**Emotional connectedness to home for Ghanaian students in the UK**

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**ABSTRACT**

Ghanaian migrants represent one of the largest Black African groups in the UK. While viewed positively in terms of economic and educational success, migration has impacts on emotional attachments. The aim of this study was therefore to explore narrative expressions of belonging and emotional connectedness for Ghanaian university students in the UK. Nine Ghanaian students took part in one of two focus group interviews. A narrative analysis revealed stories of separation, emotional belonging, meaningful connectedness and disconnections. Connections were made to the homeland through Ghanaian food, clothing, language, religion, and communication with significant persons. Stories of disconnection were related to isolation and a sense of not belonging. Recommendations are made for therapist training, culturally sensitive university environments, and further research.

According to the UK Office for National Statistics (c.2013), most of the Ghanaian migrants to the UK are between25 and 55 years of age, with approximately seven per cent of the 30 year old UK population having been born in Ghana and / or holding Ghanaian passports. This age banding is consistent with post-graduate study and career moves abroad; many Ghanaian families recognize migration to the West as *wayeyie[[1]](#endnote-1)* (one has become successful) in terms of secure economic, educational and social status (van Dijk, 2002).

The motivation for this research arose from the fact that the first author is a Ghanaian who migrated to the UK to work and study, following her two sons’ migration to the UK for their higher education. This resulted in separation from her daughter, husband and extended family. The second author, who is British, supervised the research reported here and is herself separated from family members who have migrated from the UK. Each of the two authors experiences a sense of longing that can be understood in terms of attachment theory, and specifically adult emotional attachments (Bowlby, 1969). However, this theory was developed in the UK, by a white, middle class man with later involvement of white, middle class women including Ainsworth and Main. Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie & Uchida (2002) argue that not all cultures place the same value on the expected characteristics of what Bowlby (1969) describes as a secure attachment pattern; the concepts and principles of attachment theory cannot therefore be taken to be culturally universal.

Arnold (2006) interviewed 20 women whose mothers had left them in the Caribbean to move to the UK as economic migrants during the 1950s through to the 1970s. Despite later reunion, all of her participants expressed difficulties in trusting others, and all longed for the love of their mother, feeling less wanted than children born in the UK. However, the women also attributed their psychological resilience to early memories of being loved by their mothers, suggesting a greater complexity to attachment relationships than that explored by Bowlby and his colleagues, including the importance of both early and later life narratives in the development of complex and sometimes contradictory attachment patterns.

In order to understand the cultural complexity of adult affective relationships associated with migration, therefore, we extended our theoretical referents and turned to the social science concept of belonging. Belonging is an ill defined concept but describes ‘a set of processes that are central to the way in which human relationships are conducted’ (Skrbiš, Baldassar and Poynting, 2007, p. 261). Skrbiš et al argue that the attention paid by the research community to issues of settlement focussed on second generation populations has neglected the migrant’s continued interaction with the homeland. They suggest that migrants often adopt multiple identities associated with attendant practices of belonging, meaning the things people do that reinforce their sense of belonging to a particular social group; these practices are performed in certain social spaces like the home, church or university. As Skrbiš (2008) points out, such practices are also imbued with emotions.

Migration, Skrbiš (2008, p. 236) reminds us, is ‘a process that dissociates individuals from their family and friendship networks, as well as from other socially significant reference that have strong emotional connotations.’ These referents include landscapes, sacred spaces and objects, everyday routines and practices, and language. In addition, he points out that emotional labour forms part of the attempt to maintain connection to homeland and kin, but claims that embodied co-presence is a sought-after goal, characterised by a longing for physical contact. Importantly, he suggests that those left behind are also what he calls ‘non-migrant’ or ‘local transnationals’ (p. 238).

**Separation and connection in the migrant experience**

Svasek (2010) also emphasises the importance of focussing on emotional dimensions of migration, which Skrbiš (2008) suggests has been lacking until recently in the discourse of much migration research. Despite the perceived assurance of becoming more economically and educationally secure when one migrates from an emerging economy to a more developed economy, the process of migration has significant effects on individuals and families (Falicov, 2005; Owusu, 2000). For example a country’s immigration policies and economic status of individuals and families determine who migrates and who is left behind; the process does not always take place at the same time for the whole family (Erel, 2002). The question of who constitutes the whole family is not unequivocal according to Van Dalen, Groenewold, and Schoorl (2004) for it is dependent on how *abusua[[2]](#endnote-2)* (the family) is made up; usually in Ghana the extended family of one’s lineage may be perceived as the whole family, which may be at odds with immigration policy.

Migration always involves separation (Riccio, 2008; Falicov, 2007; Silver, 2006; Parreñas, 2005), of the migrating person or unit from extended family relationships (Mazzucato, 2008; Falicov, 2007; Silver 2006; Pribilsky, 2001). The effect such separation has on family members can be profound (Navara and Lollis, 2009; Skrbiš, 2008; Falicov, 2007; van Dalen et al, 2004), including impacts on emotional attachment (Svasek, 2010). The result may be a sense of non fulfilment, surrogate attachments, or a redefinition of identities and roles of both the immigrating and extended families (Mensah, 2008; Anarfi, Kwankye, Ababio and Tiemoko, 2003; Owusu, 2000, 1999). The distress of separation could precipitate or aggravate symptoms such as depression or anxiety for separated family members (Falicov, 2007; Pribilsky, 2001).

Mitigating against this risk to mental health is the fact that modern migrants are able to stay connected with their families and homelands through a range of communication technologies (Falicov, 2007). Intense meaningful connections may be conducted at long distance, but these connections differ in important ways from connections in families who live their lives in situ. Autoethnographic[[3]](#endnote-3) research by Meekums (2010) suggests that the emotions associated with geographical separation may be concealed from loved ones in order to protect them. Her research was conducted in a British family; arguably, given the Ghanaian tendency towards understatement the pain of separation associated with migration is likely to be borne alone by migrating individuals whose preferred modus operandi is one of collectivism. The experience of holding links to the homeland, family and culture at the same time as developing new links with the host country may bring about the ambiguities of living with ‘two hearts’ (Falicov, 2007, p. 158) in which one heart is connected to the homeland and the other to the host society (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Falicov, 2005; Posada et al., 2002). The metaphor of living with two hearts evokes some of the complex web of meaningful connections that can develop through the experience of migration.

Tilbury (2009) points to those dimensions of self, values and beliefs that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment. Attachment to place often forms an important part of the development of the individual’s identity, leading to Bogac’s( 2009). suggestion that movement from the place of attachment to a new location may be associated with a distressing sense of loss of place, which may be experienced as a longing for the homeland.

Horton (1981) suggests that whenever adults are faced with a sense of loss, they call upon some object or beliefs which allow them to find their emotional bearings and enable them face challenges. He calls these ‘solace objects’ and likens them to transitional objects (Winnicott, 1971 / 1985). A transitional object (TO) is a multisensory component which for the infant acts as a useful replacement for the primary attachment figure and a defence against anxiety. For children, these objects can typically be a teddy bear or special blanket. For adults, the TO could take the form of religious practice, music, poetry, country, or language. According to Whorf, (1964) language is a vital tool in the formation and maintenance of friendships and cultural ties, shaping identities and a sense of belonging. In other words, it is a symbol of solidarity that helps maintain feelings of cultural connection and kinship. It is also possible to relate transitionally to people such as ministers or priests (Horton, 1981). Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2009) and Mensah (2008) highlight the use of religion and language by migrantsas powerful objects of identity and emotional connection. Migrants thus construct their belonging to home, roots and motherland (Fortier, 2000) through their connections to religion, place, persons, language and artefacts (Bogac, 2009; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009; Mensah, 2008; Kryzanowski & Wodak, 2007). These form meaningful points of reference for their identities, belonging and the on-going struggle to become or belong (Kryzanowski & Wodak, 2007; Tilbury, 2007). For migrants, the lived experience of belonging and identities is often marked by narratives of sadness and loss, and the search for new identities and belongings (Kryzanowski & Wodak, 2007; Tilbury, 2007).

**Emerging research questions**

Despite a growing body of research concerning the emotional aspects of migration, there is little information about how Ghanaian migrants relate and cope emotionally when separated from their known culture through the decision to study in the UK. The present study was designed to address this identified gap in the literature.

Ghanaian adults seeking a better life in the West (van Dijk, 2002) can face the dilemma of living with ‘two hearts’, creating new attachment strategies similar to Western culture in order to belong, yet at the same time strive not to become engulfed in Western patterns in order to maintain their own; however, there is little research about how this is performed and experienced..

The main aim of this study was therefore to explore how migration influences emotional attachments of Ghanaian adults living and studying in the UK. Given the limitations of small scale research, our research question was: How do Ghanaian students describe their attachments to people, place and culture within one UK university? Given Winnicott’s (1971 / 1985) theory of transitional objects and Horton’s (1981) concept of ‘solace objects’, subsidiary questions were:

* What objects are associated with stories of connection to home?
* What objects are associated with stories of connection to life in the UK?
* How does each of these reflect issues of attachment, belonging and identity?

**Sampling and recruitment**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university Ethics Committee before proceeding with the study.Purposive sampling was used to select participants. In view of the fact that the focus was on Ghanaian adults, participants were recruited from a British University where a number of Ghanaian adults have migrated from Ghana to the UK to further their education. Participants were recruited through posters in the students’ union. The poster gave the option to contact the research team by phone or email. Brief details of the study were offered by phone, followed by more detailed information via email including an information sheet and consent form to facilitate informed choice.

The sample was necessarily small, preventing any sub-group analysis on the basis of gender, age or ethnic group[[4]](#endnote-4) and so these factors were not used in determining the composition of the focus groups. Eighteen Ghanaian adults volunteered for the research. After volunteering to take part in the study, participants were contacted via email to arrange a convenient day and time for the focus group interview, and at this stage final selection took place on the basis of majority availability. This resulted in a sample of nine. Two focus groups were conducted for data collection, of a size that would allow everyone the opportunity to talk about personally meaningful topics (Barbour, 2009; Litosseliti, 2003). Following considerations of availability, four of the sample of nine were allocated to one of the focus groups, and five to the other.

**A Narrative Method**

Storytelling is an important part of Ghanaian society and forms a communal participatory experience, which is an essential part of traditional Ghanaian communal life (Ofori, 2010; Amenumey & Greiman, 2009). A narrative approach was therefore seen as pertinent for this study, enabling participants to share and listen to each other’s stories and discuss emotional accounts in a culturally acceptable way.

Narrative comprises the organisation of a succession of events into a complete story such that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to the entire piece (Elliot, 2005). A narrative may also be understood as a complete story of experience woven together from strands of individual stories of experiences which communicate meaning (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Elliot, 2005; Mishler, 1986).

Reissman, (2008) asserts that stories reveal truths about human experience. Narrative research methods reveal the structure and organisation of these experiences, leading to greater understanding of the nature of life itself within a particular culture (Sparkes, 2002; Reissman, 1993). This connection is made possible through close analysis of the stories told (Mishler, 1986). Stories help individuals explain their world, make sense of the insensible and enable the bridging of self and culture (Reissman, 2008; Sparkes, 2002). As Meekums (2008), points out: ‘...the things we know about ourselves and the world are influenced by the dominant narratives in the cultural backcloth of our lives...’ (p. 288).

Focus group interviews were chosen as the method of data collection, because the structure closely mirrors a collective story telling tradition in Ghana and was therefore likely to put participants at ease, generating narrative data for analysis. For this research, Litosselliti’s (2003) description of focus groups was used, in that they were designed to explore particular topics and individual experiences through group interaction in a permissive and non-threatening environment. Focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews through emphasis on the interaction between participants; participants are encouraged to talk amongst themselves rather than interacting solely with the researcher (Barbour, 2009; Litosseliti, 2003). Group interaction was made possible through the use of a simple topic guide, designed to stimulate the flow of narratives (Barbour, 2009) and facilitated by the first author. For example, each participant was invited to tell a story about an object from home (which some brought with them, while others imagined), and another from their lives in the UK. This strategy allowed participants to pursue their own priorities in their own vocabulary. This decision was based on the first author’s knowledge of Ghanaian cultural norms regarding story telling, and was designed to enable adequate time and space for each adult to express themselves. The epistemological stance was that participants were and are experts about their own experiences of how they cope and make meaning.

The first author, who is a multi-lingual Ghanaian (speaking Fante, Ashanti, Akuapem, Ga and Adangbe), carried out the interviews. The use of a Ghanaian language was designed to promote a unique closeness and a comfortable relaxed atmosphere of trust in which participants would feel free to articulate their experiences, inner feelings and anxieties if any (Barbour, 2009). Participants were encouraged to also use English to explore attachments to place, people and things. The variety of languages available thus enabled each participant to choose the appropriate language in which to express himself or herself, for the issue under discussion. Each person was asked to bring an object to the focus group that reminded them of Ghana and something that reminded them of their life in the UK, and to speak about each object in the group. Each focus group interview lasted 90 to 120 minutes which Krueger (1995) suggests is typical. The interviews were video recorded to enable the researcher to note nonverbal communication and affect; Ghanaians do not traditionally reveal their feelings in words and so the video recording enabled both authors to reflect after the interviews on nonverbal expressions of relatedness and affect within the groups.

Reissman, (2008) notes that narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form. The method chosen for this study involved detailed transcription of two video recorded focus group interviews, followed by the identification, analysis and reporting of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We also decided to focus on the metaphors used by participants in describing their experience; the second author used this approach for her own doctoral research (Meekums, 1998, 1999) and found it to be an evocative way to understand narrative experience in the context of recovery from child sexual abuse trauma. Smith & Sparkes (2004) also report analysis of metaphors within stories; their research with elite athletes who had suffered spinal cord injury identified different coping styles associated with three key types of narratives, linked to the metaphors used within storytelling.

For this research, each video recording was transcribed and analysed thematically by the first author, paying special attention to the metaphors used by participants. Video recordings were watched by both authors together, when the second author (who is a movement and nonverbal communication specialist) noted nonverbal data concerning interactions between participants and moments of key affect. This method enabled the identification of contrasting and complementary talk on the same theme or issue; moments of connection and disconnection between participants and status relationships within the group including with the interviewer. Significant statements and phrases directly related to emotional connectedness were identified, which were then used to produce a full description of an experience.

A research journal kept by the first author provided a reflective and reflexive narrative of the research process. This included reference to emotional responses to the research and key moments of insight. It was also used to record our meetings in which the research was discussed. In common with other reflexive accounts of research including Meekums (1998), there were moments of anxiety, insanity and struggles; then came the awakening that the only way out was to accept this ‘pregnancy’ of research and go through with it. The research process was conceptualised as a creative cycle (Meekums, 1993, 1999), in which initial striving is followed by acceptance and an attitude of letting go control, during which unconscious work continues and insights emerge that must be tested and worked on before recycling this process (see Figure 1)

**Figure 1**

**The research as a creative birthing process**

Adapted from Meekums, (1993; 1999)

Once we had all of the transcripts and video recordings in front of us, together with our deep immersion and reflexive engagement, one other key question we asked ourselves was in the form of giving a title to each story: what is this story *about*? This, together with our observations of *how* stories were told including nonverbal interactions within the group, was used to structure our reporting.

**Findings**

The following five narrative themes were identified across the two focus groups: storytelling style; stories of connection to homeland; stories of significant persons in the homeland; stories of disconnection; and stories of connection to life in the UK.

*Storytelling style*

Figure 2 shows a photographic images of Ghanaian story telling. The image demonstrates a strong group bodily focus on the story teller (whose clothes suggest high status), together with a respectfully collapsed body posture and lowered head on the part of the listener to his left (the right of the picture as viewed). It was of interest to note that participants of this study also sat in semi circles and took turns to tell their stories. They waited patiently for their turn and never interrupted. Participants demonstrated attentiveness to each other through smiles like the woman in the photograph who is wearing head attire, and nodding of heads, whereas others sat with lowered heads as in the man in this picture. In UK society, this could be misinterpreted as rudeness (not listening), but in Ghanaian culture it is a sign of respect for the story teller.

**Figure 2**

**Image of Ghanaians taking turns to tell their story**

Source: Reproduced with kind permission from Anna Cottrell, owner of Ghana story telling resources. http://www.ghanastorytelling.wordpress.com/



*Stories of connection to homeland*

Stories of connection included: objects linked to the homeland; communication with those left behind; and significant people in the homeland. Both focus groups identified Ghanaian food and clothing as objects linking to the homeland. Other objects and practices mentioned in one or other group included: Ghanaian language; currency; religious activities; pictures of family members; and the Ghanaian flag. For the purposes of this article, we focus on food and clothing since these were mentioned by both groups and therefore can be seen as particularly significant within our sample.

Significant foods connecting participants to Ghana included a variety of dishes. In Ghana, as in many African countries, food is often eaten from a shared bowl and can be thought of as a way of connecting to others through this shared social practice. Participants commented on Ghanaian food as a means of sharing, togetherness, friendship, and connections with family and friends. Note the efforts made by Participant 2 in Focus Group One (Figure 3), to connect the UK and Ghana by noticing that fast food in the UK can be shared in a container, reminiscent of the whole family eating together from a bowl in Ghana. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the importance of food as shared social practice.

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| **Figure 3****Connections Through Food Narratives From Focus Group One** |
| Key:R: ResearcherP: Participant*R: What object or it could be a person did you bring from home……?**P1: I came with my brother to join my Mum and Dad who were already here but most significantly the food I brought…..**R: What food was it?**P1: ABOLO and one man thousand, abolo from Adomi bridge near Akosombo……**R: Why is this food significant?**P1: …in my village it is for people who can’t afford a lot and this is shared-**R: What does it say about you or say to you?**P1: Thinking of others, \* SHARING, FRIENDSHIP, TOGETHERNESS - so bringing it to Europe and giving out to others unify each other.**P2:[ Looking at P1 and nodding his head]**P2: We came with YEBA a symbol of togetherness where we put our food and eat together like banku or fried yam which is similar to KFC here. In the kitchen the whole family eating together from it, sharing, bantering…..Xxx**P3: I came with Golden Tree Chocolate for my uncle as he loves it so much……and as he called friends to share and they enjoyed really impressed me- the attachment to the chocolate - and that it came from Ghana was so much important.*  |

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| **Figure 4****Connections Through Food Narratives From Focus Group Two** |
| *R: What did you bring from home that connects you to the homeland i.e. Ghana…?**P1: I brought books but I always carry passport pictures of my wife and son and I brought some Ghanaian food. The wallet is always with me to be able to connect home - …. and all sorts of GHANAIAN FOOD makes me feel connected to the homeland especially FUFU with light or groundnut soup, and also ripe plantain.**P2: [laughs,] and banku with okro**P1: Yes… banku with tilapia we say etsiw… Once a while somebody coming from home brings in SHITO that makes me feel connected to the homeland.**P2: [laughs] yes SHITO…. My story is different…. I had this wallet on me with pictures of my girlfriend but it was stolen so I realised that picture was not enough to connect me with the homeland..... But more so the FOOD connects me to Ghana. My mum had links with the African market so I was eating like in Ghana because when I wanted yam I eat, banku with okro, fufu and abekwan, especially SHITO... I like shito because you could eat it with virtually anything. You could eat it with rice.**P1: Yes shito. I eat it with anything. Bread instead of margarine I use SHITO and people laugh- [laughs]**P2: [laughs]**P3: [Smiles]**R: From what you are saying it appears shito is significant….?**P2: Yes SHITO is very important.* *P1: Very very significant.**P3: Wakye with SHITO...[LAUGHS]**[All laugh]. P1:Shito is major, P2:significant, P3:important.......[all laugh]….**P1: ...and even when we mention Ghanaian types of food like dokuno those Ghanians born here will ask what food is it kenkey, what is the name of kenkey in Ghanaian language kenkey because they want to belong so the food is so important to them to enable them to connect emotionally through something, GHANANIAN FOOD……* |

One participant narrated multiple meanings associated with the kente stole, made from kente cloth (a cloth associated with wealth and uniquely Ghanaian). These included meaningful emotional connections to the warmth of the homeland, culture and some significant persons including her mother and a work colleague.

The extract in Figure 5, like the bringing and sharing of food from the homeland that is ‘similar to KFC here’, shows the role of clothing and in particular Fugu (an overgarment) as a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971 / 1985), linking ‘home’ to ‘here’ and a pride in Ghanaian identity.

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| **Figure 5****Connections Through Clothing Narratives** |
| *P3: I am from North Ghana so I brought fugu, proper one and the traditional trousers and the boots.**P2: [laughs]…..[nodding his head]**P1: Yes, yes,[nodding his head]* *P3: [looking first to the right then to the left to include everybody]… I brought the traditional set and also other kinds of fugu, big ones, small ones so that I can wear them especially in the summer.**P1: YEAH? [smiling]**P2: SURE. [smiling]**P3: Also these other African attire. Apart from that my parents are into tie and dye so that helped me in getting those kind of things to bring along. Any time I wear them it gives me a sense of pride-**P2: Hmmn, MHM. OK.**P1: Sure, yeah. Yeah.**P3: I remember once I was wearing a white fugu on the bus and a white lady was admiring what I was wearing and I said I was from Ghana and I brought it from Ghana and for her to admire it made me proud that I was from Ghana and it gave me a sense of joy that I am from Ghana the things from Ghana gives me a sense of joy.**P2: YES…[smiles]**P4: …sure, YEAH, that you are from GHANA.**P3: yes wearing those clothes makes me feel that I belong to the Ghanaian culture so in effect that is what connects me to home and makes me stand out.* |

*Stories of significant persons in the homeland*

Given the nature of Ghanaian society, it was not surprising that some of the individuals who were seen as significant included members of the extended family, including grandmothers as the narration in Figure 6 exemplifies.

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| **Figure 6****Narratives of Significant Persons** |
| **Focus Group One***P2: My grandma raised me and I’m so close to her…...I would say she is the most significant person back home.***Focus Group Two***P2: I think the food reminds me of my grandma in Ghana. I was brought up by my grandma. My parents have been in Europe virtually all their life. My grandma is quite close to me….and I have that special connection with her...* |

*Stories of disconnection*

Even as participants shared their stories of emotional connections, they also narrated their stories of emotional disconnection. Feelings of isolation were intensely experienced by some of the participants when they first moved to the UK, especially those who had partners and children in Ghana. They experienced a sense of not belonging, feeling like an outsider and feeling disconnected /dislocated in various respects. This was linked to landscape, weather, food, how mealtimes are conducted, the way worship in the ‘English’ churches is conducted, language especially (local) Yorkshire English, social and educational practices (see Figure 7).

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| **Figure 7****Disconnection Narratives** |
| *P1: Talking about food, we’ve developed the attitude of always eating together my wife and my son in the same bowl. Even if it is separate dishes we eat out of each other’s dish so here when I sit down to eat I feel sad, alone……and remember them… [trails into silence looking down]**P4: ….I keep telling my friends here that when it is getting dark especially winter time you are forced to go inside whereas in Ghana that is the time you call on your friends and talk not thinking about time so those times I feel disconnected from home…….**P1: .......even working on my laptop searching for something then I see a pictures of places I have been to work makes me feel- [silence, looks down]…… reminding me the times I took that picture where we were, what transpired makes me feel so isolated here………Xxx* |

*Stories of connection to life in the UK*

Figure 8 shows some of the narratives of connection to life in the UK narrated within the two focus groups. It is possible to see that some of the connections to the UK (‘God’; ‘my partner’; ‘my son’) had been either literally or metaphorically transported from Ghana. Other connections were new, however (‘my studies’; ‘fish and chips’), suggesting a transition from a singular, Ghanaian identity towards biculturalism.

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| **Figure 8****Narratives of Connection to life in the UK from Focus Groups One and Two** |
| **From Focus Group One***P1...my education, but to me the one object I can hold on to here is God. He is the only one that I look up to...only thing that sustains me here...only thing that I can say I have something here...**P2: ...GOD is significant to my life here but he was also significant in my life back home. I have several.....like fish and chips, chicken and chips and also my education.....doing my Masters...being able to cope with it and even trying to cope...that is why I tell myself it is a Masters and not a servant...what connects me here tells me that I am important......knowing that I am accountable to achieve my masters makes me feel connected and important...important to my lecturers and I feel important so that is what I will call fulfillment...**P3: ...my partner...she is a native here and different from where I come from......so what keeps me here is her and the diversity...the differences...can communicate with Ghanaians and those not Ghanaians so the people here as well......**P4: .....my son connects me to my life here...he was born here...**P5: ...my family and friends here...so it has become like a second home.***From Focus Group Two***P3: ...two things...most important is my girlfriend...she is a Ghanaian but an Austrian because she was born in Austria...she has been to Ghana just a couple of times...but funny enough she is one of those who want to be Ghanaian...when communicating she prefers to speak Twi...She is so supportive...she is really the person that connects me to life here and the second thing is like singing...like when you go to church...yes singing in church...makes me feel relaxed.**P2: ...my family...that is my wife and child...they are all I have...**P1:...I think for me it is the education that brought me here so that is more the focus...to achieve and meet my expectations...so my studies is what connects me ...**P4:...GOD, I am religious...my faith and my family here and back home...**P4: [laughing]....also [laughs] tea....[laughs] and fish and chips.......**[all laugh]**P2:..fish and chips…* |

**Discussion**

*Staying in touch*

This study enabled participants to tell their stories of emotional connectedness to homeland, family and culture, stories of disconnection as well as stories of connection to their life in Britain.

Narrative analysis of the two focus group interviews identified the issue of separation from other significant members of both nuclear and extended families, with its resulting attachment and emotional challenges. This confirms results of previous studies highlighting that migration involves separation (Riccio, 2008; Falicov, 2007; Silver, 2006; Parreñas, 2005), often separating nuclear families from extended families, spouses from each other, parents from children and siblings from each other (Mazzucato, 2008; Falicov, 2007; Silver 2006; Pribilsky, 2001).

Meaningful connection was maintained with some family members through the use of communication technologies (Burrell & Anderson, 2008; Falicov, 2007)***.*** Krause (2008) & Falicov (2007) suggest that the virtual space and time in which this communication occurs may include the presence of the here and there and the real and the imagined. Thus an individual or a family’s narrative may include complex past, future and current inter-connections between players, whether objective or imagined.

One significant aspect of culture is shared language (Obeng, 2009; Whorf, 1964). Our strategy of encouraging participants to explore attachments to place, people and things through the use of different languages illustrated language as connecting bridges to attachment relationships. Participants using various Ghanaian languages (most often, Twi) demonstrated use of the mother tongue to establish, foster and maintain emotional connections to the homeland and to other Ghanaians living in Britain. This suggests that the use of language by migrants may serveas a powerful transitional phenomenon (Winnicott, 1971 / 1985) bringing solace, identity and emotional connection (Horton, 1981). Further support for this can be found in the fact that migrants often make efforts to ensure that second generation migrants retain the mother tongue as a symbol of identity, belonging and status (Obeng, 2009).

Church attendance also played a critical role in maintaining value, asserting cultural identity and a sense of belonging. This confirms the findings of Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2009), Mensah (2008) and Menjivar (2000) that many immigrants use religion to ease the stress of transition, construct identity, make meaning in a new social world and create alternative allegiances and places of belonging.

. Clothing is often used to mark out individuals as belonging to particular social group. Participants’ narratives about clothes in this study pointed to their importance for identity and status. This can be understood as ‘role costume’, while the participants’ narratives about food highlighted their significance as a means of emotional connectedness. This is unsurprising, since cooking and eating food is associated with nurturing, caring, intimacy and a sense of connecting through giving part of oneself as well as receiving. The South African women who migrated to New Zealand in Philipp and Ho’s (2010) study sought out specialist shops in which to buy their food. In Ghana, food also links to community. Narratives of eating together from one bowl such as the ‘yeba’ suggest experiences of the collective and a sense of belonging as opposed to individuality, isolation and dislocation. Furthermore, eating with hands links to sensual affective dimensions of comfort, hope and joy as the food is felt with the fingers then in the mouth. Food thus recalls the embodied presence of the other and of community.

Paradoxically, cooking and eating food also revealed issues of intercultural discomfort, including fears that the individual’s place as the central link in a long chain might be lost. This was linked to concerns of cultural displacement. Some of the stories of disconnection were powerful and sad, as illustrated in the following excerpt about meal times in the UK:

...I keep telling my friends here that when it is getting dark, especially winter time, you are forced to go inside - whereas in Ghana that is the time you call on your friends and talk, not thinking about time. So those times, I feel disconnected from home…

Separation from ‘the boss’ as narrated by two participants was not identified in previous literature reviewed for this study. This surprised us initially, but after studying and repeatedly viewing the video recordings it became apparent that ‘the bosses’ signified attachment relationships outside of the family, linked to the provision of a ‘secure base’ (Holmes, 2002); someone who cares, understands and is always (symbolically) there. These two participants, in the context of migration from their known culture were facing stressful educational challenges; the caring support from their bosses enabled them continue with their education in Britain.

*Research as therapy*

A similar ‘secure base’ relationship developed between the two authors during this study, the second author acting as research supervisor for the first. This points to the importance of affective pedagogic relationships, and is worthy of further study.

The relationship between researcher and participants, despite its different boundaries from group therapy, became a quasi-therapeutic relationship. As Hunter & Lees (2008) reflect, the narration of significant experiences connects with soul and cultural roots, potentially leading to a sense of peace and harmony.

In contrast to their stories of disconnection in the UK, participants said that sharing their experiences within the focus groups felt emotionally uplifting and engaging, generating a sense of belonging associated with the sharing of similar experiences and a feeling of being understood. Research may be therapeutic when it is perceived as empowering (Nolan, 2007; Meekums, 1998). In this case, both focus groups were marked by moments of shared laughter and embodied rhythmic synchrony probably linked to mirror neurone activity (Trevarthen, 2011; Meekums, 2002; Fogs’ & Ferrari, 2007). Such sharing of bodily states is known to contribute to a sense of belonging and connection within a group (Chartrand and & Bargh, 1999) and kinaesthetic empathy (Meekums, 2012). The formation in which the group sat to share their narratives was reminiscent of social situations in Ghana, where sitting in circles or semi circles establishes a sense of equality, belonging and mutual caring. Participants in the second focus group interview were reluctant to leave when the interview ended and some exchanged mobile phone numbers and email addresses.

*Limitations of this research*

The potential for sample bias is evident in that all of the participants were recruited from one university setting in the North of England, necessitating a relatively small sample. The focus group method also has limitations: some participants tried to dominate the discussion but this was handled through the observation of set ground rules for behaviour which were reinforced by the focus group facilitator, who is a trained counsellor and psychotherapist. The fact that the first author, who conducted the focus groups, is herself Ghanaian could be seen as introducing bias but this is arguably outweighed by the fact that her cultural and linguistic connoisseurship together with her skills as a therapist facilitated group discussion about the topic. The second author acted as ‘devil’s advocate’ and critical friend throughout, challenging assumptions and interpretations and assisting the first author in maintaining a critically reflexive stance. The analysis of narratives offered one lens through which the data can be interpreted. This report is not intended to offer an exhaustive ‘last word’ on how Ghanaian migrants experience separation and connection; rather, it is based on the understanding that all stories, including research stories, are partial narratives and their value lies in offering a new perspective, rather like taking a snapshot of a seemingly familiar place, from a different angle.

*Recommendations for practice and research*

The complex narrations of connection and disconnection for Ghanaian students in the UK call into question dominant discourses about family bonds (Krause, 2008; Falicov, 2007). Furthermore, this study highlights what others have described as the almost untenable choices faced by immigrants as a result of separations, together with their attempts to create and maintain meaningful emotional connections (Van Der Geest, Mul & Vemullen, 2004; Knipscherer, Jong, Kleber, & Lamptey, 2000).

The findings of this study open the door for discussions on the potential identification, development and provision of therapeutic services that are in harmony with African culture and traditions (Nyowe, 2010) incorporating Afrocentric values and worldview (Neblett, Hammond, Seaton & Townsend, 2010). For instance, as university psychotherapists and counsellors become more aware and familiar with the cultural orientation of African migrants they will be in a stronger position to enhance the provision of culturally sensitive therapy consistent with the cultural values of African migrant clients.

Higher Educations Institutes could do more to deliver culturally sensitive services to their overseas students. This might range from how tables are arranged in the refectory, to how student housing responds to the needs of students for whom the after dark culture is one of visiting your neighbour. Furthermore, student unions of British universities could enhance the provision of student activities to provide ways to help African student migrants to discover connections with each other.

**Conclusion**

The protagonists in the migration saga include those who leave, those who stay behind in the culture and those who come and go. Fast and accessible new forms of communication bring all these players together to form a richly interconnected system which continues to evolve over time (Burrell & Anderson, 2008; Mazzucato, 2008; Skrbis, 2008; Falicov, 2005, 2007; Silver, 2006; Erel, 2002). Falicov, (2007) asks if we could refer to a virtual family in a global world. If so, to what extent and in what ways can new global technologies of long-distance communication help nourish bonds? Perhaps migration has always been about memory, not only of country, language, sounds, or smells, but also memory of embodied relationships.

In sharing stories of their lives in the UK, participants narrated their experiences of some changes due to the influence of the host culture such as

tea, fish and chips (note how food continues to be a vehicle of connection with the host place), and the embrace of diversity.This also highlighted thatwe do not define our belonging and identity through practices alone, but also through our difference from those to whom we belong less. This was made evident when participants shared stories of how clothes not only made them connect to home but also made them stand out.

Our study suggests that even students who are temporarily resident must live with the ambivalence of having two hearts. Higher Education structures, including the provision of specialist counselling and psychotherapy and outreach services, must address this complexity. Training of UK counsellors and psychotherapists should include an understanding of the complexity of migrant experiences.

**I AM GHANA**

I live here but I am Ghana **(Narrator)**

I live here but I am connected, connected to Ghana **(Response)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Narrator**)

The dance to the dancing of connection (**Narrator makes movement of Adowa dance)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Response)**

The dance to the dancing of connection **Responders make movements of Adowa dance)**

I live here but I am Ghana **(Narrator)**

I live here but I am connected, connected to Ghana **(Response)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Narrator**)

The drums of connection of tradition and song **(Narrator makes movement of Ewe dance)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Response**)

The drums of connection of tradition and song **(Responders make movements of Ewe dance)**

I live here but I am Ghana **(Narrator)**

I live here but I am connected, connected to Ghana **(Response)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Narrator**)

I spring forth fertility, continuity and connection **(Narrator makes movement of Ga dance)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Response**)

I spring forth fertility, continuity and connection **(Responders make movements of Ga dance)**

I live here but I am Ghana **(Narrator)**

I live here but I am connected, connected to Ghana **(Response)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Narrator**)

I am mother I am woman **(Narrator makes movement of Northern dance)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Response**)

I am mother I am woman **(Responders make movements of Northern dance)**

I live here but I am Ghana **(Narrator)**

I live here but I am connected, connected to Ghana **(Response)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Narrator**)

I move in realms of rhythm, complicated, intricate, complex connections **(Narrator makes movements of Adowa, Ewe, Ga, Northern dance)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Response**)

I move in realms of rhythm, complicated, intricate, complex connections **(Responders make movements of Adowa, Ewe, Ga, Northern dance)**

I live here but I am Ghana **(Narrator)**

I live here but I am connected, connected to Ghana **(Response)**

Gongs, claps and song **(Narrator**)

I am Ghana (**Narrator)**

We are Ghana, connected, connected to Ghana but also connected, connected to here through Ghana and through here **(All)**

We are Ghana and we are here **(All)**

**Adapted from a Ghanaian traditional theatre performance by Professor Martin Owusu in 1988**

**WORD COUNT: 6,979**

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1. Wayeyie is a Twi word, which is a major Ghanaian language. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The term abuaua is used to refer to family lineage, either matrilineal or patrilineal.* Abusua refers to a whole clan. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Autoethnography is a form of research in which the subject is also the researcher. The focus is on personal experience relating to a topic of potential interest to others, but often unexplored in more traditional research methods. The goals are therefore emancipatory, in the sense that the marginalised voice becomes heard, often through a process of engagement with creative methods including poetry and image-making. The product is intentionally engaging not merely on an intellectual level; the researcher hopes to move the research audience, emotionally and also potentially towards social action. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There are more than 100 ethnic groups in Ghana and some of the major ethnic groups include Fante, Ashanti, Ga, Ewe. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)