

# Migration Loneliness and Family Links: A Case Narrative

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**Abstract**—Culture and family structure provide a sense security. Further, the chrono, macro and micro contexts of development influence developmental transitions and timetable particularly owing to variations in the macrosystem associated with non normative life events like migration. Migration threatens family links, security and attachment bonds. Rising migratory trends have prompted an increased interest in migration consequences on familial bonds, developmental autonomy, socialization process, and sense of security. This paper takes a narrative approach and applies the attachment paradigm from a lifespan perspective, to examine the settlement experiences of an India-born migrant student in Sydney, Australia. It focuses on her quest to preserve family ties; her remote secure base; her continual struggle to balance dependency and autonomy, a major developmental milestone. As positional parental power is culturally more potent in the Indian society, the paper therefore raises some important concerns related to cultural expectations, adaptation, acculturative stress and sense of security.

**Keywords**—Attachment, family security, migration & loneliness, narrative, remote secure base

## I. INTRODUCTION

FAMILIES are core to human life and existence as life begins in a family. Human beings enjoy a reciprocal relationship of caring and sharing through their development, starting their own family whilst they grow older and strive to maintain family links at the same time as they age, as family is “a basic unit of human experience” [1], p. 7. Though definitions of a family may have changed in the past, families continue to work and support individuals [2], they are significant over the lifespan, central to human development and embedded in a socio cultural context, [3] whereby changes in the chronosystem influence the family process, family systems and trends. For example, variations in living arrangements, more single parent families and fewer children or postponing marriage [4], greater father involvement in parenting [5], [6] suggesting an increased acceptance of egalitarian values [7]. Families support emotional needs of individuals [4] and through a supportive family and siblings [8] adolescents achieve an important milestone in development, a sense of autonomy. As this is progressed and mastered, parents entrust adolescents greater power thus reducing conflict and bridging gaps [9]-[12]. This helps adolescents and young people to develop a sense of security and maintain close attachment with their family even as they prepare to leave home or migrate to another country carrying attachment reminiscences of parent child relationships [13].

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Further, families have the responsibility of assisting other developmental pathways like, individuation and connectedness such that age related tasks can be attained for adaptive functioning [14]-[16]. Though authoritative parenting balances warmth, independence and compliance [17] however, extent of power, autonomy and attachment are culture specific [11]. Structural family theory suggests balanced families provide feelings of belongingness whilst respecting differentiation and are healthy as they support both, independence and interpersonal boundaries [18]. Unlike Western countries, position-power balance is more formally and hierarchically structured in Indian society, supposedly a protective function [19]. Consequently attachment security of children born into traditional joint family systems in India develops in close contact with entire family resulting in the “We self” [19] and secure attachment [20]. Further, multiple care giving, including care given by grandmothers is also not uncommon [21] - [24].

Highlighting the importance of social relationships for well-being, Bowlby [25] suggested that quality of childhood relationships with caregivers, parents or significant others enables construction of mental representations called internal working models (IWMs) that get activated when confronted with stressful life situations. IWMs guide feeling, emotion, cognition and behavior in relationships through the lifespan. Bowlby [25] proposed that attachment anxiety, avoidance, and detachment, influence physical, emotional, mental health and consequently wellbeing. Consistent-inconsistent care giving is key to secure or insecure attachment quality and serves as prototype for personality development and social interactions through the lifespan. Paradoxically then, initial dependence gives way to functional and emotional independence in later life. An attachment figure, for example, the mother, can provide physical or psychological care, cuddling and a holding environment when one faces unthinkable anxieties [26]; a secure base and safe haven to facilitate exploration and competence [27]. Later research on attachment has emphasized the significance of attachment in wellbeing and has supported Bowlby's [27] theoretical proposition that resilience developed and demonstrated in secure attachment is expressed in a variety of situations in response to stress, [28]. From a lifespan standpoint, the attachment paradigm [29]-[31], furthermore has enabled researchers to be conscious of transitions, including leaving home; understanding attachment relationships with primary caregivers and social competence such that leaving home for college that can be considered synonymous to Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Walls' [32] “strange situation” [33]-[34].

As young adults move out of home or migrate from country of origin for varied reasons, they carry with them attachment scripts and recollections of parent-child relationships and experiences of being parented [13]. Further, Bowlby [27] argued that separation and or loss of an attachment figure leads to a predictable sequence of reactions-protest, despair and detachment. Though migration is complex and is qualitatively and quantitatively varied [35] yet invasive complexities in altered living arrangements [36] and challenges faced in the process of acclimatization to a new culture did not receive much attention until recent past [37]. Life events like migration bring about isolation and loneliness [38] where, loneliness is a vital expression or representation of adjustment demands with potentially solemn outcomes [39]. All the same, capitalizing on personal or social resources reduces stress [40].

History of earliest India-born migrants to Australia dates back to 1800, working as labourers or as domestic help whilst around 1860 to early 1900 in agriculture and gold fields. Due to changes in Australian migration policy, India-born migrants from 1966 onwards include professionals, for example doctors, engineers, individuals with computing backgrounds and related fields to name a few. Interestingly census at 2006, when compared with the 2001 census in Australia, recorded a 54.1 per cent increase (55.2 per cent males & 44.8 per cent females) in India-born people. Further it is of significance to know that 40.7 per cent arrived between 2001-2006 whilst only 13.9 per cent arrived between 1996-2000 [41] venturing on Australian shores to accomplish their hopes and dreams. Migration has been globally on the rise over the past decade with over a million students pursuing international study [42]. Many international students have opted for Australian educational institutes to complete higher degrees in various fields of interest.

Though most migrants and international students settle comfortably and fulfill their educational requirements with ease, some find it intimidating where variations in habitual patterns [43] may become challenging. Further establishing new routines like travel and transport; maintaining work-study-life balance; experiencing elevated levels of loneliness [44], [45]; racial discrimination [46], [47] along with isolation and homesickness [46] and sometimes even a disadvantaged career progression [48] may become functional stressors [44]-[47] causing distress during the acculturation process [49]. Additionally, gender differences in acculturative stress suggest women experience and report greater acculturative stress than men [47] where acculturative stress may also be an indicator of adjustment [50]. Though stress experienced during transitions may be important for growth as it provides "steeling" [51] pp.44, [52] nonetheless elevated levels may have detrimental consequences for wellbeing; mental health issues like depression, and lower levels of self-efficacy [37].

Thus migration is a process of modification, readjustment, adaptation and an ongoing strive to make the host country a home. Due to change in the macrosystem [53], [3] migration is consequently associated with lack of belongingness [54].

Consistent with any group of migrants, India-born migrants to other parts of the world including Australia, carry a mental schema of their home and culture that is consistent with their sense of identity [55]. Yet marginality has potential to increase self-awareness [56] when identities are challenged. Further, significant life changes for example 'leaving home' in college students [57] and those due to migration may lead to acculturation anxiety [58] initiating feelings of insecurity; "separation" from the culture of origin and may advance to devaluing host culture [59]-[61]. This often encompasses "culture shock" [62], [63] due to altered social settings and social fabric [64], [65] having implications for both physical and mental health [66].

Previous findings [67] have also revealed attachment security and social skills to be significantly related to loneliness where securely attached individuals demonstrate better social skills, social competence and experience lower levels of perceived loneliness and diminished psychological distress [68]. Nevertheless fewer friends, shrinking social networks and lack of perceived social support have also been linked to depression; [70], [71]. Sociological studies in the past have attempted to explore socio-cultural adjustment of South Asians in America [72], [73] and previous research on international student populations has reported on their confronted challenges, for example language barriers, academic difficulties, discrimination, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness [74] to name a few. However research on settlement experiences of India-born people in Australia including migrant and Indian international students settled in Australia is sparse. In recent wake of attacks in 2009 on Asian Indians living in Melbourne, and earlier evidence that suggests their lack of support seeking [75], it is important to understand settlement experience from their perspective.

Thus taking a narrative approach [76], this paper attempts to explore the sense of security; the meaning and experience of loneliness through a narrative of an India-born migrant student at an Australian university. Since a narrative approach is holistic in nature, it was considered more appropriate to tap telling accounts and recollections related to migrant settlement experiences and loneliness. Moreover, whilst studying life events, narratives and lived experiences have in the past provided valuable information including those related to trauma [77] and in educational settings from a student perspective [78]. Since the participant has been through a major life event, namely migration and is an international student, a narrative approach was considered an appropriate methodology to elicit distinctively intense information in understanding settlement and loneliness from an India-born migrant student's perspective.

## II. METHOD

### A. Participants

Twenty five migrant students (17 female; 8 male) at an Australian university who had spent less than 5 years (mean length of stay was 4.19 years) in Australia volunteered to

participate in the study (See Narchal, 45 for a thematic analysis). However this paper presents a single case study in an attempt to provide an in-depth narrative which intends to capture the vividness and intensity of migratory experience rather than less intense information from larger numbers [79], [80].

#### B. Participant Profile

This participant, a 21 year old India-born female migrant student, whom I will call Nidhi (pseudonym; name changed for confidentiality reasons), was an on-campus resident studying at an Australian university at the time of this interview. Nidhi, a Masters student at an Indian university, was encouraged by her mother to leave her study program and country to join a similar course at an Australian university. Prior to migrating, she felt very secure; lived in a joint- family system, with her grandparents, uncle, parents and a younger brother. Back home in India, she also had pet dogs in the family. Nidhi volunteered to participate in an interview to share her settlement experiences. The interview took place after she had had spent almost one year in Australia. This interview lasted 1.5 hours.

#### C. Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the university ethics committee prior to commencement. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted. Since the settlement and loneliness experience of migrants in a new cultural context was of interest, semi-structured questions to facilitate narrative interviewing were developed to capture biographical accounts of personal life experiences, perceptions, stories and significant life events [76]. Complete anonymity was maintained through the study. Participants had the option to withdraw at any stage if they were distressed or felt uncomfortable. Participants completed consent forms, demographic information, the Revised University of California Loneliness Scale [81] and the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; attachment measure; [82]. Five highest and five lowest scorers on the R-UCLA scale of loneliness were interviewed with prior consent. Open-ended questions encouraged narratives. These were recorded and later transcribed for analysis [45] (See for thematic analysis).

#### D. Measures

(1). *Revised University of California Loneliness Scale* [81]. This 20-item valid and reliable self reporting measure of loneliness was used to determine self reported loneliness ranging from, never (1), rarely (2) sometimes (3) to, often (4). (2). *Relationship Questionnaire* (RQ; attachment measure; [82]. Based on Bartholomew and Horowitz [82] four category attachment classification, the RQ was used to assess attachment styles. The four-category framework suggests the following classification: secure, fearful-avoidant, preoccupied and dismissing-avoidant. RQ consists of four short paragraphs describing attachment styles that are self- rated on a 7-point scale on each of the four dimensions.

### III. RESULTS

Consistent with narrative approach [76], this paper presents a partial transcript from a narrative of a female, India-born migrant student, studying at an Australian university. This case was specifically selected for presentation as limited research is available on India-born migrants in Australia. It is of interest to explore the settlement experiences of this participant as she came from a joint family. She attempted to keep in touch with her family that perhaps continued to be her secure base whilst she was in another country. Her low scores on the R-UCLA scale suggest she was low on loneliness. Based on her responses on the RQ, she was classified as securely attached individual. The following data presents her experience of loneliness, the extent of resilience and her ongoing struggle to sustain and maintain an enduring relationship with her family in India. Despite staying at the student residences where many other students lived on campus, Nidhi felt lonely and that too not once in a while, but as she says *"probably every day or something after I finish work"*. She recalled those times when she was staying with her family and said, *"Before...I used to go home but here...I live in the student residences so even if I finish early I just have to go and sit by myself because in holidays and weekends everyone goes away and it's pretty quiet. Even some of my neighbours don't come out of their rooms, so I don't know why they're confined to their rooms? It's basically in the evenings or weekends... because before I used to hang out a lot with my friends for the weekends. After coming here ...I feel lonely."*

Speaking of times when she first arrived in Australia, Nidhi said, *"The first six months when I came here... I feel like I was lost basically. It was like my mum who wanted me to come here and study, I mean.....it just happened so sudden because I was already doing a Masters degree back home, I just had to quit that and I had my friends.... I came with my dad, my uncle, and there was another girl, so all four of us came together so it was really nice... I mean rather than coming alone by myself. It was all right, the first six months and the first year went very quickly with the classes and everything."*

She compared and contrasted her life, the way it was back home in India and how it was at that time for her in Australia and divulged, *" Back home my life was pretty eventless. I used to go to college, attend lectures, come back and I used to spend a good amount of time with my....I had like dogs, yes with my parents and grandparents, my brother...it was really good. I talk a lot on the phone... I used to talk to my friends on the phone, yes that's it. I wasn't going out much but staying at home... I was spending a good amount of time at home...it was good. I mean then it was just natural, it came naturally.....But after coming here I felt like oh it was so much worth it because after coming here I was missing it"*.

After migrating to Australia, she suddenly found meaning in her eventless life, more so as she missed the everyday routines that had become part of her life and readily elaborated on what she was missing when asked, what was she missing, Nidhi said that, *"Back at home I had a very secure life...secure because"*

*I'm coming from a family where I was always supported and .....protected. That means my parents were always with me and my parents would provide everything for me, so it was secure. It's like, I mean I'm learning a lot and I'm happy, at least I'm going on a path towards my career and that's what is more important to me .... because I came here to study...but... it's not that I want to be alone and study. Being lonely, I can still overcome that most of the time. Still one way it's good, like my career is kind of getting defined and I'm enjoying...One thing it's the fact that I have...like back home I know whatever happens I have somebody.... but here it's like... I don't know but... they are like so far away, you know....".*

Talking of the distance, both physical and psychological, Nidhi spoke about sudden urges to be back at home with her family and said, *"The distance, like it's, if at all...there are times I think, oh God, I can't take it anymore I need a break, I want to go, I want to be with my parents"*. She then suddenly realizes that *"it's just not feasible, I have to book my ticket, probably the flights are booked or it's like 10-12 hours journey ... it doesn't happen in a week, I need to plan and it takes a lot of time, though it's possible"*. Nidhi missed the closeness and security her family provided and held that, *"A kind of security that my family used to provide me doesn't exist anymore... I do feel close to my family but... when things went wrong during initial settlement, there was no one to fall back on, no one to confide in, no one to support and understand"*.

She recalled instances of difficult times in her academic progression, the main reason for her presence in Australia. She asserted that *"At one point I had this faith in my research, then, everything was going bad, I don't know what I was doing wrong"*. One academic, she recalled, told her, *"You're a.....student, you're like terrible.....and it was bad. I had like a really tough time and I'd get my results...oh my God, that's terrible but I couldn't find anyone to tell what was going on"*.

Meeting deadlines, completing assignments that gave her a sense of accomplishment were perhaps more positive aspects and made her feel adequate and happy. She expressed a sudden urge to connect with her family. Thinking of those times and a need to share those moments with those close to her, she uttered, *"There were also happy times, when everything's going fine I could meet the deadline however there was no one to share happiness either...I couldn't find anybody then. Of course I can always call home but still sometimes...staying on this campus sometimes the pay phone is busy or my phone doesn't have reception. That's when I'm like, oh I have to tell stuff and there's nobody. I can call home. Yes I can call, my parents are like a phone call away but I should also look at the time difference, probably they're in the office and I don't want to call up. If it's bad news I can't call them up and upset them in the office. It's like I go to the pay phone and somebody's sitting there, probably they're international or migrant students like me and they're calling their loved ones and they want to talk for an hour or*

*something and then I can't make an hour long international call on my mobile..."*.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Although narratives are co-constructed and the interviewer is a participant in the construction of narratives, they are perhaps constituted with contradictions in life [76], for example, when events occur contrary to expectation in a new context or emergence of unanticipated events that require reworking. Nidhi's response indicates contradiction in her expectation, a marked change from what it was at home and what she experienced in the host culture. She goes on to question her perception as it does not match her expectations and then tries to understand why so? Why other students don't come out of their rooms? This may be challenging as one may not have experienced similar situations in their own culture [36]. Development is complex and individuals differ in the ways they construct their narratives. Similar experiences may produce different outcomes, for example, an unpleasant experience may end in positive outcomes [83] or vice-versa as these experiences define the self. Individuals tend to normalize non-normative events or the unexpected in their narratives. This is particularly evident when Nidhi contradicts herself on more than one occasion for example when she initially felt lost on her arrival to a new country, she later normalizes it by suggesting that it was alright and first six months passed quickly. Similarly reflecting on her loneliness (this loneliness was perhaps not expected) she thinks it is still fine as she came to study. Her swift normalizing; suggesting things are just fine or glossing over, are perhaps her attempts to rationalize and be resilient through transitions.

Though females have been found to be more attached to their families than males [33], [34] yet irrespective of gender, secure parental attachment in college students has been found to be related with reporting lower psychological distress [68]. Further, consistent with attachment theory [29], [32] data demonstrates characteristics of adaptive functioning and secure base attachment. Her narrative echoes loss of a secure base comprising of her immediate family and grandparents. Both father and uncle (hierarchy in the Indian family system) accompanied her when she first came to Australia, an interesting mix of autonomy-dependency and doubt [9], [10] and or protection [24], [84]. Further, abandoning a course half way through in India to restart a new one in Australia was initiated by Nidhi's mother. Acceptance of this sudden move may be obedience to authority or possible acceptance of hierarchy? This suddenness may have been overwhelming and threatening for Nidhi as she had little or no time to prepare herself for the strange situation [33], [34]. Further pressure to live up to and or fear of not living up to family expectations is depicted in her ambivalence and conflict resolution. The conflict of not making a phone call or making a phone call at an appropriate time; not to upset her parents with news about academic challenges when parents are at work, signifies her capacity to manage affect and act appropriately under stressful

conditions. She continues to access the holding environment [26]; her secure base, though in her case, what I call a *remote secure base* (RSB) when distressed. This is further indicative of secure attachment given that absence of conflict is not a sign of security but on the contrary, dealing with it is.

Connection and security is imperative over the lifespan. Nidhi's closeness with her family and an ongoing quest to maintain family links; to be connected to her secure base when in need or distressed; trust in relationships and her ability to seek family/parental and emotional support is related to social competence [67] which consequently decreases feelings of loneliness. She articulates this clearly in her narrative reiterating the sense of trust and security with family being a secure base [27]; expresses a need for dependency and connectedness and affirms that her family will always be there for her and continue to provide a holding environment [26]. High trusting individuals reduce the significance of negative events by viewing them in the broader context of more important positive experiences [85]. Nidhi demonstrates this by reflecting over the reasons for leaving the family, to study for a career she came to make. Activation of the sense of a secure base facilitates people to perceive information as less threatening, manageable and less dissonant by promoting trust and enabling individuals to augment and amplify existing schema and consider contrary-to-belief information [86]. Nidhi reported her life to be eventless back home and her mental schema suggested this to be normal and natural. Post-migration, she missed the naturally occurring events in her life as these were now special for her, and also a change in her schema, as she gradually adapts to new edifying norms.

Support for significant developmental pathways like individuation, connectedness and age related tasks [16], [14] has also been found, where both individuation and connectedness are indicators of adaptive functioning [15]. Nidhi's narrative takes one through individuation where she refers to planning, organising (travel plan) and a sudden need for connection with secure base followed by resilience and capacity to cope with circumstances and challenges. Availability of personal and social resources [40], [87] and self-efficacy moderates stress [37] thus enabling a person-environment fit [53], [88]. This is clearly conveyed in her narrative.

Though this is a single case, yet it presents findings that have implications for social and psychological research. Outcomes suggest maintaining family links and an access to RSB whilst away from family is a sign of adaptive functioning as it assures individuals that they are worthy of support, affection and love and security [27]. Further, irrespective of gender, secure attachment with primary care giver (e.g. parent/s) is related to lower psychological distress [68]. This has implications for wellbeing. Applying a mixed method approach, future studies need to explore the significance of family as a secure base, and for immigrants, a RSB, in the development of a 'we self;' autonomy/individuation and protection that Indian families provide to young adults when

they experience acculturative stress as they move away from home. This also has implications for policy and counselling at student support services within universities and colleges. Encouraging migrant students to access their RSB and to uphold and preserve family links will help build adequate resilience that is imperative for positive settlement in a new cultural framework.

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