

Change in Geographical Proximity: A Qualitative Study of the Experience of Parting

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Abstract: The purpose of the present study is to examine the psychological impact on individuals that results from a change in geographic proximity of a close friend, romantic partner and a sibling. The topic was chosen in light of personal experiences, that is, deep affiliation with friends, and the subsequent experience of parting. A total of 6 participants (1 male and 1 female in each of the three categories), aged between 19 to 26 years were selected purposively. Out of these, 2 had experienced change in geographic proximity from a friend and 2 from a romantic partner and 2 from a sibling. The study provides an insight into the experiences of those who deal with the process of a romantic partner, friend or sibling moving away. The participants identified had experienced change in geographic proximity of friend, romantic partner or sibling within a period of 1 to 8 months. The various aspects explored were communication, well-being, loneliness, transition in feelings, coping with stress, significant experiences, etc. The data were collected using a semi structured interview, and was transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis.

Keywords: friendship, geographic proximity, parting, romantic partner.

1. Introduction

Human migration is a universal phenomenon, which has existed with the subsistence of human beings on Planet Earth (Jenkins, 2009). Some modern day factors influencing migration are job mobility, poverty, population pressure, environmental degradation, educational pursuits, depleting natural resources, development of transport and communication and marriage etc. The main aim behind migrating is improving life conditions. In addition to being a geographical and economic phenomenon, migration is also a social phenomenon which influences human life. Despite the fact that migration is undertaken for seeking better living conditions, it has often been found that

factors such as lack of preparedness, difficulties in adjusting to the new environment, complexity of the local system, language barriers and cultural disparities cause considerable distress to the migrants (Virupaksha et al., 2014).

According to a study conducted in South-east Asian countries, children whose parents had migrated to other countries were found to be less happy, had poor academic performance and resilience compared to children of non-migrant families (Jordan and Graham, 2012). The rate of net rural to urban migration has increased from 21.2 percent in 1991-01 to 24.1 percent in 2001-11 (Singh, 2016). The net result of this, especially when one member of a family migrates, is the emergence of Long Distance Relationship (LDR) which is met with differing views. Due to the rapid pace of life, many human relationships face varied experiences when either of the two people move away to another city or another country. While some researchers believe that LDRs tend to bring two people closer to one another and strengthen their relationship (Dargie et al., 2014), others are of the view that once out of sight, out of mind i.e. the relationship is bound to subsequently terminate (Stafford et al., 2006).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong, form and maintain lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human need. While some relationships are not as important to people, there are some relationships that are not only central to people's lives but are also the ones they are quite sensitive about. Given the significance of relationships like those with siblings, parents, romantic partners, best friends, people usually strive to foster these relationships, come what may. However, even extremely close relationships are put to test when there is a change in geographical proximity since there is no longer a daily interaction or a relatively less degree of interaction than before, for instance when close ones shift to another city.

While the person who shifts out has his or her own share of adjusting and adapting to deal with, the person who stays behind endures a range of emotions as well. The idea or the perception of not being able to see or reach out to that person at any time, takes the form of emotional outburst.

There are some closely linked concepts pertaining to relationships which provide framework for the nuanced study of how the bond between two people is impacted due to relocation of one of them. These are 'proximity,' 'geographic proximity,' 'physical distance' and 'parting'. While proximity refers to the nearness in time, space and relationship, geographic proximity refers to the nearness or closeness in distance. Physical distance, in the context of this study, refers to the geographic distance between two people that physically separates them from each other. The smaller the physical distance, the greater the probability that two people will come into repeated contact experiencing repeated exposure to one another, positive affect and the development of mutual attraction (Baron et al., 2012). Parting refers to the action of leaving or being separated from someone. Parting, in the context of the study however, primarily focuses on the separation between people that is based on mere physical distance between them and not the severance of the relationship. While there is abundant research on long distance relationships, the relatively sparse research on the psychological and emotional impact on people whose significant others shift to another city, has left room for further research.

It would be intriguing to fathom what the person who is left behind endures in terms of emotions, reactions, changes in routine activities and coping strategies in order to overcome the lack of physical presence of his or her significant other. Wendel (1975) studied the problems and practices of high school sweethearts in their first three months of separation in college i.e. the obstacles and challenges that had arisen as a result of the separation, how couples defined the nature of their commitment and their short-term and long-term hopes for continuing the relationship. The results indicated that the separation brought about two contradictory feelings, 1) a haunting feeling of separateness and distance and 2) a new trust in the strength of their relationship and partner. Females were twice as likely to report a new trust in their relationships while males were plagued with feelings of jealousy, fear and doubt. Most people, particularly those whose relationships were less than a year old, felt that overcoming the haunting feeling of separateness was the major obstacle to the success of their relationship. Firmin et al. (2014) carried out a study in which 16 in-depth

interviews of female sophomore students involved in long distance relationships were conducted. Results showed four themes relating to loneliness in LDRs. First, loneliness tends to be acute after seeing the boyfriend, around holidays, when their friends go on dates and on "bad" days. Second, loneliness tends to decrease when students are busy and when doing activities with local friends. Third, coping strategies include calling to talk and having other friends as their support-base. And finally, long distance relationships tend to generate "needy" tensions and give the relationship a highly perceived value.

Stafford and Merolla (2007) carried out two studies to explore the seeming paradox that, despite limited interaction, long distance dating relationships (LDDR) evidence greater relational stability than partners in geographically close dating relationships (GCDRs). Results indicated a greater existence of idealisation, as assessed by indices of idealistic distortion, romantic love, relational reminiscence and satisfaction with communication, in LDDR's than GCDR's. In the second study, a six-month longitudinal analysis, LDDR's were found to be more stable than GCDR's as long as LDDR partners remained separated. However, if LDDR partners transitioned to proximity during our investigation, they were prone to relational dissolution. It was also found that extreme levels of idealisation as well as more days in between face-to-face contact per month during geographic separation predicted relational instability upon reunion.

The objective of the present study is to gain an insight into the impact of shifting away of a significant person on people. There is a need to understand the kind of emotions, reactions, difficulties if any, changes in mood and behaviour that the person who is left behind experiences. The aim is to understand how people function when important people in their lives move away, how they deal with their absence, how they cope, how the perception of their relationship changes, how their routine activities are impacted, whether or not the quality of the relationship transforms, the pattern of communication and how they themselves change due to such a separation.

2. Methodology

The present study is a qualitative, exploratory research with an objective to understand and gain an insight into the experiences of those individuals whose significant other moves away. As the study involved subjective experiences that cannot be quantified, the qualitative paradigm was used to carry out the research. Due to the lack of existing literature, the study aimed to understand

people's subjective experiences. 6 participants aged between 19-26 years were selected purposively for the research. It was required for them to have experienced parting with their significant other within a period of 1 to 8 months. The participants were categorised into 3 categories on the basis of parting with their sibling, romantic partner or best friend. Each category had 2 participants, including one male and one female. Thus, there were 3 females and 3 males in all.

Keeping in mind the objective and nature of the research, a semi structured interview schedule was prepared with the help of a probe list. Probes were thus enlisted so as to tap all aspects of the participant's life that were relevant to the objective and the aim of the research. Interview as a method, is one of the most frequently used methods of social research, both within and outside social sciences. The interview schedule was planned in such a way that, it covered the transition of the relationship from the pre and post parting phase. The method has certain limitations such the inability to generalize the findings of the research to a wider population as each experience is unique and completely subjective to the individual. The participants were contacted and were given a brief about the interview. Both time and the place of meeting were pre decided and the participants were ensured anonymity and confidentiality. They were also made aware of the recording of the interview and were told about their right to leave the study at any point or choose to not answer a question. Next, the informed consent was signed by them. After an extensive rapport formation session, face to face interviews were conducted and recorded through a digital recorder. The interviews generally lasted for about an hour. Post the interview, the participants were thanked for being a part of the study. Each interview was transcribed, after which thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. In this approach, data is examined in order to identify relatively broad themes which summarise the content of the data. Exploration through thematic analysis consisted of categories or themes. Each interview was read carefully and important statements were marked and clubbed into codes for each category. The codes were combined and clubbed to form major themes. Sub-themes were also created and exemplars were added.

3. Results and Discussion

Using thematic analysis, the data gathered was organised in the form of themes, sub-themes, codes and verbatim statements supporting the same. The themes were generated after careful review of the interview transcripts. The important statements in the data were highlighted and organised to form codes after which they were clubbed together to form an umbrella theme. Different aspects

such as the nature of the relationship, communication levels, and the nature of the bond before parting, subsequently the transition in the relationship, significant experiences and prominent feelings were also explored. The attitudes, ideas, feelings and experiences of the participants was also analysed.

3.1 Category: 1 Close Friend

Conceptualisation of Ideal Friend: In forming and maintaining friendships, individuals develop expectations about how friends ought to be and ought to behave (La Gaipa, 1987). Friendship expectations are defined as cognitive conceptualisations about attributes individuals would like their friends to possess and behaviours individuals would like their friends to enact (Hall, 2011). The participants wished for a concerned, affectionate and altruistic friend; one who wishes the best for them and one who shows genuine affection. They talked about friends who are always there by their side, ones who guide them in times both good and bad, who provide their non-partisan opinions, who correct them when they make errors and ones who are selfless. They state that, "...someone who is always there for you" and "...criticise you if you've done something wrong but supporting you no matter what." Roberts-Griffin (2011) found that 43% of the participants who were born outside the USA and about 46% of those born in the USA chose "supportiveness" as the most desired quality in a friend. A true friend is never apprehensive of giving a wakeup call whenever he or she deems fit, particularly in an intricate situation. An ideal friend is also one who is always on the forefront to meet out help without being consumed merely by his or her own problems.

Growth in Relationship: While friendships often progress through different stages and may sometimes fall to pieces, participants reported an invigorated friendship due to varied reasons. According to social penetration theory, a group of people will share greater information with one another, or self-disclose with passing time (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Initially starting with an exchange of pleasantries, the frequency of conversations increased to daily communication entailing mutual exchange of likes and dislikes, opinions about people, personal predicaments and subsequently meaningful guidance and support followed. The net result was a deep rooted friendship, a keen affinity. Not just increased communication but also consistent communication bolstered the participants' friendship. Thus, communication can be considered tantamount to an infallible friendship. This can be verified by other studies as well. For example, Roberts-Griffin (2011) found that 50% of US born participants attached importance to

communication in extremely close friendships. One participant informed that assistance given to him by his best friend at a crucial juncture strengthened their association. The eminent philosopher Aristotle had noted, “In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge.” The perturbed friend will thus be invariably be succoured by his or her true friend. This can also be substantiated by similar studies. For example, Tanner (2015) found that out of 75% of employees studied, the ones who had a best friend at work felt they were able to “take anything on.”

Elements of Friendship: For both the participants, their friendship had an extremely strong substructure. This included getting along extremely well which led to an earnest attachment, belief that their best friends will always be there for them, prominent self-disclosure, heightened primacy of their best friends in their lives, unflinching trust, frequent interactions before parting and numerous activities done together. There is a very upfront acknowledgement of the level of friendship. In situations where participants felt like speaking about something, their best friends were always the first ones they would call up and these best friends were in fact the only ones with whom certain information could be divulged. In the participants’ friendship there is a very notable element of trust and both of them reposed immense faith and trust in their best friends because of which self-disclosure became an uninhibited convention. It is already known that Trust allows us to feel safe with friends (Brassert and Tamari, 2014). Strong friendship invariably paves way for mutually shared activities such as going out for movies, for shopping and visiting new restaurants.

Prominent Feelings of Sadness, Loneliness and Reminiscence: When participants learned about the impending shifting away of their best friends to cities different than their own, they experienced mixed emotions. On the one hand they were happy for their friends since they were shifting for educational purposes and on the other hand they were crestfallen and felt bad for themselves. After the participants experienced parting, they acknowledged feeling their best friends’ absence. They experienced a changed scenario and felt that usual things seemed different without their best friends. Seemingly unimportant things also paved way for heightened nostalgia. The participants experienced emotional loneliness which seems to be tied to the absence of an intimate friend (Green, 2001) along with transitional loneliness which occurs when people who have had satisfying social relationships in the past become lonely after experiencing a disruption in their social network (Young, 1982). The fact that the participants say

that, “everybody was crying and it was really sad...” stands testimony to the fact that shifting away of a best friend is an inordinately painful experience. The participants reported feeling not only extremely melancholic but also a sense of loneliness.

Coping Strategies: While dealing with the absence of their best friends, the participants used selective but a variety of different coping strategies. Even with a large menu of coping tactics to choose from, most people come to rely on some strategies more than others (Carver and Scheier, 1994). The participants admitted to having other friends from school to whom they were equally close as the best friend who shifted out and with whom they could hang out or vent out emotions; these friends were frequently called upon either on phone or in person to fill that void. Problem-focused coping targets the causes of stress in practical ways which tackles the problem or stressful situation that is causing stress, consequently directly reducing the stress (McLeod, 2015). The participants took to problem focused coping wherein participant 3 aimed to keep his mind diverted or occupied so as to avoid being idle and end up thinking about his best friend. Participant 4 convinced herself into believing that only a physical distance exists but she could continue communicating, taking advice, sharing her deepest thoughts and opinions just like before. A transition of the degree of emotions felt was also found in both the participants. In light of this, they reported a systematic decline in their feelings of sadness and loneliness after roughly two weeks of parting. They reported that it was in the first week that they experienced exponential despondence and loneliness but with time they felt much more accustomed to a life without the immediate, physical presence of their best friends. The process of coping with the ramifications of parting progresses through stages, beginning with denial and ending or stabilising of emotions with acceptance (Jones, 2017).

Optimism about Friendship: There is an overriding belief in the participants that their degree of attachment will not reduce over time as a result of distance. Participant 3 believes very firmly that although their friendship will remain intact, he anticipates a decline in communication for the period that his friend will be away. Even participant 4 is quite positive about the future of her friendship with her best friend. A part of why both the participants are so optimistic about their friendship remaining unblemished in standing the test of time is because of this deep rooted faith their friends will constantly be there for them no matter what. Participant 4 also has a sense of security on account of assured communication.

Gender Differences in Experience of Friendship: Significant differences in the dynamics of friendship between males and females emerged from the data. While the female participant emphasised more on talking on the phone and sharing feelings and emotions, the male participant said that he missed his best friend more when he thought of doing activities that two previously did together. It is already known that women's friendships are more often emotionally based, whereas men's tend to be activity based (Weiten and Lloyd, 2006).

3.2 Category: 2 Siblings

Guiding Relationship Embodying Care and Protection: The sibling relationship is one of the most enduring relationships in life as it is consistently a part of our lives right from childhood to adulthood. In this long span of time, siblings tend to play a variety of roles and responsibilities integrated with various emotions such as love, care, protection and jealousy. Often elder siblings become a source of inspiration and many a times younger siblings tend to follow their footsteps to become "like them". According to a study conducted by Howe and Recchia (2014), "First-born siblings engage in leadership, teaching, caregiving and helping roles, whereas second-born siblings are more likely to imitate, follow, be a learner and elicit care and help". These findings collaborate with the experiences of the participants, as can be depicted by their childhood and adult experiences with their siblings such as those described in the form of a relationship that is "guiding", "caring," "protective" and "loving". A similar understanding of their relationship with their siblings was provided by the participants, they perceived their nature to be contrary or completely opposite to that of their sibling. Participant 5 described that while she was expressive about her emotions towards her sister, her sister is very emotionally inexpressive. Similarly, participant 6 described how he was by nature very irresponsible and his sister would be taking care of everything in the house and used to take all the responsibilities. The research findings are consistent with the idea that siblings serve as role models (Brim, 1958).

Apprehensive and Emotional Period Immediately Before Parting: The theme largely looks at the experiences of those individuals whose sibling is going to move away, and subsequently captures the minute emotions and feelings such as sadness and guilt. Participants experienced significant emotional experiences of sadness before the period of parting. For Participant 5, it was in the form of an emotional moment of expressing her feelings towards her sister and for Participant 6 it was in the moment of packing his sister's luggage. A prominent emotion, related to parting and changes in relationships is

fear. Due to the anticipation about the future prospects after parting the participants reported being scared of the upcoming responsibilities and the possible future dynamics of being alone with parents. Participant 5 expressed her extreme fear of being alone with her parents while participant 6 expressed the fear he had of being the sole child in the house after his sister would move away and was scared of the increase in his responsibilities after the change would occur. Apprehensions and anxiety were also reported by the participants as one of the prominent feelings of the experience they had immediately before parting. When a significant person who plays an integral part of our life moves away from us, apprehensions could stem out of not only the future of the relationship but also as a concern for the parents. Participant 5 expressed that she felt apprehensive and anxious over how the future of the relationship with her sibling would turn out to be while Participant 6 expressed his anxieties by recalling how he used to feel worried for his mother, so as to how she would cope with the parting.

Significant Impact of Parting: When a significant person with whom we have a close and frequent interaction moves away, it affects various aspects of our lives. For the participants, changes were perceived in self, in parents, in the atmosphere of the house, relationship with sibling. The participants used positive coping strategies to deal with them. It is common for younger siblings to be dependent on older siblings for certain things and in case of the participants, parting with siblings brought about positive changes. While Participant 5 felt that parting had made her stronger emotionally, participant 6 felt that he had started taking more responsibility and also takes care of his parents. Having past experience equips a person to deal with a problem in a more effective manner. Similarly Participant 6 had a past experience of parting with his eldest sister which made him feel that he was prepared for this change and remained positive. Participant 5 experienced such a change for the first time and was quite sad and stated, "but I did feel like she was abandoning me and stuff..." However she expressed that she would feel better with time. Participant 5 felt "isolated" and "abandoned", while Participant 6 felt a feeling of "emptiness" and reported that it was impacting him and "hitting him hard". Participants also reported significant feelings of missing their siblings in various situations, especially social gatherings. Siblings also noted a change in atmosphere of the house post parting. While Participant 6 said that the house atmosphere had become boring and less lively, Participant 5 found a positive change in the atmosphere. White (2001) found that getting married and having children decreased sibling contact and exchange among siblings. Both participants reported a decrease in

conversations which were confined to catching up and keeping a check on each other's lives after parting. Both participants reported having a strong support system from friends that helped them to cope with the feelings produced due to the parting.

3.3 Category: 3 Romantic Partners

Nature of Relationship: Furman and Burhmester (1992) found that "college-aged males identified romantic relationships as their most supportive relationship, while college-aged females reported that romantic relationships were among their most supportive relationships, in addition to those with mothers and same-sex best friends". Participant 2 reported awkwardness and apprehensions about making a conversation during personal interactions and reported being more comfortable in interacting through means of texting and phone calls. Participant 1 talked about how due to difference in routines and schedules, personal interactions were not possible often. Inherently, both the participants did not feel a need for constant interactions with their romantic partners. Participant 1 felt that repeated dealings with people at his workplace will deteriorate his communication skills, particularly with his significant other. He also mentioned feeling a sense of obligation to talk to his girlfriend every day. On the other hand, Participant 2 complained about her partner's need for constant interaction and felt burdened by it. Participants also reported their fondness for their partners while describing their physical attributes, personal values and the positive impact of communicating with them. It is known that unlike relationships with peers, romantic partners engage in distinct patterns of interaction that may be higher in conflict than in other relationships (Collins et al., 2009). The key to a healthy relationship is to deal effectively with problems. Participant 1 spoke about how he tried to avoid conversations in order to prevent a fight and Participant 2 reported talking to her boyfriend and finding compromising as a way of preventing tiffs. Trust in a relationship is not only essential for growth but also for understanding the other person better. For both the participants, trust was an important component of their relationship. However, the participants did report some level of insecurity towards their partners.

Impact on Conversations and Prominent Feelings of Missing Partner: Post-parting, participants acknowledged having less topics to talk about. As compared to previous conversations over the phone, they would often run out of topics and would feel blank. There was heightened reminiscence in situations and activities that the participants did with their romantic partners or if these activities were related to their romantic partners.

Therefore, there are certain instances that increase the remembrance of partners.

Emotionally Inexpressive but Desires Care: Participants felt that the sadness they experience because of moving away of their partner, is something that they deal with themselves. This is to say that they do not necessarily require external intervention or support from other friends to cope with loneliness, sadness or emptiness and they feel, "Yeah i do deal with it myself." Owing to this emotional self-sufficiency, they also refrain from sharing their feelings vis-a-vis missing their partners to other friends and try to put up a bold front. The female participant noted, "...I don't really... tell anyone that I miss him." Having a concerned and caring partner is something that both the partners value. Lebowitz (2014) stated that when partners listen to each other, talk, ask questions about their opinions and convey that they understand each other, relationships become better. They desire a partner who will love and understand them and they feel that: "I really appreciate caring people, caring girls, caring guys so in guys that's obviously a very attracting factor...truthfulness, honesty uhh calm behaviour, caring behaviour and sensitive people...."

4. Conclusion

Through this study, we were able to assess the emotional reactions, feelings and experiences that participants endured as result of parting. Participants in the category of Siblings shared a warm, affectionate and a nurturing relationship. Before parting, experiences of the participants revolved largely around feelings of apprehension, fear of future responsibilities, shared activities and the memorable experiences. Post parting, a change in the atmosphere of the house and positive changes in self were noticed by them. Despite declined communication, there was an assurance of the availability of siblings in times of need. In the category of Friends, it was noted that the participants' friendship with their respective friends had strengthened over time which was attributed to mutual trust and frequent communication. Post parting, participants experienced mixed emotions and strongly felt the absence of their friends. With time however, they began adjusting to the reality. To cope with loneliness and sadness, participants took to problem focused coping. In the category of Romantic Partners, both the participants felt apprehensive and awkward in face to face conversations with their partners and expressed their comfort in talking over the phone or messaging. They did not feel the need for constant interaction with their partners. Trust being an important component of their respective relationships, both the participants felt that concern and care were two very

important things in an ideal relationship. However, post parting they felt that they had difficulty in maintaining a conversation. They also coped with sadness and loneliness by themselves. The study could have benefitted from a larger sample study. However, due to time constraints and intricate requirements of the sample, there was difficulty in finding participants and only 6 participants could be interviewed. Owing to the hectic schedules of the participants, 2-3 pre interview meetings could not be arranged in order to establish a sound rapport. There is a paucity of available literature on the said research problem. The experiences of only young people were studied in this research which could be significantly different from older or younger people.

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