

Work Migrants: Some Positive Implications for the Enhancement of the Self

Amit Helper

Ashkelon Academic College. School of Social Work, Ashkelon, Israel

Noga Levine Keini

Ashkelon Academic College. School of Social Work, Ashkelon, Israel

ORCID: 0000-0002-8292-5255

ABSTRACT

The self is the core of the personality and the more it becomes well established the more it will generate a sense of heightened self-esteem. In this article we will suggest that the self is a complex and multi-faceted organization. This is particularly relevant to the sphere and experience of work migrants in their work migration. Their experience is such that they often find themselves in strange and unfamiliar circumstances that are frequently lonely and anxiety-inducing. In this article we will focus on and explore the multi-faceted self, based on the findings of in-depth interviews of 28 work migrants who came to Israel from India, Nepal and the Philippines. We will examine the varied states of self that evolved from the complex experiences of work migration. This conceptualization is drawn from object relations theories and those of relational theorists regarding the self.

Key words: Immigrants, Self, Feminist, Self Esteem, Mothers.

INTRODUCTION

The self is the core of the personality and represents the nucleus of the mental structure of a person. A cohesive consolidated self provides a person with a sense of mental health and positive self-esteem. This self-esteem derives from a basic sense of cohesivity in which the various parts of the self are interconnected, interrelated and are integrated with each other. When the sense of cohesivity is lacking and self-esteem is absent or impaired, there is a danger of fragmentation of the self into separate parts. In such situations the boundaries of the person become porous, and they experience a lack of energy and even an absence of internal balance.

Work migration from third to first world countries is inherently stressful. The work migrant is forced to cope with a new culture, new customs, a foreign language, different ways of life, being on the margin of a society, endangered by exploitative employers and of course, being distant from their families of origin and their children. These multiple stressors include numerous difficult challenges which may injure and disrupt the organization of the self and its stability. The self in such circumstances must discover novel ways of coping, in order to preserve its sense of internal cohesivity. If this is not possible, then work migrants may lose their sense of self-worth, and their strengths will dwindle and they will become deficient of their internal balance.

THE SELF ACCORDING TO VARIOUS PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACHES

Ronald Fairbairn

Fairbairn (1958) differently from Freud, contended that libidinal activity is inherently and primarily object-seeking, rather than pleasure-seeking. The dramatic shift in his viewpoint from the classical viewpoint, lies in his main understanding that a person's motivation is not towards libidinal release (Freud) but towards the seeking out of an attachment to another. The other, and the attachment towards them becomes the center of thought and psychoanalytic exploration. All the events that characterize the building of the various mental structures involve relationships and connections to others. Consequently, the essence of change in psychotherapy, towards which we endeavor, lies in relationships. Accordingly, the transition was made from the psychoanalytic focus on the instincts to the individual's experience in relation to their others.

Object relation theorists, claim a variety of versions of the self, one libidinal that attaches itself to an object in order to receive love, and the other which is anti-libidinal that becomes attached to a rejecting object. This contribution of object relations advanced the conception that the self is multifaceted, a view that is prevalent among relational psychoanalysts.

Heinz Kohut

Kohut claimed that the self is a concept that is undefinable, but what is definable is the identifiable phenomena that gave birth to its needs (Kohut, 1984). The self relates to the personality as a whole, to all mental functioning, to the bodily self and to the person's representations of themselves. The self serves the experience of continuity, the cohesivity of the mind and its development (Oppenheimer, 2000)

Kohut emphasizes the importance and centrality of the person's relationships with the other with regard to the development of pathology and consequent disruption of the person's experience of their self. The conception of self, according to Kohut is the personality's integration alongside and by means of experience. For further development and the acquisition of experience of the self, a previous experience of the "other" is essential. The prior initial interactions with the other that enable the establishment of the self, are the interactions with objects that previously responded in an attuned way towards the needs of the developing individual, which thereby provided for their mental and physical needs. According to Kohut, this evolves when the individual internalizes and introjects the functions of the "other" and then transforms them internally into stable, sustainable and flexible functions.

Thus, in Psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the focus lies on the weakened self and responsiveness and attunement to its needs which were deprived and frustrated in the past. This kind of attunement and responsiveness will strengthen the self (Kohut, 1984)

Both approaches, that of object-relations and the approach of Kohut, created a bipolar space and focus, according to which the focus may be seen to move between the individual (Self Psychology) and between their relations to the other (Object Relations). Within such a space, both the subjective and the objective resonate productively and creatively.

The Relational Approach

Relational adherents contend that the relationship of a person to the other is the central factor that drives the central experiences of the individual. The development of the self therefore, always involves the creation of the self and not its exposure as contended by the Kohutians. The observing other, in their relation to the individual, defines, demarcates and circumscribes the self of the individual for themselves. Consequently, the need for the other precedes the creation of the self. What may be understood from this is that the experience of the person of their self is built only through interactions with the other and in their relationships and attitudes towards them.

The Relational group contend that multiple self-states co-exist in a person (Mitchell, 1999). This contrasts with the perception of the Kohutians who view in the self as a nuclear and continuous structure. Mitchell contends (1999) that early interactions with significant "others" create various differing self-structures. All those various self-states include elements that are cognitive, emotional, instinctual and behavioral and they are colored with different values. These elements are organized around significant points of specific reference to others. These different self-structures maintain connections one with one another. At times they appear in parallel and at times they might become conflictual.

Even though a person experiences continuity, this continuity according to Mitchell, may be illusory. Nonetheless, this sense of continuity, aids us in adapting, choosing and reaching our objectives, and thereby directs our activity (Mitchell & Aaron, 1999)

The perception of the concept of the self has changed in modern psychoanalysis, even though these perceptions differ between the various theoreticians. The perception has essentially changed from perception of the self as unitary, multi-layered, integrated and continuous in time, towards a perception of the self as multiple and even discontinuous. According to this latter perception, a kaleidoscopic metaphor is proposed. Looking through the lens of the kaleidoscope, and while working around its axis, a broad variety of forms appear simultaneously and change with the movement around its axis. This being similar and alike the human self.

Winnicott

Winnicott presents two contrasting and different paths for the development of the self (Winnicott, 1957). The first is based on the ability of the "good-enough" mother, in virtue of her primary maternal preoccupation, to respond to the spontaneous gestures of the infant and child, and to respond towards them with empathy and to bestow on those experiences meaning, by means of her facial expressions and later verbally. This process leads to the deep recognition by the child of their self and true unique individual characteristics around which their self becomes established and crystallizes.

The second path in the development of the self is that which is built on the failure of the process of finding personal and subjective meaning. When the mother has difficulty in attuning herself to the needs of the child in a "good-enough" manner, similar to the inability of the mother and family to meet the child in the emotional place in which he is currently located, their expectations for submission, his becoming a "good boy" according to accepted social norms, are those that drive the child. Wanting to survive – he responds with submissive adaptation, with

pleasing acquiescence and the development of a false self. The false-self, evades and rejects this reality until a sufficiently nourishing environment is discovered in which development can be renewed. This process is a historical product of the maternal failure that disrupted and impeded the developmental growth (Berman, 2009).

This description of the two extremities enables the recognition of the existence of the defensive structure of the false self, to a greater or lesser degree, a defense that moves in the range between the heathy and mannered self and the false self, that pleases, is split and is distant and is seen erroneously as the whole child. Winnicott illustrates the normal view with that of teaching of a young child good manners. One hopes that the child will learn to adjust themselves to the accepted norms of behavior in society to the required degree, in order that their life will be tolerable, and this becomes a part of the price of socialization. But there are children that are never able to accomplish this, perhaps because someone tried to teach them to say “thank you” from a too early age. And they prefer and choose not to be socially accepted rather than to lie (Winnicott, 1957; Philips, 1999; Kolker, 2003)

Migrant workers experience emotional, social and cultural dislocation and turmoil on arriving in the many countries absorbing them. They experience turmoil while alone, without their supportive families. From the interviews it appears that most migrant workers report on difficulties that they experience around work migration.

Each of them, must search for and discover inside themselves their particular and unique resources, in order to flexibly adjust and cope with the complex new reality of work migration. We examined these difficulties along several criteria:

THE EXPERIENCE OF LONGING, YEARNINGS AND DIFFICULTY

All the interviewees spoke of their longing for family, yearning for their children, their husbands, their country of origin, their familiar known culture.

How did their self organization adapt to this challenging experience?

There were interviewees that turned to the practice of inner suggestion and conviction by means of which they persuaded themselves of the importance of the step they took on behalf of their whole family, and thereby transformed themselves into some kind of heroine that is saving their home and family.

Lucy, a work migrant from India

“It is very difficult, but there is no alternative. This is life and if I want to advance, one has to work very hard. Later things will improve”

Others viewed work migration as an altruistic act that they chose to do for the sake of someone else close to themselves, and not only for their own benefit.

Levina, a work migrant from India

“It is difficult for them now .. My son is very sad about his father .. He cries a lot. My sister shares this with me and I try to help him. My sister is very concerned about him and she takes care of him...He loves her very much. Sure it is difficult and I wish I was there with him but for the moment it's not possible and it's not that we really have an alternative..”

Both illustrations illustrate the strengthening of the self-organization in the work migrants, by the strengthening of their own self representations and their foundations. The work migrants bestow much value on the work migration in their viewing it, as a critical life-changing event.

Present absence in family life

"We (Mother and daughters) constantly are in conversation, I talk with them daily ... They are no longer babies and so they can converse with me.. they are able to share with me . they actually share everything with me .. Even though I am not beside them, I know when they return from school and even what they ate ...(laughs) Yes, yes I talk with them daily .. I know that they are feeling well and I know that they are okay... "

Bessie, a work migrant from India

"Today there is no school (Saturday) and my son is riding his bike and my daughter is watching television. Even though I am here, I am updated. I know everything... I know everything that is going on at home..."

While at a great physical distance, they are nevertheless involved emotionally in the management and daily functioning of the distant family. The physical distance between them and their families, obligates the work migrants to contain and hold/manage? complex mental situations. On the one hand, they are distanced physically while on the other hand they are involved in every detail of their family's life. Such situations create tensions for the work migrants and each resolves them in their unique way. This paradox obliges the self of each and every woman, to be more flexible, to solve problems and to manage both poles of the situation.

AMBIVALENCE INTRINSIC TO THE DECISION TO BECOME A WORK MIGRANT

In all interviewees, The decision to choose work migration was accompanied with considerable hesitation. All interviewees are mothers to children, some of young ages, and their absence had involved much and considerable pain, over the years. On the other hand, the wish to bestow on their families and children a future with housing, higher education, a higher living standard and wellbeing was very enticing for them. Ambivalence is always a complex mental state, in which a person needs to accept the fact that no solution is perfect. Acceptance and life alongside ambivalence matures and strengthens the mental organization because of the use of splitting: It is as if all is either black or white and it serves as a primal defense. Thereby the self of the migrating mother is strengthened as it exists in a complex ambivalent state.

Erina, a work migrant from Nepal

"I do not want my daughter to be in my situation and to do the same as I am doing. To travel far in order to work and not to be able to see her family when she wishes to. It is so difficult, and I would not want this for her. I would like her to study, and then she will be free to do as she wishes in life."

"It is difficult for me. I am fortunate to have good and successful children. The important thing is that they are able to enjoy life."

The feeling of victimhood rather than a sense of empowerment and self-esteem

The decision to choose work migrancy demands a very heavy price on the part of the migrant mother. It is natural to believe that in such a situation, feelings of victimhood will arise.

Serena, a migrant worker from Nepal

"I explained to my daughters that I am doing this for them. They understand. We wish to build a house and that is for my daughters. To enable us to live a good life, to study and so that they are able to enjoy a good standard of living."

Shelna, a work migrant from India

"I wouldn't want my daughter to do what I do. I am not able to see how she is growing up and I am not with her. I do this for her future, so that her future will be better and that she will be able to go to college and to study for a good profession and that thereby she will have work and money."

Alongside the sense of victimhood, the status of the migrant worker is much enhanced because of their important contribution to the welfare of their family. Similarly their self-image and feelings of self-worth are much enhanced, because of their central position in the extended family, who all are beneficiaries of the fruits of their labor.

Even according to this measure, the complexity of the mental state of the migrant mother is noteworthy, as she is forced to hover between the two given poles: the sense of being a victim and the sense of being a savior. As mentioned in the previous measure, the capacity to contain both of these poles in the self of the migrant mother and to function on a very high level, strengthens and crystallizes their internal self organization.

Accepting responsibility, the associated pride and acquiring western life-skills

Many interviewees expressed the sense of pride that they are "responsible elders" for the whole families. Some even mentioned their spouses who were provided insufficient or no financial support. They also mentioned that because of their work migration they spearheaded the acquisition of skills in western culture. Professional literature bears witness that work migration is advantageous for migrants, technologically and culture-wise on their return to their countries of origin (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991; Parrenas, 2005; Hochschild, 2006; Hondanyo-Sutlo, 2006; Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018; Zhu, 2020).

Work migrants become cultural messengers that challenge their abilities and develop their talents in many ways.

Valery, a work migrant from Nepal

"Israel is beautiful and modern. When I had vacation I travelled friends and visited Jerusalem and Haifa... I very much enjoyed to see and to discover. It is very different from Nepal since by us, everything is different. In Israel there is progress, with everything computerized, and based on a stable fast internet and I learned to manage with all of that".

To accept responsibility and to enjoy pride in acquiring skills of western life, strengthens the self-image and sense of competence and clearly then, the core of their personalities.

Female Financial Independence

All interviewees noted their new enhanced higher status in their families, that they acquired by their monthly transfer of money. In addition, they showered their children with gifts as they themselves saw fit (Mohatny, 1997; Uy-Tioco, 2007; Lockwood, Smith & Karpenko-Seccombe,

2009). This comprises a totally new position for a migrant worker, whose family of origin is of patriarchal structure. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2006) coined this "the international gender reversal". The work migrant is not dependent or reliant of any male. The experience of financial independence strengthens very much, the self-esteem of the migrant woman, and bestows on her a sense of power, superiority, independence and self-confidence.

Anna, a work migrant from the Philippines

"We roam the city, see something beautiful and I always buy it and send it to my daughter. I enjoy the ability to do that. I send money back every month and I work hard so that this may happen. I almost never take a holiday"

Mina, a work migrant from Nepal

"My husband was completely against it and so I spoke with his father and requested he explain to him. My husband is in Katmandu, where males do nothing, men are men. Only woman work. I constantly tell my husband to come... Why doesn't he come?(She laughs) He is lazy.. He doesn't want to work"

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Migrant workers encounter challenging and stressful situations and consequently, they need to adjust and adapt themselves and their inner resources to these demanding circumstances. These challenges, demand flexibility, adjustment, new forms of coping by their selves, and if they are not able to, they will not survive the new situations.

The relational theories contend that multiple self-states exist in a person, which is clearly in contrast to the Kohutian views that see the self as nuclear and continuous. The literature reports that most work migrants manage to complete at least one period of visa employment, which is granted for five years (Kemp & Kfir, 2012, Population and Immigration Authority); This fact supports the view that the self is a flexible structure, adapts and has multiple states. This research illustrates that the self is a dynamic organization and is certainly not static. The self develops, changes and is flexible.

In reasonable conditions, if such exist, there is a good chance that migrant workers are able to grow personality-wise and to become stronger.

Further research is necessary to explore the new status that work migrants experience, on their return to their countries of origin. This is in view of the personality changes they undergo as work migrants.

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