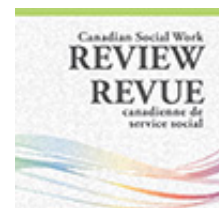


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Experiences of Family Separation for Adults Who Immigrate Alone Lessons for Social Work Practice and Research

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Article abstract

This study explored lived experiences of migration and settlement for adults who migrated to Canada on their own and were separated from family and friends. A theoretical framework drawing on ecological theory and adult attachment theory was used to analyze data collected from exploratory, in-depth interviews with seven adults who arrived in Canada through a range of immigration streams. Themes previously identified in research on unaccompanied minors, refugees, and migrants with precarious status were found in this study to be experienced also by those who had arrived through other immigration streams. Participants described how they associated separation from various family members with negative experiences of emotional isolation, and both negative and positive experiences of social isolation. Participants discussed changes in relationships that occurred prior to migration and continued after arrival, particularly when separation was lengthy. Participants drew upon various personal and environmental resources to help mitigate negative impacts of social isolation, but were less effective in countering emotional isolation. The findings have implications for social workers working both with individual immigrants separated from family members and with immigrant families that have been reunited. In this paper, the author also suggests areas for further research and social work advocacy.

EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY SEPARATION FOR ADULTS WHO IMMIGRATE ALONE

Lessons for Social Work Practice and Research

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Abstract: This study explored lived experiences of migration and settlement for adults who migrated to Canada on their own and were separated from family and friends. A theoretical framework drawing on ecological theory and adult attachment theory was used to analyze data collected from exploratory, in-depth interviews with seven adults who arrived in Canada through a range of immigration streams. Themes previously identified in research on unaccompanied minors, refugees, and migrants with precarious status were found in this study to be experienced also by those who had arrived through other immigration streams. Participants described how they associated separation from various family members with negative experiences of emotional isolation, and both negative and positive experiences of social isolation. Participants discussed changes in relationships that occurred prior to migration and continued after arrival, particularly when separation was lengthy. Participants drew upon various personal and environmental resources to help mitigate negative impacts of social isolation, but were less effective in countering emotional isolation. The findings have implications for social workers working both with individual immigrants separated from family members and with immigrant families that have been reunited. In this paper, the author also suggests areas for further research and social work advocacy.

Beth Martin is an instructor in the School of Social Work at Carleton University. This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Keywords: Immigrants, social work, social support, adult attachment, family separation

Abstrégé : Cette étude a exploré des expériences vécues de migration et d'établissement pour les adultes qui ont émigré au Canada par eux-mêmes et qui ont été séparés de leur famille et de leurs amis. Un cadre théorique s'appuyant sur la théorie de l'écologie et la théorie de l'attachement des adultes a été utilisé pour analyser les données recueillies lors d'entrevues exploratoires approfondies auprès de sept adultes arrivés au Canada par divers canaux d'immigration. Dans cette étude, il a été conclu que les thèmes précédemment identifiés dans la recherche sur les mineurs non accompagnés, les réfugiés et les migrants ayant un statut précaire ont été vécus également par ceux qui étaient arrivés par d'autres voies d'immigration. Les participants ont décrit comment ils associaient la séparation de divers membres de la famille à des expériences négatives d'isolement émotionnel et à des expériences négatives et positives d'isolement social. Les participants ont discuté des changements dans les relations, qui se produisaient avant la migration et se poursuivaient après l'arrivée, particulièrement lorsque la séparation était longue. Les participants ont puisé dans diverses ressources personnelles et environnementales pour atténuer les effets négatifs de l'isolement social, mais ont été moins efficaces pour contrer l'isolement émotionnel. Les résultats ont des implications pour les travailleurs sociaux qui travaillent à la fois avec des immigrants séparés des membres de leur famille et avec des familles d'immigrants qui ont été réunies. Dans cet article, l'auteur suggère également d'autres domaines de recherche et de plaidoyer en travail social.

Mots-clés : Immigrants, travail social, soutien social, attachement à un adulte, séparation familiale

Introduction

THERE ARE THREE MAIN immigration streams to Canada that together account for the vast majority of new permanent residents. In 2014 this included (1) 78,041 principal applicants and 186,901 of their 'dependent' family members through the economic stream, (2) 66,661 individuals reuniting with family members in Canada through the Family Class program; and (3) 28,641 people granted permanent residency through refugee and humanitarian programs (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015).

Given the number of individuals granted permanent residency as 'dependents' of a principal applicant, it is clear that many immigrants arrive in family units. However, as statistics simply describe individuals and do not break down the number of applications by size of family unit,

it is unclear exactly how many arrive as families, and how many principal applicants through the economic stream or refugee and humanitarian programs are alone upon arrival, having left behind close family members.

Yet families separated by immigration is a phenomenon that is receiving increasing attention. Separation can be planned, for example when an individual immigrating for work leaves behind family members either by choice or because a particular immigration policy does not allow family accompaniment (Boccagni, 2013). Or it can be unplanned, for example when someone emigrates after having been separated from family members as a result of conflict (De Haene, Grietens, & Verschueren, 2010). *The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* addresses the problem of family separation through Family Class sponsorship and the “one-year window” that allows family members to join successful refugee claimants. However, the time taken to process applications for family reunification can vary greatly, for example by visa office or type of application (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016).

Qualitative research on immigrants who arrive alone is limited and few studies have considered their immigration experiences holistically, especially in the Canadian context. This paper takes a small step towards filling this gap in the literature. Using an ecological framework that considers the immigration experience to be informed by complex, multi-layered contexts, the project explored in-depth the experiences of seven adults who arrived in Canada alone, separated from the people who were most important to them, from the perspectives of the immigrants themselves.

Theoretical Framework

The study drew on both ecological theory and adult attachment theory. These theories were appropriate because the study examined the experience for a range of immigrants of a particular phenomenon—being alone and separated from loved ones—within a context of many personal and environmental factors that could affect the experience of transitioning from life outside Canada to life in Canada.

Ecological theory, originally defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979), examines the interaction between an individual and the many different levels of her environmental context. The key concept of the “Person: Environment (P:E) fit” describes how the needs and aspirations of an individual should fit with her resources and environment (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). This P:E fit can become unbalanced during “ecological transitions” that occur when an individual changes her role and/or setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Protective factors that increase resiliency during such transitions include internal and environmental resources (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).

One such source of protection for individuals that has long been recognized is the presence of positive relationships (Orth-Gomér, 2004). Adult attachment theory describes an innate human need to develop and sustain “attachment bonds” with other people (often, though not always, family members) throughout the course of one’s lifetime (Sable, 2007). Physical closeness to these “attachment figures” is argued to have a positive effect on mental health and in particular, to act as a protective factor during important life transitions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Conversely, physical separation from an attachment figure can lead to anxiety and distress, which may increase as separation lengthens (Germain and Gitterman, 1995).

Both ecological theory and attachment theory distinguish between “emotional isolation,” and “social isolation” (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008). Emotional isolation, defined as isolation from those with whom one has strong emotional attachments, prevents satisfaction of the need for bonding and is thus experienced as intrinsically negative (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008; Weiss, 1973). Conversely, social isolation, which occurs in the absence of a broader social network, can be perceived as positive, when it leads to a sense of freedom and independence (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008) or negative, when it results in boredom and aimlessness, feelings of exclusion and marginality, and difficulties with self-definition and formation of identity (Weiss, 1973). One type of relationship cannot mitigate the other type of isolation and indeed may have an exacerbating effect. For example, social networks may intensify emotional loneliness if an individual is surrounded by happy couples or families, as it reminds her that she is separated from her own attachment figures (Weiss, 1973).

Migration as an ecological transition

Migration, whether internal or from one country to another, can be seen as an ecological transition that can result in an imbalance in the Person: Environment fit (Paat, 2013). This ecological transition is one that may involve intense disruption to emotional attachments and/or social networks (Skrbiš, 2008) as well as separation from culture and community (Svašek, 2010). At the same time as disruptions to relationships, the migrant may also be exposed to stressors in the migration and settlement process. Pre-migration stressors, documented for a range of different types of migrants, can include exposure to conflict or crime as well as economic pressures (Li & Anderson, 2016; Torres & Wallace, 2013). Post-migration stressors may include, but are not limited to, poverty (Shields, Kelly, Park, Prier, & Fang, 2011), barriers to employment (Nakhaie & Kazemipour, 2013) and difficult working conditions (van der Ham, Ujano-Batangan, Igancio & Wolffers, 2015), restricted access to physical and mental health services (Lebrun & Shi, 2011; Saecho et al., 2012), problems accessing suitable housing (Shier, Graham, Fukuda & Turner, 2016) and language barriers (Fuller-Thomson, Noack & George, 2011).

Reflecting both theories, many different personal and environmental factors have been argued to increase resilience during the migration process. They include personal resources such as self-esteem and motivation (Ho & Chiang, 2013), presence and strength of family relationships (De Haene et al., 2010; Letiecq, Grzywacz, Gray & Eudave, 2014; Nair, White, Roosa & Zeiders, 2013) or social networks (Beiser, Simich, Pandalangat, Nowakowski & Tian, 2011), cultural resources such as religiosity (Carlson, Cacciatore & Klimek, 2012), broad, diverse community networks (Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013), and programs and services that address barriers to integration (Wood, McGrath & Young, 2012).

Family separation and migration

Turning to absence of family, research has found that for the migrant, separation from close family members is most often associated with negative mental health outcomes. Studies have documented possible connections between family separation and trauma for refugees from West Papua (Rees, Silove, Tay & Kareth, 2013) and depression for Mexican migrants in the US (Letiecq et al., 2014), as well as general negative mental health consequences for new mothers from Afghanistan in Australia (Russo, Lewis, Joyce, Crockett & Luchters, 2015) and migrant caregivers in various countries (Hutter, 2013). Ward and Styles (2012) discuss the guilt felt by British women over separation from their parents after emigration to Australia, while Doku and Meekums (2014) discuss how Ghanaian students in the UK link family separation to feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging. Christou (2011) discusses how separation can be particularly emotionally distressing during personal or family crises.

A corresponding body of work has explored the impact on family members (usually focused on children) who remain in home countries, as well as those who become the caregivers to children who are left behind by migrant parents (Boccagni, 2013; Graham, Jordan and Yeoh, 2015; Siriwardhana et al., 2015). Further, transnational relationships between family members can also come under intense pressure, again documented most clearly for parent-child relationships. Dreby (2015), for example, talks of frustration and resentment expressed by Mexican children towards their migrant parents.

Migrants have been documented to expend a great deal of emotional labour in attempts to maintain transnational ties with their family members in other countries (Skrbiš, 2008; Svašek, 2010). The impact on the individuals concerned and the relationship between them is argued to vary not only according to the success of attempts to maintain continuity in relationships through transnational communication and remittances, but also according to family structures and the perceived success of the migration itself (Dreby, 2015; Graham et al., 2015; Siriwardhana et al., 2015). For example, Menjivar and Abrego (2009), in their research with

families split between Guatemala or El Salvador and the US, find that transnational provision of financial remittances and other support was appreciated by those who received it, while a lack thereof could lead to a breakdown in the family relationship. Yet Madianou and Miller's (2011) study found increased accessibility to cell phone communication to have only partly improved relationships between transnational mothers and their children. Moreover, pressure on the relationship between family members does not necessarily end upon reunification, especially when the separation has been lengthy (Boccagni, 2013). In a cyclical manner, perceptions of the quality of the reunification experience can in turn further influence both mental health and family relationships (Rusch and Reyes, 2012).

The research on separation from family members has most often focused on mental health in parent-child relationships, and has primarily been carried out with migrants from specific regions or countries who have a precarious status in the destination country. This study aimed to complement and build on theory and existing literature by starting to fill the gap on the lived experiences of adults arriving alone through a range of immigration streams to Canada.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was used consisting of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This allowed for deep exploration of a single phenomenon—immigration alone—within a rich and complex ecological context, with an emphasis on individual perception (Creswell, 2009; Engel & Schutt, 2014). The use of in-depth interviews enabled development of a more complete understanding of participants' individual experiences than could have been achieved using quantitative data (Creswell, 2009). For example, to minimize the potential bias of a focus on 'nuclear' family members that is often externally imposed in studies of family (Sadye, Logan & Rasheed, 2008) including those on family separation, participants were asked in interviews to describe the people who were important in their lives regardless of the type (or not) of biological or conjugal relationship.

The central research question, intentionally broad, was, "What are the immigration experiences of adults who arrive alone in Canada?" These post-migration, in-Canada experiences had clear time and geographical boundaries, though they included exploration of the pre-migration context insofar as it affected the immigration experience, by establishing the existence and strength of pre-migration relationships (Creswell, 2009).

Target participants were adults who had immigrated alone to Canada at least one year prior to the interview and who were able to participate in an interview in English. The aim was to capture the experience from

diverse perspectives, so a heterogeneous sample was intentionally sought that included people who had arrived through different immigration streams. Immigrants were recruited through word of mouth and with the help of a large immigrant-serving organization in Ottawa.

Interviews took place in 2010 in Ottawa and Montreal. The interview guide covered four roughly chronological periods; the pre-migration context, the process of leaving, the experience upon arrival in Canada, and how the participant thought the experience may have been affected by the fact that she/he was alone. Given that not all participants spoke English as a first language, it was particularly important to use techniques such as probing and paraphrasing, as well as repeating narratives to the participants in order to better understand, clarify, and confirm their accounts, and to improve trustworthiness (Kelly, 2010).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the sole researcher. Transcripts were first coded by hand line-by-line, then codes were combined into broader themes. Next, an overview matrix of themes was created to identify those cutting across interviews (Creswell, 2009). Finally, themes were reorganized and presented according to the theoretical propositions that informed the research (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2008).

This study, focused as it is on a small number of cases, was intended to generate questions on the topic of immigration alone from an un(der) studied angle, in order to provide a base upon which to carry out future participant-centered research in Canada. Thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the experiences is provided using detailed excerpts from the transcripts to expose differences in perceptions of the phenomenon and increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Barusch, Gringeri & George, 2011). As there is limited research on the experience in Canada against which to compare findings, they are situated instead in relation to research on migrant populations in other countries or research on similar phenomena for other populations.

The research project was approved by the McGill University ethics board prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews began and small sections of two interviews were later deleted upon the request of participants. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that my own social location had an undeniable influence on the development and implementation of this project. My identities as a graduate student in social work, and/or a white British permanent resident may have led participants on the one hand to feel a pressure to give particular answers, or on the other to feel more comfortable at discussing the immigration process with a fellow immigrant. More generally, the project was originally conceived after hearing about the negative experiences of immigrants with whom I worked and volunteered, though my own experience of immigrating alone had been relatively positive. This may have influenced my focus

toward either negative or positive findings and necessitated close attention to both positive and negative experiences and a firm grounding of the findings in the voices of participants.

Profile of participants

Eight participants were interviewed. One participant was excluded from analysis as it became clear during the course of the interview that, though she arrived in Canada without her husband, she was accompanied by her children. Participants had initially arrived in Canada as students ($n = 3$), a skilled worker ($n = 1$), resettled refugees ($n = 2$) and an asylum seeker claiming refugee status (that had been recently granted) from inside Canada ($n = 1$). Five participants fell within the age range of 31–40, one was 41–50 and one was 51–60. All of the participants identified important ‘nuclear’ and ‘extended’ family members with whom they had primarily positive relationships prior to migration (see Table 1), albeit with varying degrees of dependence and closeness as will be discussed in the findings.

Table 1—*Overview of participants*

Participant	Participant Country of origin	People from whom separated at time of arrival in Canada	Stream
1. Ibrahim	Sierra Leone	Children and grandchild in transit country	Resettled refugee
2. Lulu	Democratic Republic of Congo	Father, brother, grandmother, and extended family in home country Sister in Europe	Student
3. Yunsheng	China	Parents (only child) and extended family in China	Student
4. Serge	Democratic Republic of Congo	Mother and siblings in home country Wife and children in transit country	Resettled refugee
5. Ahmed	Syria	Mother, father, siblings, and other family members in home country	Skilled worker
6. Lina	Turkey	Husband, mother, sister, and other family members in home country	Student
7. Joseph	Nigeria	Father, mother, wife, and children in home country Brother in Europe	Asylum seeker

Findings

Emotional isolation

The most common theme, expressed by all participants, was that of emotional isolation. This presented as different forms of loss and loneliness that could grow worse over time. Joseph, for example, spoke about the intense pain of being separated from his wife and children, "I talk of being alone, very hard. I'm telling you, I did not pray for my enemy to be in this situation, do you understand? [...] I would not wish it for anybody." Ibrahim similarly described the overwhelming sadness he felt at being separated from his family:

It affect me very badly because I don't have nobody here. I want to be with my family but I don't have no family here, so I still by myself. Every time I think of my family I just feel sad.

For Yunsheng loneliness was experienced as an ongoing feeling of insecurity, "[Y]ou know I feel lonely. I feel not secure, not safe."

Fears of facing both daily life and one-off events alone were cross-cutting themes. Many participants spoke about food for example. Serge, Joseph, and Ibrahim all described how it was difficult to build motivation to cook for one. Ahmed spoke about the challenges of eating alone, "I can't eating by myself. No point you know. Like this, as example, why I have to put food in the dish and take all these dishes to the table, and sit by myself and feel bad? No point."

Three of the four participants who had completed academic programs in Canada spoke about the pain of facing the ostensibly positive experience of graduation alone, in the midst of other students who would be with their families. For Lulu, the refusal of visitor visas for family members to be present at her graduation led to her ultimate decision not to attend, "I figured, you know, everybody have their family there. And, you know, I was just going to be looking all their mothers there. I, I just decided not to go."

Ahmed described how his whole community in Syria would share in celebrations and successful moments. By contrast in Canada isolation meant that it was the good times that were most painful, as he had no one close with whom to share them. When talking about graduation in particular, he too spoke about the need to have someone recognise the work that had gone into the achievement, "Graduate c'mon that's special thing for me because I was having a really hard, hard time. You have to celebrate, whatever it is. I work hard for that, [...] So I need someone to say: 'You did good job'."

Not having shared the migration experience with the people who knew them best could also have an impact on sense of identity. Lina described isolation as no longer being fully understood by anyone,

even by her closest family members. Her new friends in Canada only understood the ‘Canadian’ side of her, and the family members she had left behind in Turkey did not understand how she had been changed by immigration:

Sometimes it makes me feel alone like that nobody really understands, that nobody really knows me. They know part of me and the other you know, so yeah. That was true then [upon arrival] and it’s true now [several years later].

Yunsheng and Ahmed both spoke about the idea of being ‘uprooted,’ “I’m not rooted in this society because my parents are there” (Yunsheng). They and others who had deliberately chosen to migrate alone shared a self-reproaching ambivalence towards the decision to start again in a new country, “[S]ometimes you are crying for yourself you say ‘OK what you doing here?’ I already have everything. I finish but I have to redo it again” (Ahmed).

Social isolation

In contrast, participants perceived social isolation to have both negative and positive implications. Social isolation was a particularly difficult experience for those who had been part of extensive social networks prior to immigration. Ahmed, for example, had worked very hard upon arrival to build connections with neighbours, colleagues and fellow students. Yet the more limited depth and breadth of these new relationships compared with the rich and busy social life he had enjoyed in Syria left him feeling socially isolated:

I am not individual. I cannot, I come from big family, I can’t stay, I can’t isolate myself. I want to go, I want to talk. I need to, I need at least to listen. I need to feel myself I am part of this community.

Some participants, particularly those who had been highly dependent on others prior to migration, thought that lack of social support limited their ability to accomplish goals, especially before they had time to develop new relationships, “union is a strength. If you are alone it is very difficult to accomplish some things in life” (Serge). Other participants described specific difficult circumstances that had been compounded by social isolation. Ibrahim, for example, became keenly aware of an absence of social support when he developed vision problems. Social isolation had particularly dangerous repercussions for Lulu who, unfamiliar with local ingredients upon her arrival in a rural area and with no one to help or even notice, had resorted to such a restricted diet that she had ended up in hospital.

However, social isolation was also perceived by some participants as having benefits. Lina spoke about how being socially isolated made her more task oriented and efficient, "It almost forced me to get things done quicker, actually like maybe I was very focused." She later described how this had resulted in feelings of freedom and independence, "I kind of frankly realized that I felt so liberated. Like I went where I want, I did what I want [...] it was all good."

Several respondents spoke with a sense of pride about how they had developed a new self-reliance. Ibrahim described facing up to challenges in order to move forward, "I had to work hard to pay the loan to the government, so... But still I forgot about it and I go alone along with my life." Joseph, who had admitted to being spoilt as a child by his family, acknowledged that being alone in Canada without them to rely on had forced him finally to mature:

I just train myself on my own, be on my own, depend on myself, be independent. [...] So, that the reason why God bring me to Canada. Was just that God knows me better and separate me from my family.

Changing relationships

Participants also spoke about how relationships with those to whom they were close prior to migration had changed over time. For Ahmed and Yunsheng, relationships with parents had changed as soon as they had mentioned the idea of emigrating, with Ahmed's mother even threatening to disown him, "[S]he told me, 'I'm gonna consider you like you die'."

Post-migration communication was clearly important to participants. Most described regular communication with their closest attachment figures by telephone on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis though cost, and for Lulu lack of infrastructure for her family in the Democratic Republic of Congo, could be a barrier. Participants did not explicitly report using Skype or similar applications, likely due to fact that their use was still limited during the time participants were arriving in Canada.

Seeing family members in person was a much rarer occurrence. Ibrahim, Serge, and Joseph had not seen their family members at all since arriving in Canada, primarily due to lack of resources, and in the case of Joseph, his (at the time) unresolved refugee claim. Lulu, Yunsheng, and Ahmed had been able to visit their home countries sporadically, though not as often as they liked, and were extremely frustrated that visas had been refused for family members to visit them in Canada. Lina was the only participant able to meet with her family more frequently.

Regardless of the frequency, communication and visits were not seen to be enough to maintain the quality of relationships. Lina described how she now saw little point in sharing everything, "I don't find that I share a lot of things with my mom and my sister anymore because they

kind of, they don't really understand the significance of it." Joseph talked about the damage to his emotional bond with his children caused by the distance, difficulties communicating, and the ongoing uncertainty over his only recently resolved refugee status that had prevented him from applying to bring them to Canada, "I'm talking to them, but it's like I'm talking to friends. The love is still, dead."

Talking to family members living in unstable situations led to increased worry and guilt, for example by Ibrahim, "I feel so bad for all my family." This guilt was also felt for family members in more stable situations with Yunsheng, an only child, worrying about who would care for his aging parents in China. For Serge and Joseph, communication exacerbated the pain of separation so much that for self-preservation purposes they limited the frequency of calls to family members.

Participants expressed frustration at delays and barriers in the permanent family reunification system. All participants had applied for family reunification in Canada except Yunsheng, who did not yet meet minimum requirements to do so. Pending reunification applications were facing a variety of difficulties. Ibrahim's daughter, for example, had given birth to a child of her own, which caused considerable delays as this meant the application had to be reprocessed. Ahmed had encountered suspicions over the genuineness of his marriage that were delaying his wife's application.

Protective factors

Several personal and environmental protective factors increased resilience in the face of these difficulties, with varying degrees of success. These included an array of personal strengths upon which participants were able to draw, such as the self-reliance described above. However, perhaps the most discussed factor was existing and new relationships.

Lulu, Yunsheng, and Ahmed already knew at least one person in Canada and all participants formed important new relationships after arrival, most commonly at church, the workplace or school. Serge described, for example, how through volunteering at his church he began to feel accepted, "[I]t was very good, I feel good, comfortable with everybody because I like everybody and they like me."

Several participants described attempts to develop 'surrogate family' relationships to fill a void left in their life by separation. Yunsheng, after talking about close relationships he had developed with two older women, reflected, "I don't know maybe I have like, you know tried to find someone to replace my mom." Similarly, Lulu described a former teacher who, "became like my mom." Yet participants also emphasized that these new relationships, important as they were, were unable to replace those with the people from whom they were separated, "[N]ot like my family not like my *real* [emphasis added] family you know" (Joseph).

Finally, further environmental factors that played a role in reducing the stressors of migration included the kindness of strangers and institutional support. Even simple smiles from neighbours or acquaintances were appreciated, “at least give me some positive emotion” (Ahmed). Serge spoke at length about his deep gratitude for help he had received from hospitals and from one doctor in particular, “I won’t forget the name of that doctor because (he is) like a God to me.”

Discussion

The experiences described by participants support and extend previous research and theory on the experiences of separation from attachment figures during a life transition. The first finding that emerges from this study is that the stress of emotional isolation previously found for migrants in more precarious situations including refugees (De Haene et al., 2010), undocumented migrant workers (Cheung, Delavega, Castillo & Walijarvi, 2011), and caregivers (Hutter, 2013) was also felt by participants who had arrived in Canada through skilled worker and student streams, which supports Doku and Meekums’ (2014) findings for Ghanaian students in the UK.

The impact of migration on multiple identity formation, of having a ‘Canadian identity’ and another for the country or culture of origin, is well documented in relation to children within immigrant families (Mistry and Wu, 2010). Here this extends to adults, building on Butcher’s (2009) description of an “ambivalent inbetweenness” (p. 1368) for transnational professionals. The findings suggest that immigration alone added an additional layer to the experience of immigration-related identity development, as there was nobody present who understood the participant in the context of both their pre- and post-migration environment.

Another unexpected new finding specific to family separation and migration, was the negative experience of graduation celebrations, exacerbated by the refusal of visitor visas. Though not looked at in relation to immigration, studies of the general population have been mixed in their findings of whether or not depression increases during special events such as major holidays (Bergen & Hawton, 2007). Further research is needed to explore this potential inconsistency, though it may be that it is particularly important to have personal achievements, such as completion of a degree, recognized and celebrated by close attachment figures. The recent initiative by universities to stream graduation ceremonies online may be a first step in reducing the sense of isolation induced by the convocation experience for students separated from their families.

Social isolation resulting from having immigrated alone seemed to be experienced most negatively by participants such as Ahmed and Joseph who had placed greater emphasis on previously rich and busy social lives

even though they spoke about building new networks. This suggests that different perceptions of the experience of lone migration may result from different patterns of pre-migration social networks or different personality traits. Indeed, personality traits have been shown to impact experiences of loneliness in non-migrant specific research (Bogaerts, Vanheule & Desmet, 2006). Further qualitative and quantitative research on the implications of personal and social characteristics, immigration stream, and access to resources for the experiences of immigrants who are alone would allow for better targeting and design of programs for immigrants.

Similarly, differences in attitudes towards increased flexibility and availability of time post-migration may have been related to the level of responsibility held towards others prior to migration. Those who described a greater pre-migration dependency on others found it much more difficult to adapt to self-sufficiency upon arrival, though they did later recognize benefits in terms of self-development. The sense of pride that both male and, in particular, female participants described in newly discovered coping mechanisms reflects that which was found in previous studies (Cepeda, 2015; Jiminez, 2015).

New social networks failed to relieve emotional loneliness, which supports the theoretical distinction between emotional and social isolation, as well as previous non-migration specific research (Rokach, 2004). That deliberate searches for 'surrogate' family members were ultimately unsuccessful, is a particularly clear example of how difficult it can be to compensate for separation from attachment figures. While other research discusses immigrants' development of similar 'surrogate' familial relationships for social support (Price, Bush & Price, 2015), the findings here suggest the limitations thereof for providing emotional support.

Finally, the ways in which relationships were affected by separation also supports and extends previous research findings. Initially negative impacts on relationships were experienced more acutely by those whose family members did not understand the choice to leave. Over time the effects became worse for those who had more limited access to communication. Guilt towards family members expressed in previous research by refugees in Canada (Rousseau, Mekki-Berada & Moreau, 2001), Ghanaian students in the UK (Doku & Meekums, 2014) and British women who have immigrated to Australia (Ward & Styles, 2012) was also experienced here. The decision not to communicate in order to avoid further pain was also identified by Falicov (2007) in the context of transnational mothering.

Advances in communication technology offer migrants more and more ways to remain in contact with family members in other countries and this can be crucial for maintaining a relationship (Cepeda, 2015). Technology such as Skype that enables audiovisual communication

is seen to improve transnational communication by more closely mirroring everyday interaction (King-O'Riain, 2015; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Nevertheless, research suggests that there remain limitations to maintaining emotional connections through technology (Jiminez, 2015), and this study suggests that Boccagni (2013) may be correct in arguing that physical separation and distance "does matter" (p. 15).

Implications for social work

Viewed in the context of other research, and situated in an ecological framework, these findings suggest several implications for practice with immigrants that address both sides of a Person: Environment (P:E) imbalance. Most generally, in supporting an individual to better adapt to the environment, one clear implication is that it is crucial to use an approach that looks at the immigration experience holistically. Moreover, the present study supports Schwartz's (2002) assertion that family separation and its interaction with presenting and underlying issues should be considered when working not just with immigrant families but also with individual immigrants who are separated from their families.

Practitioners should avoid being geographically bound when looking at familial systems. They should take into account not only those who are physically present in Canada, but also those who are absent. Falicov (2007) suggests using telephone or email to carry out family therapy across borders for those who are separated. For those who are reunited, research on counseling consistently calls for family separation to be considered a potential contributing factor to dysfunctional relationships (Suarez-Orosco, Todorova & Louie, 2002).

The reactions of participants to their experiences trying to reunite with families in Canada also suggest a need for pre-emptive action to better manage immigrants' pre-migration expectations of visitor visas and ultimate family reunification in Canada. Upon arrival, realistic information about options for temporary and/or permanent family reunification would be particularly useful for people considering whether to transition from temporary (e.g. student) to permanent status.

Immigrants with limited resources such as refugee claimants, refugees, those on low incomes, and some students, may benefit upon arrival from support with maintaining transnational connections to family members, as also called for by Boccagni (2013) and Falicov (2007). While communication methods are becoming increasingly accessible through services such as Skype, costs remain of accessing both the required computer or phone and an adequate internet connection (King-O'Riain, 2015).

Those who are alone and experiencing health-related challenges would also benefit from targeted programming or being made better aware of services that already exist. Some new immigrants, such as students

transitioning to permanent residency or those arriving through economic streams, may have had little contact with the traditional immigrant-serving agencies responsible for much of the dissemination about available services. Therefore, it would be particularly useful to educate social workers and others working in institutions such as universities and hospitals about specific ways of helping the lone immigrants who will access their services.

However, the most direct way of rebalancing the environment side of the P:E fit for lone immigrants suffering negative consequences of family separation would be to work with them to bring their family members to Canada. Support could include, for example, helping clients to avoid delay-inducing mistakes with their family reunification applications, or finding ways in which to address the increasing financial barriers that prevent individuals from applying for reunification with family members in the first place.

Finally, in a context of increased restrictions to family reunification, some of which the new government has started to reverse, social workers must add their voices to advocacy efforts for policy improvements. Specifically, they should call for increased and speedier access to temporary and permanent family reunification for immigrants as they arrive and settle in communities throughout Canada (Beiser et al., 2010). This would reduce negative impacts on the original immigrants and their family members and on the relationships between them.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature by supporting and expanding upon research that has been carried out in different contexts. It works to deepen understanding of the phenomenon of migration alone and to extend the scope of understanding to a broader range of immigrants. While it is clear that many internal and external factors can intersect to influence the different ways in which individuals experience the life transition of migration, certain themes did emerge from the data that may relate to immigration alone regardless of, for example, immigration stream.

Firstly, participants perceived there to be both negative and (albeit fewer) positive implications of immigration alone, separated from loved ones. Emotional isolation was experienced negatively by refugees and economic immigrants alike and regardless of the type of family members from whom they were separated, while social isolation, also regardless of immigration stream, had both negative and positive implications. Relationships could start to change even pre-migration and continue to be affected after arrival, again for different types of immigrants.

Secondly, resilience in the face of negative impacts could be only partly improved by other factors. Participants described drawing upon

various personal and environmental resources including newly discovered personal strengths, new relationships, and the support of institutions. However, while those resources addressed impacts of social isolation, they were less useful as replacements for emotional bonds. Neither did regular communication fully make up for the physical separation from loved ones.

Finally, these findings suggest areas for further research and advocacy. First, they support the importance of unpacking and addressing sources of stress, such as family separation, that are inherent to the migration process. Research with larger samples of immigrants who have arrived alone in Canada through all immigration streams (including economic, refugee, students, and temporary workers) could investigate further the relationships between family separation and other personal and environmental factors. Second, there is a clear gap in the research in relation to possible benefits of immigrating on one's own; benefits that potentially could be built upon to improve the experience for those who do arrive in Canada without family and friends.

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