

VOICES OF THE LEFT BEHIND: PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF ELDERLY PARENTS COPING WITH MIGRATION-INDUCED SEPARATION - A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Background: Ever since the turn of this century, a new trend has emerged in the field of information technology, resulting in a significant number of Asians migrating to Silicon Valley and Germany. The West has made great promises and scope for thousands of software personnel to move to the land of plenty. The tech hubs of the West have proved to be the preferred destination for Indian IT professionals to relocate. Earnings in dollars or Euros helped the aspiring youth to embrace the new land and choose to settle there. Though their parents also enjoyed and shared the benefits of the rising standard of their children, in the long run, it also took a toll on their emotional quotient. Financial stability was ensured for the family, but with the passage of time, aged parents experienced a sense of loneliness and insecurity. As discussed by Adhikari et al.(2011), the mental health and general well-being of the older parents of migrant children are at a toss. Today, we are witnesses to a new kind of community centres, old-age homes! Parents of children who have migrated to other countries live in such homes to get some support in their old age.

It is for us to scrutinize this issue to see if there is anything common or if there is a general pattern in the emotional state of the aged who are impacted by migration. Among the parents, the mother was most significantly affected.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with mothers who met the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Each conversation lasted about 30 to 45 minutes and was recorded in high-quality audio. We then carefully analyzed the interviews using a six-step method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). After completing these steps, the interviews were transcribed into scripts and reviewed manually to identify phrases, statements, or words that fit certain themes. We assigned initial codes to parts of the data that highlighted important aspects related to psychosocial distress, coping strategies, and personal challenges. From these codes, broader themes were developed to reflect common experiences or different variations among the participants. We continuously reviewed and refined these themes to ensure they were reliable and accurately represented the mothers' experiences. Throughout the process, we made sure to interpret the themes in line with our research focus - exploring how migration of their children affected the mothers personally, emotionally, and socially, and how they coped with these changes.

Results: After careful and repeated analysis, we identified four main themes: 'Living with longing,' 'Strength in solitude,' 'Caught between pride and pain,' and 'Finding belonging elsewhere.' The first theme, 'Living with longing,' expresses the deep emptiness parents feel and their strong yearning for their children's presence. The second, 'Strength in solitude,' shows how they cope by finding a quiet, inner resilience in being alone. 'Caught between pride and pain' captures the mixed emotions parents go through—the initial pride in their children's success abroad, followed by the gradual heartache and sense of loss when their children decide to settle far away. Finally, 'Finding belonging elsewhere' reveals how the parents adapt and find new ways to accept their reality and move forward, even when left to face life on their own.

Conclusion: The four themes capture the deep and complex emotional impact that migration has on mothers. They show how a mother's feelings and inner world change when her children move away. Instead of just one strong emotion standing out, these findings reveal a mix of feelings all working together, reflecting the true complexity of a mother's experience. Pride, happiness, loneliness, insecurity, sorrow, resignation, acceptance, and adaptation are interwoven in the fabric of life. The themes highlight the continuous change and adjustments negotiated by mothers with the migration of their offspring.

Keywords: Migration, loneliness, emotional void, coping strategy, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Migration refers to the movement of people away from their usual place of birth to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a country. There are two main aspects that can influence migration: the PUSH factor and the PULL factor. The PUSH factor is the factor that provides the reason for an individual to emigrate, while the PULL factor provides a reason for an individual to immigrate (Serraglio et al., 2023). Children moving around the world in quest of better opportunities has become a common occurrence, leaving behind older parents to deal with the challenges of ageing. Research indicates that elderly people who are left behind have higher levels of depression than those whose children stay close by as discussed by Mosca & Barrett (2016). Traditional caring patterns are upset when adult children are absent, particularly in societies where filial piety places a strong emphasis on intergenerational assistance and co-residence. The elderly may become distressed as a result, as discussed by Thapa et al.(2018). Even though monetary transfers might ease certain financial difficulties, they frequently fall short of filling the social and emotional gap that befalls parents who are left behind, as discussed by Dakua et al.(2023). The findings of Guo et al.(2009) and Mandal et al.(2024) point to the importance of continued inter-generational support after out-migration in maintaining parental well-being. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the personal narratives of these senior citizens, investigating their coping strategies and the complex effects of separation brought on by migration on their psychological health.

Mental health is of utmost importance, be it for a child or an elderly parent. Causes of poor mental health can be due to stress, peer pressure, lack of sleep, and more. Though the mind is a fragile being, it is imperative to take care of it. To a child, mental health is not a big thing as things are at ease for them. Adolescence is the time when the mental health gets affected due to the responsibility and independence they have. As teenagers mature, they get more responsibility, and constriction becomes less so they would get stressed due to the support they would have to find for themselves. Factors which can influence mental health can be due to biological factors such as genetics, environment and other miscellaneous factors as discussed by Patel et al.(2018).

Adult children tend to travel abroad and may settle; parents may choose to stay in their hometown due to pull factors like the cultural connection or family connection, as discussed by Levitt & Glick Schiller(2004). Though adult children migrate abroad for further studies and can help support parents, the parents would feel a sense of distance, which can cause them to stress and worry. A mother worries more about her child than a father. Studies have shown that most children tend to miss their mother more than father when away from home. Due to their children staying abroad, parents must be more independent and with the constant worry of how the child's life is, it truly does take a turn on them. This is discussed by Kinsella et al.(2009). Miltiades et al.(2002) discuss how the left behind older adults are largely dependent on hired help for their day-to-day survival.

Technology is getting advanced, which benefits parents who are away from their children who are abroad. Video calls and voice calls tend to relieve the parents' stress about their child to an extent and can provide a virtual touch which enhances communication. When the adult child starts a family, their children would prefer to stay in the country they currently reside in as they are most frequently exposed to that environment which develops a comfort as discussed by Nedelcu & Wyss(2016). Due to this they would tend to rarely travel to their hometown to visit their grandparents and would give little importance to tradition and culture which can cause disagreements between the two as told by Kwak (2013). Mental health getting a toll on one side and physical health too is at stake for the older adults as discussed by Song (2017).

A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. The interviewer had a few questions for the participant. Then the responses were recorded, the common answers fell into a common topic which were then categorized into headings called themes. The themes were compared, and conclusions were deduced from them as per Kallio et al.(2016).

METHODS

Ethical clearance was acquired from the Institutional Ethics Committee (Ref. No. DHR/ICMR Registration No: EC/NEW/INST/2023/TN/0293) following ICMR guidelines, ICMR COVID 19 Research Ethics guidelines.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of elderly parents coping with migration-induced separation from their adult children. A phenomenological approach is appropriate as it seeks to capture the essence of their emotional and social realities, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and respond to this life-changing transition. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of psychosocial distress, coping mechanisms, and the evolving parent- child relationship in the absence of physical proximity. Through rich personal narratives, this study aims to uncover the emotional, social, and cultural complexities that shape their well-being and resilience.

Study Population comprises elderly parents of age 65 and above who live independently. In this study, we focused on mothers of out-migrated children because they occupy a unique and deeply personal position in the migration process. While much of the migration literature highlights the experiences of migrants themselves, the voices of parents, particularly mothers, remain underrepresented, despite the profound emotional, social, and cultural implications that migration holds for them. Mothers often serve as the primary caregivers, cultural transmitters, and emotional anchors within families, and therefore their perspectives provide valuable insights into how transnational migration reshapes family life, caregiving practices, and intergenerational ties as explained by Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004). By centering mothers' experiences, this study seeks to illuminate the often-invisible emotional labor and adjustments they undertake, contributing to a more holistic understanding of migration and its ripple effects on families left behind.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Females (mothers) aged 65 and above who are living independently with their spouses and with all their children settled abroad.

Exclusion Criteria

- Mothers who are already under psychiatric medication.
- Mothers who are suffering from any terminal illnesses.

Sampling Technique

Elderly parents of adult children who had migrated were selected by using the method of purposive sampling. It was ensured that the sample population was willing to share their experiences and was aware of the significance of this study. Varied accounts and perspectives of the sample group gave great insights into their socio-emotional state. The sample population hailed from different social setups, financial statuses, and living arrangements, giving very realistic and reliable data. To widen the sample, suggestions were taken from the initial group of respondents who referred to a similar population of aged parents known to them. Thus, the snowball sampling method was also adopted.

Sample Size

Usually, in Qualitative research, we follow the principle of data saturation to arrive at the sample size. As concluded by Guest et al. (2006), the data saturation arrives as early as 6 samples for certain qualitative studies. Data saturation is the point after which further collection of sample data does not add any new insights. In this study, we reached data saturation after interviewing 13 participants, and we included two extra interviews to ensure we had enough information. So, a total of 15 interviews were conducted and carefully transcribed. Although the sample size was small, the insights gained were rich and meaningful because this was a qualitative study. Each mother shared deeply personal and emotional experiences, allowing us to explore their stories in detail.

The smaller sample made it possible to thoroughly analyze each narrative and really understand the mothers' mindsets and coping methods. This close examination helped us capture subtle emotions and important details that might have been missed with a larger group. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2006), this depth is a key strength of qualitative research. While many shared similar experiences, we also discovered unique stories that added valuable perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth Semi-structured Interviews

One-to-one, semi-structured interviews in alignment with the objectives helped in data collection. This facilitated a sincere flow of thoughts and emotions from the respondents. This method also ensured a good balance between structure and flexibility. Deeper and meaningful interaction helped focus on the main research questions. A team of seasoned psychologists helped in framing a flexible interview schedule and validating it as well. This is shown in SM1. The schedule was designed to elicit detailed accounts of the psychosocial experiences, coping strategies, and personal challenges of the parents.

Interview Guide

Questions focus on key areas such as:

- Emotional responses to migration-induced separation from adult children.
- Challenges in social interactions and daily life due to the absence of children.
- Coping with mechanisms to manage loneliness, emotional distress, and social isolation.
- Perceptions of familial relationships and changes in parent-child dynamics post-migration.
- Impact on self-identity and life satisfaction after children's departure.
- Support systems include extended family, friends, and community involvement.

Interview Duration and Setting

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a private, comfortable setting chosen by the participant, ensuring both confidentiality and ease. Privacy and comfort were prioritized to create a safe environment that encouraged openness, trust, and honest sharing of personal experiences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. This approach is suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

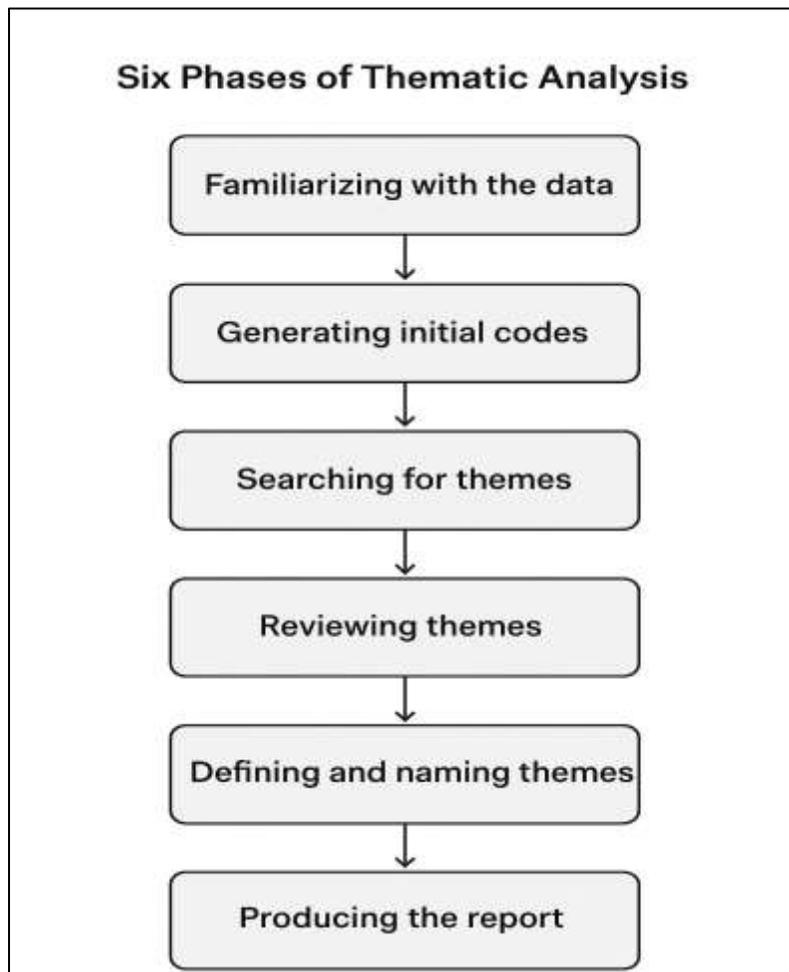


Figure 1 Braun and Clarke's 6 phases of thematic analysis.

Transcription

All interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy by comparing them to the original recordings.

Coding

Initial codes were assigned to segments of the data that capture meaningful elements relevant to psychosocial distress, coping mechanisms, and personal challenges. Coding was performed manually.

Theme Development

Codes were grouped to identify broader themes that reflect commonalities or variations in participants' experiences. Themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the data's essence.

Interpretation

Interpretations were done after careful study of the experiences and responses of the mothers. With respect to the research questions, the themes helped in understanding the psychosocial impact, coping strategies, and mental health of the respondents. To add authenticity, direct quotes from the participants have been added to illustrate each theme.

Triangulation

In order to ensure credibility, researcher triangulation, validation, and cross-checking were done. Multiple researchers reviewed and gave their interpretations of the data. This ensures objectivity and reliability in the process of interpretation.

Data analysis

The transcript of the recorded interviews has guaranteed accuracy and authenticity. The research team read and scrutinized the transcripts carefully. The iterative process helped to understand the nuances of the narrative. Initially, codes were manually and inductively assigned to enable focusing on patterns and meaningful expressions connected to psycho emotional experiences, coping strategies, and mental health of aged parents living by themselves in the absence of their children who had relocated to other countries. Multiple researchers worked independently on the transcripts, coding them, and later the discrepancies were resolved after discussion, dialogue, and consensus.

Next, the codes generated were reviewed for similarities in concept and general patterns. Thereafter, sub-themes were aligned with the main objectives of the research study.

These sub-themes were further refined and consolidated into broader themes that captured the core dimensions of the participants' narratives. A manual thematic map was developed to visualize the relationships between codes, sub-themes, and overarching themes, aiding in the clarity and coherence of the analytical structure.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation methods were employed, including peer debriefing, collaborative team discussions, and cross-verification of codes across different transcripts. Themes were continuously compared against the full dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the diversity and depth of the participants' experiences.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the analysis and interpretation of the four core themes identified. Additional sample quotes are included under the sub-themes of each core theme. The fifteen participants are anonymized and labelled Participant 1 to Participant 15).

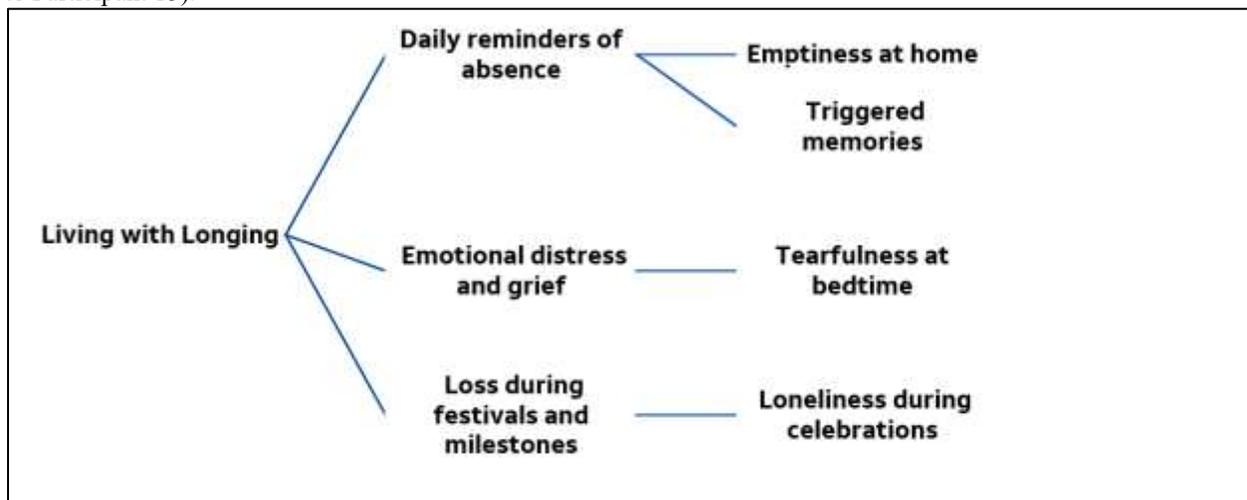


Figure 2 Visual Code-to-Theme/Sub-Theme Map of Theme 1: Living with Longing

Theme 1: "Living with Longing" – The Persistent Emotional Void

Across the interviews, a strong undercurrent of emptiness and sadness was evident, rooted in the absence of their children. Although phone and video calls were frequent, they could not replace the comfort of being physically present. As longing seemed to be a persistent theme, a theme named "Living with Longing" was derived.

Sub-themes:

❖ *Daily Sense of Absence*

Codes:

- ❖ "The house feels empty"
- "I miss hearing their voices"
- "Meals feel lonely now"

Moments of Heightened Yearning

Codes:

- ❖ "Festivals are the hardest"
- "Their birthday passes with just a prayer"
- "I watch old photos again and again"

Sleep and Health Disturbances

Codes:

- "I can't sleep well thinking about them"
- "My health got worse after they left"
- "Stress causes me headaches"

➤ "When I pass by his school or when I see a mother walking with her son, I wonder if mine even remembers how tightly he used to hold my hand." (Participant 2)

"The house has never been the same. It lost its noise, its fragrance... her presence." (Participant 4)

This theme highlights how emotional loneliness lingers despite technological connectivity, underlining that physical closeness remains irreplaceable.



Figure 3 Visual Code-to-Theme/Sub-Theme Map of Theme 2: Strength in Solitude

Theme 2: "Strength in Solitude" – Coping through Spirituality and Routine

Many participants described how they found strength by immersing themselves in faith, daily rituals, or personal hobbies. These practices gave them structure and a sense of calm, helping them manage the emotional strain of separation. Hence, on seeing how they derived their strength through solitude, the theme "Strength in Solitude" was arrived at.

Sub-themes:

❖ *Spiritual Anchoring*

Codes:

- "I pray for their safety daily"
- "Faith gives me peace"
- "Temple visits calm my mind"

❖ *Structured Daily Routine*

Codes:

- "I keep myself busy with chores"
- "Gardening is my therapy"
- "My routine helps me avoid overthinking"

❖ *Finding Meaning in Independence*

Codes:

- "I don't want to burden them"

- "Managing everything alone gives me confidence"
- "I feel proud I can still take care of myself"

"I have started reading thirumurai every morning. It gives me peace and helps me feel connected to something bigger." (Participant 14)

"I do rangoli every morning, listen to devotional songs and I've joined a woman's reading group at the nearby temple." (Participant 13)

This theme illustrates how participants leaned on inner coping strategies to create meaning and stability in their everyday lives.



Figure 4 Visual Code-to-Theme/Sub-Theme Map of Theme 3: Caught between Pride and Pain

Theme 3: "Caught Between Pride and Pain" – Mixed Emotions of Parental Sacrifice

A recurring thread was the tension between pride in their children's accomplishments abroad and the quiet sorrow that accompanied it. Parents felt both uplifted by their children's success and weighed down by the loneliness that success had cost them. It was undeniable that most of the mothers were literally caught in a web woven with pride and pain. Hence, the phrase "Caught between Pride and Pain" was coined.

Sub-themes:

❖ *Pride in Children's Success*

Codes:

- "He's doing so well in the US"
- "I feel happy seeing them succeed"
- "Their success is my reward"

❖ *Emotional Conflict*

Codes:

- "I wish they could be here and still succeed"
- "I smile but my heart aches"

➤ "It's bittersweet"

❖ *Sense of Sacrifice*

Codes:

➤ "We stayed back so they could go ahead"

➤ "I gave up my comfort for their dreams"

➤ "This is the price of a better future for them"

"I feel proud when people mention her achievements but my chest aches when I sit alone during dinner." (Participant 5)

"...I became proud of him, yes, but the longing never reduced – it only found a quiet corner inside me." (Participant 13)

This theme reflects the emotional ambivalence of parental sacrifice—where pride is deeply intertwined with solitude.

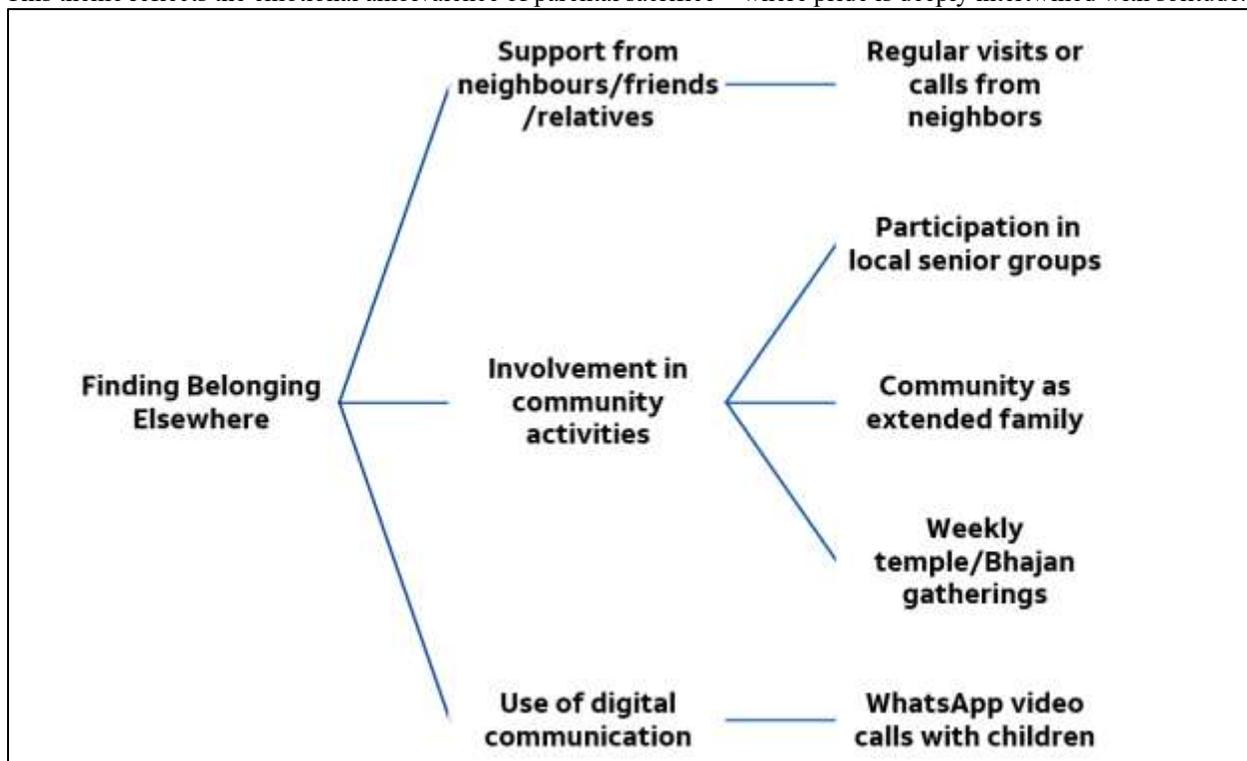


Figure 5 Visual Code-to-Theme/Sub-Theme Map of Theme 4: Finding Belonging Elsewhere

Theme 4: "Finding Belonging Elsewhere" – The Role of Social Circles and Community

Some parents turned to their local networks—friends, neighbors, or senior groups—for comfort and companionship. These interactions helped recreate a sense of belonging and softened the sting of separation. This way of coping through socializing came together to form the theme we called "Finding Belonging Elsewhere".

Sub-themes:

❖ *Support from Friends and Neighbors*

Codes:

➤ "My neighbor helps me with groceries"

➤ "We all go for morning walks together"

➤ "My friends have become like family to me now"

❖ *Participation in Local Groups*

Codes:

- "I joined the senior citizen club"
- "We have bhajan sessions weekly"
- "Volunteering gives me joy"

❖ *Digital Connection and Emotional Relief*

Codes:

- "Video calls ease my loneliness"
- "I wait for their messages"
- "At least I can see their faces online"

"The group of ladies in the park are like my second family. We walk, we chat... it fills the gap." (Participant 9)

"Thank God we live in a community where we have lots of friends of our age to talk to, so we keep our evenings busy chatting with them down in the fresh air." (Participant 10)

This theme illustrates how belonging is reconstructed through both offline and online connections, showing that while the absence of children cannot be erased, the loneliness can be softened through companionship.

Taken together, these themes reveal a layered emotional landscape. The *"Living with Longing"* portray the raw void created by separation, which parents seek to manage through *"Strength in Solitude"* — faith, routines, and independence. Yet, even amidst coping, the paradox of *"Caught Between Pride and Pain"* reminds us that sacrifice carries both dignity and sorrow. Finally, *"Finding Belonging Elsewhere"* shows that parents are not passive sufferers; they actively seek connection and meaning through community ties and digital contact.

DISCUSSION

This research aims to explore how the migration of young adults affects their aging parents who remain behind. At the turn of the century, India experienced a major demographic change as many young, skilled IT professionals moved to the US, Germany, and other Western countries for better-paying jobs. While this brought financial benefits and happiness to many middle-class families, over time, a different reality emerged. As children chose to settle abroad permanently, parents found themselves caught in a difficult situation. They didn't want to leave their homeland, and their children didn't want to return. This created a significant emotional and mental health impact on the elderly parents left behind.

Through semi-structured interviews with these parents, the study uncovered the deep emotional emptiness and complex mix of feelings they experience. Four key themes emerged that reflect the parents' stories. These themes align with existing research on migration and aging but also add new insights. The parents continue to miss their children every day and often find it hard to move on from the past. They cling to the memories and pine for their children. The *"Living with Longing"* theme mirrors what Baldassar (2007) terms *"distance care,"* where emotional closeness is sustained through digital communication yet remains insufficient to counter the embodied loss of co-presence. Similarly, the persistence of disrupted sleep, health concerns, and daily voids aligns with findings that parental separation due to migration exacerbates psychosocial vulnerability in older adults (Glick, 2010).

The second group comprises those who find an alternative and divert themselves into the world of spirituality, which helps them cope with the absence of their children in their solitude. *"Strength in Solitude"* illustrates how parents actively draw on spiritual and routine-based strategies to sustain resilience. This echoes studies highlighting the role of religiosity and structured activity in preserving well-being among older populations (George, 2013), but here it is uniquely shaped by the absence of migrant children. Parents' sense of independence and self-reliance complicates stereotypes of older adults as wholly dependent, revealing instead a subtle agency in how they cope with separation.

The third group of parents experiences a mix of emotions—a deep pride in their children's financial success and social recognition abroad but also pain because their children are not physically present. This paradox, captured by the theme *"Caught Between Pride and Pain,"* reflects what migration researchers call *"ambivalent intimacy"* (Parreñas, 2001). While parents feel a sense of validation from their children's achievements, this pride is intertwined with grief, creating a complex emotional experience that is often overlooked in policies and public conversations.

The fourth group shows remarkable resilience, finding comfort by joining new social groups and discovering fresh purpose. The theme *"Finding Belonging Elsewhere"* highlights how local social networks play a vital role in helping parents adjust. Research on aging has long pointed to the protective benefits of community involvement (Chen & Silverstein, 2000), and this study builds on that by showing how parents actively create a sense of belonging even when their family is far away.

Overall, this study reveals that the impact of migration on left-behind parents is complex and multi-layered, not a straightforward experience. It is marked by a unique mix of pain and pride, sacrifice and dignity, isolation and social connection. The research offers a deeper understanding of the transnational family, moving beyond simple ideas of loneliness to recognize emotional strength, creativity, and adaptability. It shines a light on a growing issue among older adults—the emotional struggles parents face after retirement when their children migrate. The loss of love from grandchildren, feelings of loneliness, and the ways they cope to find meaning in life all come into focus.

CONCLUSION

The emotional struggles faced by elderly parents whose children have settled abroad often go unnoticed by their neighbors. Even with financial stability, these parents experience a deep sense of emptiness that money can't fill. This study suggests there is a real need for more research focused on helping older adults build resilience, improve their physical health, and find hobbies or activities that give their lives meaning and purpose. The traditional Indian value of dedicating one's life entirely to raising children and making sacrifices for them could benefit from evolving to include more emphasis on self-care and personal well-being. This will help in ensuring better mental health of the senior population in the years to come.

Limitations

This study, being an interview, may have limited the participants from sharing more of their experiences about various other things. However, the rich, in-depth data obtained from this approach is valuable for understanding the complexities of migration-induced psychosocial distress in older parents.

Abbreviations

SM 1- Supplementary Material 1

Supplementary Information

Supplementary Material 1 - Semi-structured Questions for the Qualitative study

Authors' contributions

(Corresponding author) Vijayalakshmi Purushothaman and Archana Mohan contributed to the research design and implementation, the analysis of the results, and the writing of the manuscript. Authors Seethalakshmi helped with the review of literature and author Vijayabanu with the methodology. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Funding

No funding was received for this research work.

Availability of data and materials

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the first author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Clinical Trial Number

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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