

Are We There Yet? Understandings of Home Among Compulsive Migrants

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses a gap in the field of cultural studies by analysing compulsive migrants — individuals who voluntarily migrate out of *desire* rather than *need*. Employing in-depth interviews, I create a theoretical framework for compulsive migrants' understandings of home based on their lived experiences. Research on migration focuses on home from a literal and figurative standpoint, emphasising the theoretical consequences of leaving the original home behind. Home emerges as closely linked to belonging, which is traditionally associated with place. Compulsive migrants, by contrast, do not locate a sense of belonging in geographical place. They are voluntary, non-economically driven migrants whose mobility is determined by a search for self-fulfilment. Exhibiting cosmopolitan mindsets, compulsive migrants thrive in experiencing the unknown — people, places and cultures — while retaining their own values, beliefs and lifestyles. They experience a heightened sense of boredom, which they employ as a coping strategy for dealing with their disillusionment with the world. In this sense, boredom can be a means of escaping a life that is deemed unfulfilling. Compulsive migration surfaces as a response to coping with the world's uncertainties. For compulsive migrants, home is an interplay between three things: a cosmopolitan cultural identity; the principal motivation for continuing to migrate, boredom; and a sense of belonging based on a familiarity with a culture and its people. In these ways, compulsive migrants form part of a transnational elite seeking fulfilment beyond familiar borders. This politics of self-actualisation opens important legal, political and ethical questions for future cultural research.

Keywords: Transnational Elite, Global Migration, Home, Identity, Cosmopolitanism, Boredom

What is home to you? Geena, one of my research participants, states: “That’s a really good question. I philosophise a lot about that. I hope you don’t expect me to give you a straight answer.”

Articulations of migration’s impact on migrants often emphasise the idea of home: the migrant experience, after all, is one of mobility away from one’s place of origin. It is associated with the post-modern condition, a metaphor for the rootlessness and homelessness of contemporary identity, and is as such heavily contested (Chambers 27; Morley 2-3, 9; Massey 151). Migration relies “on the designation of home as that which must be overcome” by either rejecting the existence of home or accepting its existence and attempting to escape it (Ahmed 339). The migrant is inherently intertwined with the notion of home. “Migration is a one-way trip. There is no ‘home’ to go back to. There never was” (Hall, “Minimal” 115). Migrancy is an irreversible experience: the act of moving over national borders is the gateway to the life of an international migrant.

Migration is generally divided into forced and voluntary migration, with the former including refugees, asylum seekers and trafficked individuals, and the latter consisting primarily of labour migrants and family reunification migrants (Martin n.pag.). The experience of migration varies greatly between forced and voluntary migrants; this paper focuses on voluntary migration only. Academic research on voluntary migration has focused on understandings of home among migrants from a literal and figurative standpoint, emphasising the theoretical consequences of leaving the original home behind. Greg Madison’s work (“Conceptualising”; *Existential*) is an exception in both the method and the conclusion, which emphasises the rather poorly understood motivations behind voluntary migration (Amit 8; Al-Ali and Koser 14) and its impact on home. Madison investigated migrants’ reflexive performance of home. What makes his approach unique is his focus on non-economically driven voluntary migrants, meaning those who move internationally for reasons other than monetary benefit. Furthermore, Madison uses in-depth interviews as his primary research method, developing the idea of home-as-interaction, thereby synthesising the method and concept that I base my own research on. This presentation uses Madison’s study as a starting point to expand on the understandings of voluntary migrants’ complex relationship with home.

I have chosen to study an unlikely candidate to elucidate home — the one who continuously migrates. In particular, my study focuses on the sub-segment of voluntary migrants who have moved internationally out of *desire* rather than *need*. This group has been absent from academic research. My analysis investigates the type of individuals that willingly uproot themselves continuously to experience life in different parts of the world. I call these individuals ‘compulsive migrants’. Compulsive migrants’ frequent international moves make it more difficult to locate a sense of belonging in place and are therefore the perfect research subject for a study on home, as home cannot be based on place alone.

During the research process, the question of home evolved in unanticipated directions. Compulsive migrants hold complex notions of home. As well, compulsive migrants’ cultural identity impacts the motivations for repetitive migration. Thus, I argue that for compulsive migrants, home is an inter-play between three things: a cosmopolitan cultural identity; boredom; and a sense of belonging based on a familiarity with a culture and its people.

Method

Because interviews enable detailed exploration of “people’s subjective experiences, meaning-making, accounting processes, and unspoken assumptions about life and the social world in general” (Healey-Etten and Sharp 157), I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with compulsive migrants to gain insight into their understandings of home. With a small sample size of eight people there is no representative value. Instead, the value lies in the individual interviewees’ “voices add[ing] an important dimension to understanding the full spectrum of the issues involved” (Caluya et al. 89). The interviews with compulsive migrants centred on five questions:

1. Describe your life in terms of the countries you have lived in.
2. Relate which countries you moved to because you *wanted* to move. What attracted you to those countries?
3. What were your motivations for moving away from where you were living?
4. What is home to you?
5. How do you relate to home?

These purposefully vague questions enabled conversations as opposed to question and answer sessions. Interviewees were aware of the study’s focus on migration; however, they were unaware of the focus on home. By giving the participants the chance to narrate their life stories around topics of their choosing (albeit based on the questions above), I gained insight into their understanding of self, home, and their motivations for migration. The first two questions emphasising migration and countries of residence were intended to help the participants overcome any concerns about the interview. The remaining questions addressed motivations for migration and then focussed on the participants’ initial reaction to home, revealing whether they had thought about home before. To probe further, I asked about the participants’ relationship to home, which resulted in discussions about identity and belonging.

I cannot discount my partiality to this topic: I am a compulsive migrant and therefore can relate to the interviewees’ narratives. This is suited to cultural studies, which locates the self firmly in the practice of research, using reflexivity as a tool for critical (self-) awareness (Johnson et al. 44, 60). The researcher’s own process of representation forms the basis for ethnographic research (Skeggs 199). My personal history provides a unique perspective into my interviewees’ stories. Furthermore, I used my own compulsive migrancy to encourage participants to share experiences, buoyed by identifying with someone who has made similar lifestyle choices (Madison, “Conceptualising” 243). These in-depth interviews with compulsive migrants create a theoretical framework of their understanding of home based on the specificity of individual lived experiences.

Defining the compulsive migrant

For my purposes, I define a compulsive migrant as someone who has migrated from his or her country of origin voluntarily at least twice *and* has the intention of migrating again in the future. This excludes economic migrants (who move for education or improved employment), those moving to be with a partner, and forced migrants such as refugees. Compulsive migrants seek opportunities abroad because they truly *desire* to live in different countries. They uproot themselves for reasons that they usually do not understand. They differ from travellers by staying in their chosen locations for at least a year and ‘settling’ — with a (semi) permanent address, work or study, and a social life including friend groups.

Because visas to live, work or study in foreign countries can be difficult to obtain, most compulsive migrants are educated, skilled workers with some disposable income. Compulsive migrants are part of a transnational elite formed by corporate expatriates and NGO workers, humanitarian service workers, and diplomats, amongst others (Sassen 169). They benefit from their mobility as they can monetise the international networks they build from their transnational lifestyle (175). Furthermore, they are likely to belong to the “creative class”, defined by its professional status of working in a creative capacity that drives economic profits (Florida 69). My interviewees — three researchers, an engineer, an advertising strategist, a freelance journalist, a project manager, and a kitchen chef — are all in professions that depend on creative abilities to produce new ways of thinking that can broaden concepts, set agendas and influence others.

Compulsive migrants are a highly mobile group of educated professionals that seek experiences beyond what their immediate surroundings can offer. They tend to have an insatiable thirst for exploring unconventional thinking and the unknown, both in their private and professional lives. Often misunderstood, they have to constantly explain their decision to migrate, particularly to friends and family who perceive them as abandoning their homes. They have to justify their decision to move to those they leave behind as well as to their new social groups. These characteristics are a universal migrancy phenomenon (Hall, “Minimal” 115), which may be exacerbated by the compulsive nature of this type of migration.

What differentiates the compulsive migrant from other types of migrants is the *desire* to migrate for the *sake of experiences*. Following Jacques Lacan, David Oswell demonstrates that desire is a means of compensating for a perceived lack in an attempt at self-improvement (109). In the case of compulsive migrants, this leads to repeated migration.

Life Stories

My interviewees’ life stories introduce compulsive migrancy. Life stories are a way of gaining context and making new discoveries (Atkinson 7; Hall, “Cultural” 224). Each of these stories depicts a compulsive migrant, revealing commonalities. Except those who moved internationally during childhood, interviewees started migrating in their early to mid 20s as a means of exploring life beyond known boundaries. The first voluntary migration is triggered by exposure to people from other countries, friends’ success abroad, dissatisfaction with their life in their country of origin, or curiosity about the world. The first international experience leads to another, and the desire to move again and again; going back to one’s country of origin seems, at least in the short term, not to be an option. This behaviour is the reason for calling these migrants ‘compulsive’: it is not meant in a psychoanalytic sense but indicates repetitive migration. While some interviewees would like to settle in the future, none have specific plans or a time frame for settling, and they are concerned about their ability to do so. A few acknowledge migration as a means for finding the perfect location to settle, while simultaneously admitting that they do not expect to find it. The following life stories highlight the interviewees’ diversity.

Table 1
 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS

Name	Age	Gender	Relationship Status, # of children	Profession	Nationality	Country of Birth	Countries Lived in for a Minimum of 1 Year*
Heather	28	Female	Single	Consumer Researcher	Slovenia	Slovenia	Slovenia, UK
Hillary	29	Female	Domestic partnership	Freelance Journalist	Finland	Finland	Finland, Brazil, Belgium, USA
Florence	32	Female	Married	Advertising Strategist	New Zealand	New Zealand	New Zealand, USA
Geena	62	Female	Divorced, 2 children	PhD Candidate	UK	UK	UK, Germany, Egypt, Somalia, Cyprus, Holland, Turkey, Israel, Oman
George	29	Male	Domestic partnership	Kitchen Chef	Germany	Seychelles	Seychelles, Germany, New Zealand
Anthony	28	Male	Single	Political & Social Researcher	UK	UK	UK, France, Belgium
Luis	39	Male	Married	Engineer	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, New Zealand, Sweden
Robert	46	Male	Single	Project Manager	UK	UK	UK, USA, Germany

* All interviewees were living in Sydney, Australia, for a minimum of 1 year before the interview.

Anthony

Anthony is from a small British town and has been in Australia for six months. He started moving internationally after realising that many of his friends were from abroad and had life experiences beyond his imagination. Leaving the UK for the first time at 24, Anthony moved to Paris with his Parisian girlfriend. This marked the beginning of short stays in France and Belgium, lasting from several months to two years, before he came to Australia. He hopes to move to South America next and has been studying Spanish in anticipation. Eventually he would like to move back to Europe to be closer to his family. He is planning to retire in the town where he grew up. Although he expects to eventually build a life in one location, he questions whether he will be able to do so.

Florence

Florence is from Auckland, New Zealand. She first migrated for further education. Back in New Zealand, she married a local who, like her, aspired to live abroad. Both found jobs in New York and spent several years there before the global financial crisis stripped the city of its glamour. Moving to Australia to be closer to family, Florence and her partner expect to move again in the future; however, distance to New Zealand matters to them. Florence is committed to her partner, family and friends, but feels no commitment to a place.

Geena

The daughter of a British military contractor, Geena grew up moving around the world, imitating her parents in calling Britain 'home', although she had only spent holidays there. Completing high school and university in Perth, Australia, she moved to London, UK, after graduation. Marriage and children temporarily ended her compulsive migration. After she divorced and her adult children moved out, she picked up where she had left off: moving around the world, particularly the Middle East. Currently settled in a PhD program in Sydney, the 62-year-old hopes to explore more of the world after graduation.

Hillary

Hillary's first international experience was as a 16-year-old exchange student in Brazil. The blond Finnish teenager attracted a lot of attention and the experience left her slightly traumatised. Nevertheless, after graduating from university in Helsinki, she realised Finland was not the place where she wanted to spend the rest of her life. Internships in Belgium and the USA entertained her for a while but the only full-time employment she could find was in Finland. A new career in freelance journalism gave her the opportunity to leave Finland again. She now lives in Sydney with her Canadian partner and freelances for Finnish newspapers. She does not see herself settling in Australia and is already plotting her next destination.

Heather

Heather grew up in a town bordering Slovenia and Italy. Living on the border shaped her identity; she has never fully identified with either nationality. At 18, she took the opportunity to flee that dilemma and went to study in the UK. She has travelled extensively, and after Australia, her next destination will likely be South America. Although she would like to settle somewhere in the future, she has a hard time imagining a fulfilling life without moving.

George

George was born in the Seychelles to a Finnish mother and German father. At 10, his family moved to Germany. Feeling that he never fit in, he left 18 years later to work first in New Zealand and then Australia. George would like to settle in a place that "feels right" but is unable to articulate his expectations further. In the meantime, he is happy moving around the world; however, he is in a relationship with someone who does not want to migrate frequently. George acknowledges that he will have to change his ways but questions his ability to do so.

Luis

Luis, in contrast, has found the perfect partner. He is married to an artist who thrives in unknown environments and on Luis's migrant lifestyle. Born in the capital of Costa Rica, Luis moved to the Dominican Republic with his family during high school. Back in Costa Rica, he became frustrated with the country's bureaucracy and decided to search for a better system. His quest has taken him to New Zealand, Sweden and Australia, and he is now considering the USA. He believes he will live in Costa Rica again in the future to be close to his family; however, he doubts he will be happy there. Consequently, he keeps pushing off the inevitable return.

Robert

Robert started moving later in life than the other interviewees: at 35, he decided to leave his native England for the USA. He has since lived in Germany and Australia and is looking to settle where he feels comfortable and can create meaningful relationships with people. He acknowledges that he migrates because he is searching for something without being able to define what that is. He fears that one day he will look back and realise that he had everything he was looking for without knowing it.

Understandings of Home

The research participants discussed belonging as way of defining home. Most commonly they established a sense of belonging through relationships with other people. Robert envisions home as “a place with a nice quality of life, where you have people around you, friends, possibly family ... because that is what makes home. The people you're with”. His comments confirm theories that social interactions and encounters form a support network that makes one feel at home (Ahmed 340; Rapport and Dawson 27). Robert further describes familiarity of place and people:

Once you have lived in a country for a bit, you have friends and you understand how the place works. It doesn't seem alien to you so you can feel at home there . . . [A] big part of it is when you become used to a place, when it doesn't seem strange anymore.

Familiarity involves knowledge of the location as well as an understanding of the alien culture. “How” one belongs is thus more important than “where” one belongs (Allon 286). The *unfamiliar* is what causes excitement and the thrill of discovering a new location and people; the *familiar* is what creates a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging based on familiarity with the culture and having social relations, including local friendships, can be encompassed in the concept of home-as-interaction. Interactions with environment and people are necessary to become familiar with a culture and develop a sense of belonging. Home-as-interaction may explain the basic needs that have to be met for a compulsive migrant to feel at home, but it does not explain why the same does not apply for the compulsive migrant's place of origin. It also does not suffice as an explanation for why compulsive migrants continue moving. To better understand the compulsive migrants' notion of home requires further consideration of their motivations.

Motivations for Compulsive Migration: Cosmopolitanism

Luis is the only research participant who describes himself as a “citizen of the world”; however, other interviewees demonstrate this cosmopolitan cultural disposition that includes a heightened desire to engage in cultural experiences, alien mannerisms and customs (Appiah 91; Hannerz 239-40; Tomlinson 185). Florence, a New Zealander, exhibits cosmopolitanism by actively choosing places that provide her with new and foreign experiences.

Moving is about meeting new people and starting a new experience. It forces you to grow, and that's attractive . . . One of the things that turned us off of London was that a lot of New Zealanders go to London and we really wanted to experience something different.

Florence is drawn towards cultures that differ from her own. She discusses her friends in New York being from all over world and how she is able to learn about different

behaviours and ideas through her interactions with them. Florence calls it “eye-opening”.

Many interviewees speak of the benefits of engaging with foreign cultures and people. Robert, for example, decided to learn how to play the cello and join a semi-professional orchestra in Germany. He could have joined an orchestra in his native England; however, it was Munich’s ubiquitous orchestras that inspired the idea. Joining an orchestra helped him integrate into the city’s culture instantly: “I hit the ground running . . . and after a month I realised it was a really nice place. I liked the culture, as a foreigner”. This qualifier — “as a foreigner” — acknowledges that if he were a local, he may have felt differently about Munich, because it would have mandated a different level of involvement. As a foreigner, choosing his level of engagement is easier. Through limited involvement in politics, for example, but full submersion in Munich’s orchestra culture, Robert selectively experiences life in Munich. While this could be perceived as problematic in the framework of a cosmopolitan cultural identity, Robert’s selectivity highlights his sensitivity towards the world as a world citizen, a *global* as opposed to *local* engagement.

Hillary believes that changing her environment gives her the ability to reinvent herself in a never-ending process of self-improvement.

Somehow every time you move abroad you are free to . . . invent yourself anew. Because you are doing something different, you are living somewhere else, you have a completely different circle of people around you.

Leaving behind the life she knows gives Hillary the confidence to explore aspects of herself that she otherwise may have left undiscovered. A freedom emerges from the challenges caused by placing herself in new environments and situations. She compares the experience of migration with drug-induced euphoria, claiming that she “gets hooked on the high of learning new things”. She describes challenges as a means of providing new ideas and feeding her imagination, leading to creativity and inspiration. The overseas experience enhances her cultural capital, which she values highly. Hillary’s comments reflect Karen O’Reilly and Michaela Benson’s analysis of migrants perceiving mobility as enabling their self-realisation (4), a process Anthony Giddens sees as emblematic of modernity (*Modernity and Self-Identity*).

Motivations for Compulsive Migration: Boredom

Compulsive migrants like Hillary seek out challenges as a learning experience as well as a distraction, a break from the routine and monotonous life they consider boring. Boredom is mentioned by every research participant as one of the reasons for geographical mobility. Interviewees talk about boredom leading to escapes from their communities, hometowns, and cities or countries of residence. Luis says, “I just get bored when I do the same thing for 18 months or 2 years because there’s nothing else to learn. And it would be the same thing with the country”. Heather feels the same: “It’s kind of exciting when you live in different places, you learn so much about different people and yourself . . . I think I get bored easily if I stay somewhere too long”. Luis and Heather expect excitement and challenges from their physical surroundings and the people they interact with. Boredom is fostered by a lack of engaging stimulation. Heather explains:

Some of my friends ask: “Why do you move again? You have to start all over again”. And I’m like, “that’s actually quite exciting”. For me it was very exciting to come and start exploring a new place and meet new people. There

are still places in Sydney that I haven't been to. It's great; you can go and explore a new street, a new thing. For me, that's exciting. Sometimes familiarity is good. But it's boring after a while.

Migration, thus, is a way of escaping the repetitive lifestyle and is perceived as a means of providing change. As Heather puts it: "It's a two-year cycle where I think I need a change. And I could easily see myself in two years thinking, 'okay, what next?'" Heather reflects the sentiments Elizabeth S. Goodstein identifies as "the disaffection with the old that drives the search for change", which in turn creates a dissatisfaction produced by the constant drive for change (1; see also Leslie 35 and Salzani 131). Boredom generates a cycle that becomes impossible to break. Heather and her fellow compulsive migrants exhibit a practical application of the intellectual debates on boredom being a driver of change, an engine of creation, and a means of self-improvement (Benjamin 105; Moran 180; Hayes 4).

If boredom is the reason why compulsive migrants keep leaving the places where they have established a sense of belonging, boredom is also the reason why they have several homes throughout their lives. It is the underlying cause for leaving their *original* home as well as every *subsequent* home. Further research is necessary to understand the causes of compulsive migrants' heightened sense of boredom.

Conclusion

Employing in-depth interviews, I created a theoretical framework for compulsive migrants' understandings of home based on their lived experiences. Compulsive migrants have a cosmopolitan drive to explore the world by taking up residence in different countries. These perpetual migrants uproot themselves constantly because they like to engage with the foreign. Exhibiting cosmopolitan mindsets, compulsive migrants thrive in experiencing the unknown — people, places and cultures — while retaining their own values, beliefs and lifestyles. They are excited by the negotiation between foreign cultures and their own. Cosmopolitanism, then, is one reason for compulsive migrants' mobility, but this is not the only factor explaining compulsive migrants' motivations.

Boredom may offer an explanation for the repetitive migration. Compulsive migrants crave challenges. Moving within a city or country, however, does not seem to provide them with the challenges that they require. Their cosmopolitan disposition demands encounters with culturally different environments and people, making international migration their primary solution to bored states of mind. When these new locations inevitably become familiar, however, compulsive migrants experience a renewed lack of challenges, renewing the desire to migrate. For these individuals, boredom creates a never-ending cycle of compulsive migration.

Compulsive migrants use boredom as a coping strategy for dealing with their disillusionment with the world. In this sense, boredom can be a means of escaping a life and lifestyle that is deemed to be unfulfilling. The experience of migration is supposed to fill the void and keep them entertained and challenged. That compulsive migrants continue migrating, however, shows that migration is not the solution to the problem. The boredom that leads to migration ultimately perpetuates the feeling of boredom. Meaning *cannot* be found in migration. It is a temporary escape, a 'quick fix' to a larger existential problem that Martin Heidegger addresses in the "question of Being" (in Giddens 224). Furthermore, while compulsive migrants choose the

lifestyle of migration, they claim that it is not a choice, but a reaction to their desire for self-actualisation.

Compulsive migrants use migration to increase their cultural capital by learning about and integrating with foreign cultures. Giddens calls this the “reflexive project of the self”, a post-traditional form of coping with the challenges of modernity (32). This politics of self-actualisation opens important legal, political, and ethical questions for future cultural research. A better understanding of the underlying reasons for compulsive migration and compulsive migrants’ identity can result in recognition of this group. Furthermore, theories on compulsive migrants may find application to other migrant groups. Many fields could benefit from further exploration, including cultural studies, sociology, psychology, and (immigration and citizenship) law.

This study has taken me through migrant homes and varying degrees of belongings based on cultural identity, friendships, family and familiarity. I have found that the inverse relationship of belonging and excitement places compulsive migrants in an impossible situation: when one belongs, the familiarity leads to boredom; when one is a stranger in a foreign land, the unfamiliar causes excitement. To experience excitement, the compulsive migrant must be in unfamiliar realms, thus leading a long-distance relationship with belonging. A compulsive migrant cannot simultaneously belong *and* experience the thrill of the unknown. Home becomes the point in the middle of the inverse relationship of belonging and excitement.

Home is the short-lived moment when compulsive migrants interact with a culture that provides a sense of belonging based on relationships *before* the culture becomes boring so that their cosmopolitan interest in the wider world is still being met. A new culture offers challenges and excitement but no familiarity and sense of belonging: it is a home in the making. For compulsive migrants to actually *be* at home, a balance between familiarity, the unfamiliar, and belonging must be struck. Which may explain why Geena, Hillary, Luis, and all the other compulsive migrants I interviewed did not know how to define home.

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