

The existential journey of the 'bi-rooted' migrant

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Abstract

This article is based on my doctorate research project. It explores the experience of voluntarily relocating to a foreign country – while keeping strong bonds and continuous contact with the country of origin; the experience of being a *bi-rooted* migrant. It questions how, or whether, the multiple aspects of such a lived experience might be successfully transcended, simultaneously experienced, or might be seen as a constant internal split. It explores the differences in the characteristics, the texture and the quality of both sets of roots; exploring the dialogue and tension that may occur between them and their impact on the sense of Self. It will discuss the existential framework that accompanies the relocation process into a foreign country; the anxiety that it engenders, and the opportunity to confront existential issues such as choices, responsibility, meaning, freedom and value, and the awakening of self-consciousness that may ensue. It will conclude that rather than being experienced as a concentric concept with a central anchor around which the whole construct of Self occurs, living with double roots is experienced as an open and dynamic interconnected construct, continually becoming, and reflecting in the Self while simultaneously shaping a new perspective of life.

Keywords: *Phenomenological, Existential, Bi-Rooted, Immigration, Roots, Self, Home, Belonging*

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Introduction

The widespread movement of people whether individually, in groups, as refugees or by choice, continues to be a dominant phenomenon reaching almost every part of the world, which is having a far-reaching influence socially, politically and individually. More than ever before, advance transportation and technology have made the world a smaller place and made it possible to relocate to a new country whilst staying closely involved in the country of origin, thus living actively with multiple sets of roots.

For many generations this multiplicity of roots has been central in my original family history, and as such has had a defining influence which has shaped my own perspectives and choices. Thus, this research is based on the exploration of both my personal experience and that of other participants of being *bi-rooted* migrants; the experience of voluntarily relocating to a foreign country while keeping strong bonds and continuous contact with the country of origin, and of laying down new roots in the new country of residence: in short, the experience of living with two sets of active roots.

It explores where on the continuum of possible emotional and geographical 'homes' an established place can be selected – if indeed there had been any specific selection. It questions how, or whether, the multiple aspects of the *bi-rooted* lived experience might be successfully transcended, simultaneously experienced, or might be seen as a constant internal split and it explores the dialogue and tensions that may occur between the different roots and their consequent impact on the sense of Self.

Loss, Void and Fluid Self

Relocating to a new country is a complicated psychological process with considerable effects on personal identity. It may start with a sense of loss (Akhtar, 1999; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989) or a sense of liberation (Madison, 2010) but usually evolves into a much more complex position and thus contributes to the understanding of the concept of Self, its fluidity and the importance of its context.

Migration is such a fundamental change that the immigrant's identity may be at risk (Walsh & Shulman, 2007), and it triggers a certain 'culture shock' (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Handlin, 1973), followed by a state of anxiety which challenges the fundamental constructs of the migrant's psychic organisation (Akhtar, 1999). In light of the seismic shift that takes place when relocating to the present place of residence, most recognised points of reference mirroring the migrant's self-image dematerialise (Akhtar, 1999; Grinberg & Grinberg 1989). This sudden clearing of the 'décor' that used to be part of the self creates a vast void. Whether this state of affairs creates a mourning period or a sense of liberation will result in eroding self-assumptions surrounding self-identity and create a renewed sense of self, thus allowing a fresh relationship and understanding between self and context to develop. The emotional experience of dis-location, conjoined with uncertainty and anxiety faced by the migrant, may produce the right internal conditions for regressing into a split internal world, thus reverting to the primary fragmented position of all good and all bad (Akhtar, 1999).

This resonated with my personal experience and that of the participants in this research. In the face of this challenge the individual may experience grief expressed in various dimensions: emotional, psychological, intellectual, including language

and social references which may trigger a stress response.

However, this crisis may also allow the individual to move from dichotomous attitudes of love and hate to that of ambivalence (Kernberg, 1966); this position may change the migrant's perspective on the world he/she inhabits, on his/her own life and of himself, and by doing so adopt a more existential perspective. This fluid period, with its difficulties and challenges, can be an opportunity for self-exploration and profound changes or even transformation into adopting a more authentic stance.

From that emptiness and void a new search for the self in the new context is created. The *bi-rooted* individual will be confronted regularly with a simultaneous and flexible set of references which will contribute to the sense of being in constant flux; thus, creating that unique position which comprises sometime both sets of references, or interchanging them.

A vast and rich concept has therefore emerged as consequence of relocation which is much broader than consideration of personal psychology. There is an emphasis on the existential stance of relatedness and its application to a conceptual home created outside traditional boundaries. If the definition of home resides in the tension between security and novelty, it is by accepting that tension and learning to live with it honestly that might lead us toward our authentic Self.

Home and Homelessness

Sartre (1966) argued that being 'at home' fixes the individual's identity through his identification with the environment and therefore should be interpreted as an act of 'Bad faith'. This concept describes the phenomenon whereby acceding to social pressure and responsibilities we disown our innate freedom of choice, resulting in an inauthentic attitude which in turn inhibits our ever-changing self (ibid.). Therefore, I would suggest that agreeing on one definition of home proposes a limit to our location in all dimensions and so to whom we are, fundamentally contradicting the self being ever changing (ibid.). Home, as a definitive concept, should be the focus of ceaseless enquiry (ibid.) in our efforts to diminish our being in 'bad faith'.

A philosophical exploration of 'home' uncovers

the realm of the unknown, which resonates with Kierkegaard's (1940) leap of faith, and one that will distance us from an idealised concept of a haven of safety and security. This suggests new space to explore internal conflicts and by doing so redefine our sense of self which resonated with the participants' experience:

'The life that we are investing in and creating is becoming our home and we belong to it.' (Participant 2)

So, what is a sense of home that keeps changing and shifting? Is there an authentic or real concept of home that resides outside a physical space? Is there a possibility of keeping a concept of home within a space created by the never-ending cycle of construction and deconstruction? Can we existentially connect to ourselves in the context of home?

Existence is closely related to the physical environment in which we live, practically as well as philosophically. It may be seen as a structure of closely woven ties of cultural, social, personal and familial references, where we continuously re-define ourselves by re-evaluating our connections, creating new ones while questioning others. Our subjective perception of the world surrounding us makes our attempts to define home more equivocal and elusive. Sartre defined existentialism as a practical discipline that concentrates on the exploration of the nature of human issues (Adams, 2014). As such, it transcends the binary perception of the philosophical and the physical and suggests an idea of home as being one of continuous movement, progressing from the concrete to the abstract. Thus, the individual grows from idealising home as a safe and secure concept (genuine or imagined) within the emotional connection to family and culture and moves towards an advanced state in which one is as authentic as possible in any presented time and place (Tuedio, 2004).

In parallel, home can be perceived within temporal connections of past and present and a space in which we continuously create ourselves by restructuring and redefining these connections (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Our creative tendencies allow us to preserve the indicators (material or spiritual) of our identity and of our perception and need to belong, intertwining them into a unique

personal fabric of being. This process offers us new possibilities to evaluate our connection with home from different perspectives and in the context of the new experiences we meet along our journey (Tuedio 2004; Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

'For me the emotional home is still there [in my country of origin]. But our little family home is here. Home is where my childhood was and where my belonging is, but our family home and where the four of us are and want to be is here. This is my children's childhood home. I have two different levels of homes.' (Participant 6)

Thus, in the attempt to explore our relationship with the vast term 'home' there is a possibility for moving beyond traumatic experiences, towards empowerment and the continuous recreation of oneself.

Roots

The situation in which an individual is living simultaneously with multiple cultural, social and emotional points of reference due to his/her intrinsic duality as a *bi-rooted* individual, is a constant reminder that the concept of identity and the way we make sense of it are not fixed. They resonate with the outlook on the Self and its ever-changing nature being the result of our experiences of life and their subjective meanings (Sartre, 1966). All individuals are in possession of consciousness and self-consciousness, which are eternally changeable, thus his assertion that 'existence precedes essence' (ibid.). However, living with an inherent duality and being connected in different ways to different countries, with their unique cultures and emotional input, raise the notion of changeability to a heightened level. From a theoretical perspective the ability to change should be adopted as much as possible in order to be more authentic for a concrete life experience. This attitude, if embraced and cultivated by the individual, may transform the concept of binary identity into a deeper understanding of a more complex construct that emphasises the fluidity of the self (Papastephanou, 2012).

An interesting picture of the concept of roots emerged from this research. Different sorts of roots were described by the interviewees, each having their own characteristics. The picture that is

created reveals two sets of roots that are different in form and substance, but put together open up the opportunity to be existentially in the world.

One set is vertical, deeply embedded in the emotional realm of the subject. These are roots that develop organically from growing up in a place, where some of the processes of being rooted are conscious and others totally unconscious. They are grounding, but also absolute, and therefore define the person and restrict his/her movement. They give strength, but within this depth and stability resides their weakness.

The second set is shallow by nature, as it has been acquired during adult life. It is rhizomatic by nature, having multiple points of entry and multiple connections, and expands in different directions. It does not define the individual, but allows him/her the freedom to choose whether or not to be flexible and fluid, and this is where its strength and also weakness resides. It allows freedom but supplies little grounding:

'Whereas in here, we started something new, it is a fresh small tree, you know, and there a massive, massive tree; massive roots and small ones. We don't have all our family here; we are just developing our own family here. So, our roots in here are very shallow. There are two homes ...but they are different... Because there, there is a history behind, many generations behind us, you know, here, we started this, it is a fresh start.' (participant 1)

This interpretation is based on the rhizome, a philosophical concept created by Deleuze and Guattari in *'A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia'* (1987). It is used as a symbol of rootlessness and opposes traditional ideas of 'rooted', where anything grows from roots, like a tree. Being a non-linear living organism, it has no beginning or end; it expands, continuously aiming to free itself from the forces that restricted it. The rhizome is a subterranean stem like a bulb or tuber and differs from roots (ibid.). Deleuze removes the rhizome from a possible relation with one central being and by contrast sees the rooted and centrally connected tree as the villain (Adkins, 2015). The tree (and its vertical roots) symbolises the dichotomy between subject and object, between signifier and signified, and by doing so is dichotomous. However, by privileging one sort of roots over the other,

Deleuze is creating the very dichotomy of good and bad that he is criticising in the first place. Viewing both roots as the expression of different aspects of the human psyche and being able to experience both together allow a more complete experience of self.

Through this research, I came to see roots as a metaphor for the need for connection and as an answer to that need. Seeing both sorts of roots as one whole allows the individual to experience both the grounding depth and strength of the vertical construct, while recognising its limitations, and the shallow horizontal roots which, although they may not give the same sense of grounding, provide flexibility and freedom for the individual to change and create new strengths and so develop a more perpetually authentic way of being.

Thus, the *bi-rooted* migrant may benefit from these dual roots. That experience was seen as a transformative experience resulting in broadening the individual's perspective of living 'in tune' with their sense of self and being able to use both resources as needed.

Outsider / Insider

However, as tempting as it may be to rise above one's clearly defined sense of identity, whether it is a real possibility is problematic. It may be a lifelong process that requires one to transcend a naturally polarising position and to superimpose the concept of one's identity onto that of others, thus creating layers of transposed images of oneself that form a newly created entity that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

One could argue that this position may result in a sterile no man's land, a 'sitting on the fence', rather than choosing to fully and totally engage in day to day local life where ever this may be. However, recognising and accepting the fluctuation of the sense of self may generate opportunities for diving deeply into two or more life experiences. These experiences relate to different social, emotional and geographical settings, resulting in an internal richness. This complexity percolates into various dimensions of human existence creating multiple points of views, and eventually translates into an all-encompassing and flexible attitude to life. This, if accepted and recognised, may allow both freedom and the responsibility which is quite clearly

reflecting a principle developed and discussed in the traditional existential literature by Sartre (1966), Deleuze (1987) or Kierkegaard (1980), and being prepared to examine one's assumptions is at the heart of the existential paradigm. The responsibility for that task lies with both migrants and local citizens equally, and requires an alternating movement from guest to host and back within the dictated social and cultural context. This might contribute to the fluidity of the sense of self that is required when laying down new roots.

Application in Therapy

The quest for defining one's own identity, letting go of it and then redefining it again is portrayed, in one way or another, in all the life stories disclosed in therapy. Holding two or more conflictual or dual positions is part of the phenomenological and existential stance. Likewise, 'not-being-at-home' is not exclusively the faith of the migrant. 'Not being-at-home' can manifest itself in a variety of situations in our lives, within our society, with our own family or within our own body to quote just a few. The findings of this study may be useful and applied in therapy for migrant or 'migrant at heart' alike, as they are dealing with existential issues related to human existence. Roots are found in every aspect of our life, and the experience of rootedness and rootlessness may be relevant to the many changes we undergo.

My Experience

This process has led me personally to change my sense of self and the organisation of my identity, regardless of the very strong ties that I still cultivate with the country that I considered, subjectively, to be my country of origin. After a significant amount of time spent in London the quality of my old ties has been modified by the experience of living here. Simultaneously, as if feeding into each other, that modification has allowed me to lay down new roots that are fundamentally different and constantly changing and by doing so created a new life perspective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for the migrant who is initially exposed to an emotional, cultural, physical and psychological 'no man's land' there is a psychological window of opportunity to re-evaluate

personal and moral values, social, political and moral assumptions, and to gauge his/her cultural references differently. It results in broadening one's view of the world from multiple perspectives, which in turn expands the sense of self. Choosing not to ignore pain and difficulties, but by working through these in order to achieve a possible healing, is congruent with existential thought and existential psychotherapy. We may not need to choose between total isolation in order to be true to ourselves, or need to lose ourselves in order to be part of a new social environment. If we can notice a progressive social movement toward accepting and sometimes celebrating differences and deem them multicultural, perhaps it is time to celebrate multicultural differences and conflicts within the self; complexity, difficulty, unfairness are equally important alongside wonder, beauty and grace. None of them can merge into a unidimensional way of being. They result in broadening one's view of the world from multiple perspectives, which in turn expands the sense of self, and it is within the realm of differentiation and acceptance that authentic living lies. ☺



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