self-sufficient and discrete, however this would be a misconception. Each theme is implicit in the others, refining our understanding of one affects our understanding of the others. By briefly describing each separately, I hope the reader will approach a more holistic *felt understanding* of the intricacy and variations constituting an experience of what I've

⁶ As mentioned previously, the form of phenomenological analysis used in the research will be the subject of another paper, where it will be described and explored in terms of its practical and philosophical implications.

called 'existential migration'. It is my intention to try to relay some *feeling* of the underlying 'existential dichotomies' inherent in 'home and not-at-home' (the unheimlich), 'belonging and never quite belonging', 'the world of mystery and the mundane', 'freedom and the suffocation of potential', 'independence and loneliness', and 'yearning and loss', without totally obscuring the rich variance of how these dimensions are experienced and expressed in the course of an individual life. After briefly describing the themes, an imaginary first person account of 'existential migration' will be offered based upon collating the preceding thematic descriptions.

Self and Identity

Upon reflection, it seems that one's 'self' is actively created *in interaction with* one's surroundings and therefore the environment can either support or obstruct development of one's self potential. It is difficult to maintain a balance between arid isolation and the threat of opening to a flood of homogeneity that would obliterate what is unique in one's self. The required balance between space and relationship was not experienced in the home culture. In this sense, migration can be a 'self-protective' choice. Moving to a foreign place fosters flexibility to develop oneself according to an 'inner call'. The 'call' to realise one's potential overrides most other considerations, including the need to belong. However, finding oneself 'rootless' and alone can result in a fragile sense of self that is constantly unsettled and restless, seeking respite.

Belonging

'Belonging' is viewed with intense ambivalence; the attraction consists in an imagined warmth and connection with others, while the revulsion is due to an oppressive demand to conform to the conventional and disown one's uniqueness. Co-researchers were very sensitive to experiencing expectations as oppressive and claustrophobic. Narratives reveal that individuals experienced themselves, and were experienced by others, as 'different' and this was partly determinative of their feeling of not-belonging. Feeling different was not a *product* of being marginalised, but more clearly *predates* those responses to the individual's difference. Co-researchers also often rebuke their home culture for being too homogeneous or 'provincial' – indicating that processes of rejection can go in both directions. It was not uncommon for co-researchers to say they *never* felt at home in their home environment. This informed their leaving and often they were the only ones who left – most siblings and friends usually remained in the original culture. Subsequent to leaving home, it is common for co-researchers to attempt

to reside in two cultures, or at least have a country house, or travel frequently, in order to have a place to escape to. This seems to be one resolution of the competing needs to belong and to maintain distance and independence.

Valued characteristics and sensitivities (recurring emphasis on space, freedom, independence, choice)

Self-direction (self-creation) in life prevails over the importance of belonging and security, in fact *anything* seems worth sacrificing in order to maintain the freedom to choose for oneself. Conformity to the conventional is avoided at all costs – life is meaningless unless it is self-directed. Independence and choice require space from impinging environmental demands. Physical space is a prerequisite for the reflective space within which self-direction manifests. Moving to a foreign place and international travel are archetypal situations for protecting and expressing the need for freedom and independence.

Wider Life Perspectives – Philosophical and Spiritual Outlook

Leaving home can be the expression of a spiritual quest that cannot be undertaken within the confines of the home environs. Exploring the world can be guided by an 'inner calling' that seems to be a manifestation of an intuitive connection to the transpersonal dimension. Travel is a valued mode of 'conscious living', keeping a person aware of surroundings and preventing the slippage into habitual and less mindful ways of being. Seeking out contact with unfamiliar and mysterious cultures offers the experience of a 'flow' between the mystery one finds within one's own being and mysteries of the world. Complementarities between person and world can generate a temporary feeling of being at 'home' in the world, of belonging. This suggests a new definition of 'home' as person-environment *interaction*. For some the imagined return home, after years abroad, can represent a spiritual dimension signifying reconnection and psychological healing of self and family.

Openness to experiences of difference and foreignness

Co-researchers display a marked affinity to otherness; the unfamiliar, 'difference' in many forms, and this typically sets them apart from their social environment. It is not uncommon for co-researchers to find their values better reflected in foreign cultures and languages rather than in their own home cultures and families. Voluntary migrants often find each other and coalesce into informal social groups of internationalists, exhibiting pronounced cultural diversity within underlying similarities in terms of liberal values of toleration and respect. There are recurring themes of difference within similarity and

similarity within difference that may entwine notions of the *unheimlich* or uncanny. There is repeatedly the unanswered question of why these specific individuals exhibit these values regarding difference. It remains a mystery why, often within the midst of a milieu that values similarity, these individuals should so deeply value the opposite.

Significance of family relations and home circumstances

Early relationships: familial, parental, and peer, are frequently implicated in decisions to leave home or at least the timing of the migration. It is unclear to what extent difficulties in these relations are expressions of, rather than formative of, desires to leave. However, while acknowledging that early parental relationships often had an impact on their plans to leave, co-researchers frequently cautioned that their feelings about home and travel couldn't be reduced to these dynamics. Difficult family circumstances seemed to coalesce around and contribute to pre-existing sensitivities in those who left, differentiating them from siblings who stayed. Overbearing parents and merged relationships with mothers were cited as hastening departure at a specific time, usually as quickly as possible in order to begin to develop oneself in a freer space. Relations with the home culture and parental relations can become intermingled, so that an attitude of needing space from one is generalised to needing space from the other.

Explicit Issues of Home and Returning Home

Not surprisingly, explicit reference to what constitutes a 'home' and the question of returning home aroused deep emotion during the interviews. The home as physical structure retains potency as a symbolism of security for some co-researchers, whether it's an adult residence or one's childhood abode. Knowing that this place exists unchanged, even in another part of the world, offers a base for venturing out into the world. But the longer one remains away from 'home' the less concrete seems the experience of home. For many this process culminates in the person not really feeling at home anywhere. As previously mentioned, 'home' may be best conceived as an interaction, a moment when the individual and the environment 'match' in specific and idiosyncratic ways, temporarily allowing the feeling of being 'at home'. Feeling at home is often tinged with an intertwined feeling of being not-at-home for co-researchers. As mentioned, these individuals often try to arrange to live in two different localities, never achieving 'home' in either but often assigning the term 'home' to the place where one is *not* rather than where one currently is. Though there seems to be a desire for the home country to remain frozen in time and unchanging, the inevitability of change means that home also becomes a foreign country, while simultaneously

deeply familiar (stranger in a familiar land). Returning home can be a complex geopsychological process of healing as well as relocation, while also an opportunity to assess the transformations that have occurred in one's self while away.

An overview of the processes involved in migrating: leaving, adapting, unexpected consequences, and paradoxes

For some co-researchers even in childhood they were making choices consistent with, and facilitative of, their future destiny. Despite one's desperation, leaving still requires the gradual accoutrement of adequate self-confidence to cope in unfamiliar settings. Some co-researchers tested these abilities by planning a phased leaving in order to guarantee that their departure would be successful and they would not be forced to return. The necessary skills to adapt to foreign cultures comprise a double-edged attribute. Some co-researchers valued being so adaptable, while also recognising that this malleability threatened their own sense of self. However inevitable leaving was, it consistently incorporated unexpectedly deep feelings of loss and sadness. Co-researchers often report feeling sorry for, but superior to, those who are seen to have taken the 'easy route' by staying, while also being jealous of their accomplishments and security. The gap between those who leave and those who stay continues to widen as time passes. As co-researchers age, some begin to desire the positive attributes of a settled life, at least to gain the associated 'social capital', for example, a house, career progression, and established support networks. But they also seek to maintain their mobility and respect for their personal sensitivities. Those who have attempted to return home perceive it as a long and complicated process, by no means one of recapturing what was left behind – there is a melancholic recognition that *that life* will remain as un-lived potential (though in fact an illusory potential since most co-researchers insisted that they couldn't have stayed). Many co-researchers report being in a limbo state where no place will ever feel like home again. However, regardless of the emotional pain and losses inherent in leaving home to live in a foreign land, not one co-researcher would choose differently if they had the choice again. Everyone would still leave despite knowing now that such a leaving implies irredeemable losses and years of deep difficulties. Such 'existential migrations' usually lack a clear destination but instead include a *felt directionality* to them, away from the known and predictable towards the unknown and awake.

A Tale of Existential Migration

The headings and themes above are abstractions from particular concrete living. The description below is an amalgamation of individual stories of existential migration, including both essential and idiosyncratic aspects of this process. This is simply *one* imaginative variation, but hopefully it offers an *evocative foundation* for understanding many variations of the experience. A version of this narrative was sent back to co-researchers for their validation and representative feedback included, 'this description is powerful and resonates for me', 'it is acknowledging an abyss that is impossible to understand', 'very touching'. From the preceding themes and the narrative below I hope it is possible to begin to sense the *quality of experience* implied by 'existential migration'.

As soon as 'life?' entered my awareness as a question, part of my answer was to explore the world. This impetus was so self-evident that I can remember being shocked to learn it was not universal. While for me there was a 'call' to venture into the exotic unknown, overriding all other considerations, for many of my friends the road ahead was paved with predetermined possibilities. The vague anxiety pushing towards departure further separated me from the familiar settled world I'd known. My 'self' feels like an active living entity beyond my own control, deeply informed by this emanating call and its search for self-creation. Migration would be a multifaceted act of self-protection, self-expression, and self-worth: a valuing of my mysterious self, my uncertain life, my being.

I imagine foreign places with unfamiliar routines, unknown codes, exciting my unformed and malleable self. I am thrilled by the hoped-for fertile interaction between self and a new world offering different constellations of choices and possibilities. It is a relief to see an escape route from the old confining expectations, to be able to defy sameness and to survive. I experience the homeworld as oppressively homogeneous and boring and they expect me to adapt to that in order to fit in. We reject each other - they reject me for not fitting in and I reject them for their narrow quotidian view of life. How did I end up living here of all places?

The motion of leaving creates my freedom and independence, but this step requires enough confidence in myself to think that I can make it out there. I have a greater sense of being able to survive in a foreign and unfamiliar place than at home. Leaving is an act of survival: If I am not free I am not alive. First I leave to continue my education, then to explore the world, with growing confidence at each stage, testing each step to make sure it will hold and I won't collapse back to the origin. I am directed towards increasingly larger migrations, a felt direction towards increasing distance and difference. The foreign context offers me the perspective to see life as a whole, to look back at my home experience without the danger of being sucked down into that homogeneity. I now realise more clearly that I never really was 'at home' in that first world. Feeling different has sensitised me to others' differences, and I find a loose fellowship with other nomads and outcasts. Together we enjoy our cultural differences,

but we also share the sensitivities that lead us to 'choose' this journey into perpetual 'exile'.

International travel and living as a foreigner in a foreign land are archetypal situations for nurturing a self like mine. But I now come to realise that being rootless also makes me feel insecure and fragile, and it takes a lot of energy just to keep myself together. I find myself in a kind of indeterminate state, in limbo between everything solid and fixed. I no longer know where I belong and sometimes that still excites me but increasingly I feel lost. I look at those who stayed behind and lived the life that was laid out for them, and I feel superior because I had the courage to leave, but increasingly I also feel envious. As time passes, the gap widens and I see their security and the fruit of their deep rootedness increase the distance between us. I realise that a part of me thought I could always return to that life left behind but it is gone forever. There is no going back through time to the moment of departure – no experiment by which I could assess that alternative settled life.

I think about returning home almost every day. Sometimes I am clear that I would never return, sometimes I fantasise about it, yet other times I feel a dull homesickness, a kind of pull to the only place that could have been home but never really was. I think this signifies a desire for a kind of spiritual and psychological reconnection, a healing of the self in some way, a reconciliation where originally there was mutual rejection. Return would be a complex process necessitating a melancholic recognition of time: home did not freeze the day I went through the departure gate. Home has changed, though deeply familiar it is also different, and I would return as a stranger in a strangely familiar land. But again, how could I stay and not succumb to the suffocation that led me to leave in the first place? How could I protect my fluid self, elaborated by all my experiences in the world, and withstand the sustained demand to cement into sameness? How can I balance my desire for home with my need for self-direction? Any feeling of being at-home is now forever tinged with feeling not-at-home; the two come inextricably intertwined. Homesickness is a given, not a demand to return home, where the feeling paradoxically continues unabated.

I need to find a balance between the threat of impingement and the arid desert of isolation. I seek a combination of relational connection with the attraction of mobility, change, and the stimulation of the unfamiliar. When I feel myself settling and starting to belong, I relax. But then the opposite impulse for adventure is triggered, the exotic is magnetic and the deepening roots are disturbed once again. I need to live consciously, not automatically. I need to stay awake, to continually 'kick myself alive' so I don't slip into the mundane and habitual. In an unfamiliar culture the everyday demands call for constant attention, there the waking sense of mystery matches my own. That was the closest experience I've had to being-at-home, the temporary relief of the world mirroring the mystery of my own self.

What happened back there that I didn't fit in? I contemplate that question increasingly as I begin to long for the ground to hold me still. Why was it me who left, why not my siblings, my cousins, my peers, most of whom stayed behind unable to comprehend my desperation to leave. My feelings about home and travel cannot be reduced to family dynamics but when I reflect upon my life trajectory it always involves those early years, where the journey originated. From my earliest memories I gazed outward to the horizon and made choices that would facilitate my departure. I knew then that I was different, and they also seemed to know. Feeling different at home was not all painful, I

grew to like standing out – and now returning home for visits allows me to feel somewhat exotic, somewhat prodigal, finally with a justification for my difference, but still achingly extraneous to their lives.

My family cannot understand; anyone who chose to stay behind would not comprehend. I sit in silence with a feeling that can't be said, it touches my deepest convictions, hopeful excitement hand-in-hand with irretrievable loss. Sometimes out of a subtle shame we mask our leaving behind economic rationales. But for us the desire was not for riches; it is equally likely that we end up living less affluent lives because we left. The imperative was to follow 'potential' as an end in itself, not as a means to material betterment. My migration remains more 'other-worldly' than consumerist. I was called to make manifest an intuitive connection to the transpersonal dimension. But there is also a dawning recognition that one can live only one life no matter how many possible lives one can imagine. After all is said, there is also optimism and satisfaction and some pride from having followed the mysterious path of the unknown with courage, concurrent with a niggling thought that it might actually have taken more courage to stay.

The Unheimlich in Existential Migration

The following discussion begins with Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) before turning to Heidegger's discussion of the 'unheimlich' in order to assess whether this concept can assist in efforts to re-think migration and specifically the experiences outlined above. According to Freud, the uncanny (unheimlich) is related to what is frightening, especially to what evokes dread and horror. In particular, he says the uncanny is that class of the frightening which refers back to what was long familiar. Freud struggles with the phenomenon, and his analysis culminates in the interesting implication that *feeling at home entails keeping some things hidden* – we shall see that Heidegger's description of the unheimlich echoes this theme. The experience of the unheimlich occurs when something that should stay hidden in order to feel at home, becomes revealed.

Freud's analysis of this phenomenon remains purely psychological. For the most part he suggests that experiences of the uncanny may be traced back to a childhood castration complex and he presents a complicated theoretical rationale for pre-supposing the infantile source of uncanniness. From a phenomenological perspective Freud is delimiting the experience by pre-shaping it according to his theory. Like Heidegger, Freud suggests that anxiety leads to the sense of the uncanny or the unheimlich. However, for Freud, anxiety and the uncanny result from the presence of the repressed, whereas for Heidegger anxiety is an existential, and the unheimlich is an aspect of our

primordial being. This is not the only difference between the two conceptions, as each thinker seems to extrapolate to a different end: Freud to psychological experiences of 'the unfamiliar' and Heidegger to human 'not being-at-home' in the world. The co-researcher narratives seem to substantiate a more Heideggerian analysis, or at the very least his metaphors offer more superficial resonance with their stories.

Heidegger proposes that the human being (Dasein) drifts along groundless, yet the uncanniness of this 'floating' is concealed by the prophylactic of our self-assured interpretations of things (MR:170)⁷. As long as we can remain convinced by the taken-for-granted appearance of life, we create the impression of ground, covering over the uncanniness of existence. This analysis proffers uncanniness as the primordial facet of our being rather than as a developmental pathology. It is a phenomenon toward which *we all* must adopt a responsive attitude of some kind or other.

Living according to publicly accepted conventions offers a 'tranquillized self-assurance', a feeling of being-at-home, in which life is obvious, unremarkable, and taken-for-granted. It is angst which 'fetches Dasein back out of its entangled absorption in the "world" (S:189). Anxiety, or angst, gives rise to an 'uncanny feeling' in which the indefiniteness of the nothing, the nowhere, and the negated being-at-home, finds expression (S:188). Through angst, Dasein stands out from the unremarkably familiar and enters the 'existential "mode" of *not-being-at-home*' (S:189). Uncanniness, not being-at-home, is constituent of Dasein's structure in that 'Tranquillized, familiar being-in-the-world is a mode of the uncanniness of Dasein, not the other way around. *Not-being-at-home must be conceived existentially and ontologically as the more primordial phenomenon*' (Ibid, *italics added*).

The consumerist modern world offers an extensive inventory of pre-packaged opportunities to cushion the experience of uncanniness when it emerges unbidden as part of our being. Most of these responses aim to return Dasein to the comfort of anaesthetised solidity. In contrast, those voluntary migrants exhibiting facets of 'existential migration' actually seek out and express variations of uncanniness rather

⁷ This section is based on references to 'the uncanny' and 'unheimlich' in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Joan Stambaugh trans. (1996, signified as S) and John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson trans. (1962, signified as MR), with the numbers corresponding to sections rather than pages. These translators variously translate Dasein with (Da-sein) or without a hyphen but for consistency I will omit the hyphen.

than simply fleeing from it. This unusual response seems in part due to the lack of available modes of tranquilisation that would easily convince these individuals that life *is* as it appears, straightforward and meaningful. Of course what emerges from the interview transcripts is much more intricate and ambiguous than this. Furthermore, as well as a scathing scepticism regarding the conventional, co-researchers also express positive desires to leave home in order to discover who they *really* are and to fulfil their potential, which reiterates Heidegger's suggestion that uncanniness confronts Dasein with the nothingness of the world in which it is anxious about its potentiality-of-being (S:276).

Awareness of the world's uncanniness originates as a 'call' from within Dasein itself (S:276). This is not a call that offers guidance, direction, or indeed any content; it is a deeper disturbing call from something so close and obscured that it is unfamiliar and yet unmistakably one's own - the 'foreignness' within (see Kristeva, 1991). Individuation is disclosed through this anxious call to awake from distraction in the world and reorient towards Dasein's potentiality-of-being.

What relevance could Heidegger's thought have for those who choose to leave home for the foreign and unknown? Are some voluntary migrants attempting to respond to their groundlessness by continuing to search for a convincing tranquillizer, or are they attempting to answer the call of conscience by fulfilling their potential? We have yet to see if the 'existential migrant' is an existential 'hero' or if he or she is hopelessly lost in the dilemma of perpetuating the condition they are simultaneously trying to address. Crossing Heidegger with these narratives raises many vexing questions. Does the search for alterity in the experience of the foreign, both attractive and unsettling, sustain a way of being that is open to, sensitive to, the call of conscience? Or are voluntary migrants seeking a means to reduce the uncanny to the ordinary, temporarily conquering it but in so doing reawakening the anxious call back to authenticity? Can we explore homelessness and the unheimlich as the *literal* search for one's belonging on earth as well as the metaphoric confrontation with our existential plight?

In existential migration a person may leave home yet never shake its haunting presence, long for home yet undoubtedly see no future for him or herself there. Paradoxically, they maintain a 'special connection' to a homeworld even though they may rarely have

felt at-home there. It may be this quandary that ascribes such poignancy to the dilemmas of leaving or staying, returning or wandering on. 'Authentic homelessness' offers the potential for human dwelling in awareness of the unheimlich dimension in life. Migration, specifically existential migration, seems to sustain enhanced possibilities for self-awareness; authenticity and 'homecoming' arising from confrontation with the alien and the non-ordinary, though these possibilities are not automatic and require choice. In this way, *the concept of existential migration clarifies the possibility that 'home' in its conventional sense constitutes true exile* from values such as authenticity, awareness, pursuing self-potential, freedom, and the ineffability of existence. One's orienting values determine which process is considered exile and which is considered 'home'. In terms of existential migration, the suggestion is that we are not-at-home *not* because we have been exiled *from* home, but rather because we have been *exiled by home from ourselves*.

This phenomenological study of voluntary migration intimates that some individuals experience a felt yearning to leave, a call to go out into the world – perhaps to live within some acceptance of the unheimlich, anticipating a resolution that remains elusive. Dariane Pictet suggests 'Experiencing homelessness is a striving towards home' (2001:45). Yet, a striving towards a 'home' that seems to offer no substance, sustenance or ground, while simultaneously 'housing' the demand to be *what* and *who* one is. Though such striving may be expressed in many ways, metaphorically or concretely, presumably in both migratory and settled modes, the stories of voluntary migration seem to present these issues in unusually stark relief. It is my contention that a subset of voluntary migrants engage in a process of 'existential migration', and thus grapple, either originally or as an unintended consequence of their relocation, with some expression of the philosophical life issues outlined above. This view will be further elaborated and supported in future articles that concentrate on the philosophical implications of these experiences.

Discussion

Relocation research (Robock and Simmonds, 1983; Jun et.al.1997:520, Miyamoto and Kuhlman, 2001) repeatedly concludes that cross-cultural contact can result in shaken life assumptions. As suggested above, I consider this 'shaking' to be foundationally a

deconstruction of the 'natural attitude'⁸, possibly resulting in a fissure through which I believe a more primordial and unsettling experience of being may emerge, even briefly. In the case of 'existential migration' such shaking begins at home. The voluntary migrant's marginal position offers insights into our understandings of common human experiences like belonging and feeling at home, while also highlighting positive aspects of not-belonging, not feeling at home, and living with awareness of human insecurity. The study implies intriguing potential for interdisciplinary collaboration between existential psychotherapy and disciplines such as intercultural studies, anthropology, migration studies, and developmental work with refugees and migrant populations. In addition there may be possibilities for innovative clinical interventions with ex-patriot communities, professionals and NGO staff engaged in international fieldwork, work with international diplomatic and academic communities, and supportive group work for 'trailing families' of internationally relocated corporate staff.

In her work with post-war migrants, Zita Weber (2000) points out the crucial therapeutic value in migrants being able to tell their story. Weber's migrants found that their group discussions naturally coalesced around topics of 'leaving' and of 'home'. Weber saw these opportunities as 'important ways of finding coherence and meaning which act to offset the feeling of dispossession' (Ibid:11). An unexpected outcome of the current study was the degree to which 'telling one's story' was valued by co-researchers. They overwhelmingly found that the opportunity to reflect in-depth regarding their leaving home was a valuable and positive experience, and a peculiarly emotive one. They also found that their self-understandings were transformed during this exploration.

Further research with the sub-group of voluntary migrants to whom I ascribe the process of 'existential migration' may offer insights into the under-acknowledged difficulties of cross-cultural contact generally. As the number of people coping privately and individually with these issues increases, there is a growing imperative to understand the *underlying existential meaning* of intercultural processes generally and the effect these can have on those who choose to experience them. There is a corresponding need to

⁸ 'Natural attitude' refers to a belief that everyday objects and events *are* as they appear; the scientist 'believes in the existence of those entities to which his theories refer' (c.f. Dreyfus, 1991:254), in other words accepting the evidence of our senses, our common-sense explanations and our social practices as objectively real.

explore the subsequent experiences of those who eventually attempt to return 'home': is it possible to resettle in an environment that was once deeply familiar but subsequently, due to inevitable changes in migrant and origin, now also unfamiliar? An existential analysis of voluntary migration may offer insights into the tensions between human existence and the ubiquitous malaise of our 'post-modern' world. It may be that through global capitalism our contemporary world is offering increasing opportunities to experience the 'unheimlich' undercurrent of the world (the conflation of strangeness and familiarity), and if so, this is an unintended side effect of globalisation, in fact a potentially undermining one in that the intrusion of 'the unheimlich' may subvert the conventional unreflective attitudes sustaining capitalist economic life.

The experience of 'existential migration' often seems to invert the common descriptions of general migration. Migration is generally accepted as including an alteration of outer culture, causing a discrepancy between inner and outer worlds, but for the 'existential migrant' this alteration in the outer environment may paradoxically lessen the discrepancy between inner and outer. For example, some co-researchers in the present study report feeling 'like a fish out of water' in their native culture but when travelling to a totally foreign and unfamiliar environment a powerful feeling of 'being-at-home' is evoked though they had never previously set eyes upon that place. For these individuals what is commonly referred to as 'culture shock' (Brislin, 1981), a fracture of self-doubt caused by a discrepancy between outer reality and inner expectations, is more attributable to their interaction with the home environment than with foreign environs. In this sense, most of the co-researchers actually welcomed experiences of what is traditionally thought of as 'culture shock'.

This is only one example of how the current study might contradict, clarify, and elaborate our general understandings of migratory processes by revealing assumptions that are embedded within our basic concepts, such as 'inner' and 'outer', including what constitutes 'discrepancy' or 'similarity' or 'fit'. Suggestions that a *fit* between inner and outer reality is important is typically based upon the assumption that a 'fit' consists of finding an 'outer' world that is similar enough to the original world we carry 'inside' of us (see Huntington, 1981:4). These ubiquitous assumptions seem embedded within a *settled-centric* worldview that fails to account for the minority who are 'called to' explore the unfamiliar, and who report never feeling 'at home' in the original

homeworld. An inclusive worldview would account for this minority's deep affinity with foreign cultures, the exact situation when the majority of their compatriots are feeling a dissonance between 'inner' and 'outer' and a desire to return to the familiar. It is intriguing to consider how our view of life might change if instead we prioritised the migratory over the settled, or at least redressed this unexamined bias.

Summary Comments

Though the myriad psychological and psychoanalytic approaches to the subjective may seem alluring, the current research steadfastly maintains an attempt to explore the more abstruse existential realm, attempting to avoid the instigation of yet another array of psychologically-bound theories of maladaptation etc. By prioritising the term *existential migration* rather than *existential migrant*, I attempt to avoid contributing yet another diagnostic category to the vast therapeutic and social science nomenclature. Though I may be overly cautious, at this point there seems insufficient evidence to suggest there is a 'type of person' we can refer to as an existential migrant, as though it is an inherited personality variable or trait. Of course there could well be a specific style of 'openness' that underlies some proclivities to migrate – for example, there could be individuals who are more likely to engage in 'existential migration' due to their openness to certain sensitivities or potentials in being. This openness may be the outcome of an interaction between their being and their environment, creating a predisposition for this specific response to the dilemmas of existence. However, it also seems possible that even these individuals may eventually settle (though what that means may be idiosyncratic), while others who were settled may later 'open up to' existential migration as a strategy for life. It is obviously not primarily an inherited 'trait' if it arises and subsides in a variety of people in response to their changing circumstances. It seems much more like an interactive process, one that may last a few months, a year, a decade, or a lifetime. It also seems that the way that this process begins, and when, may be significant – if one never felt 'at home' at home, leaving will have a different meaning than if one did feel at home for some time and then that felt belonging dissipated. There are also the experiences of those whose predicament does not express their personal proclivities, for example the wife or husband accompanying a relocating spouse and who otherwise would never have actively chosen to move to a foreign place. These so-called 'trailing partners' may be forced to confront aspects of existence that otherwise would not have

arisen for them. What of refugees, and at the other extreme, what happens to individuals who have an affinity for existential migration but do not have the basic ability (economic, state hindrances to migration) to leave? These issues and others will be explored in future research and subsequent papers delving into more specific aspects of this phenomenon. The aim of this paper is simply to offer a new conceptual discernment to assess its value in further thinking about these pivotal life experiences. The haunting question for me remains whether it is valuable or even possible to investigate the actual foundation of our *ability to have the feeling* of being-at-home, not-being-at-home, feeling without a home, feeling homesick...? Why as humans can we even feel such things?

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