Relocation to an area of high amenity: Tree-change euphoria vs. homesickness, alienation and loneliness

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Migration to areas of high amenity is often motivated by lifestyle choices (sometimes referred to as the sea-change or tree-change phenomenon) and can include a desire to exchange the stress of career and work in the city for a slower pace of life. Areas of high amenity are generally non-urban, coastal or rural, with high quality natural landscapes and/or sociocultural environments. Little is known about individuals' experiences after such relocation and there is insufficient research to hypothesise about psychological outcomes. Interpretative phenomenological analysis {Smith, 1995 #236}was used in this preliminary study to analyse data from semi-structured interviews with individuals who had recently moved to Cara (pseudonym), an Australian semi-rural tourist destination known for its scenic, cultural, and social amenity. Analysis produced 4 themes: a) The fit between the individual and the new location; b) Friendship and being a part of something vs. alienation and self-doubt; c) Making sense of social difficulties; and d) Relocation to an area of high amenity as an intense experience. Issues of identity and sense of self arose within almost every theme and employment status impacted in a variety of ways. Such relocation can be intensely positive, or intensely distressing, and avenues for research are identified, including possible interventions.

A relatively modern phenomenon observed throughout the 'developed' world is migration to areas of high amenity (e.g., Benson & O'Reilly, 2009a). These are generally non-urban areas, coastal or rural, with high quality natural landscapes and/or socio-cultural environments (e.g., Burnley & Murphy, 2004). Traditionally, reasons for geographic relocation have often been economic (Barcus, 2004). However, relocation to these regions is often motivated by lifestyle factors, sometimes referred to as the sea-change or tree-change phenomenon (Burnley & Murphy, 2004; Ragusa, 2010). Such migrants are often looking for a slower pace of life and sense of community (prioritising lifestyle over work), and have frequently moved from a city (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009a). Relocation to areas of high amenity can involve the decision to work less hours, the search for employment in areas with limited job opportunities, commuting long distances, using information technology to work from home, or choosing to leave the paid workforce altogether – each perhaps with its own potential challenges. Receiving communities often experience fluctuating populations, and individuals may return to

their previous location due to disappointment and unmet expectations (Lu, 2002; Nelson, 2006).

Amenity migrants can be motivated by the desire for a more meaningful life (e.g., Hoey, 2006), choosing relaxed lifestyles in attractive environments over the pressures of career and/or city life in both Australia (e.g., Burnley & Murphy, 2004) and other nations (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). The decision to move to an area of high amenity can be part of an intrapersonal journey and even result in (or from) changes in identity, particularly when it involves exchanging a corporate career for what some experience as a more authentic life (e.g., Hoey, 2006). Similarly, Hamilton (2003) in his Australia Institute report on "downshifters" (p. vii), described individuals whose lifestyle change involved reduced income and consumption motivated by the search for more fulfilling lives. As early as the 1960s in Australia, as elsewhere, alternative lifestylers (Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1986) were leaving traditional forms of employment and moving "back to the land", attempting to live sustainably (Halfacree, 2006, p. 1). This movement has grown to include less radical lifestyle migrants in

search of a "rural idyll" (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009b, p. 612). Relocators often expect rural life to be better, simpler, relaxed, and to include a strong sense of community (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009b). This does not always match reality (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012), though limited research of post-relocation experiences has been conducted (Barcus, 2004), particularly in Australia.

Motivations for amenity migration often include the natural environment (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011) and some authors have observed a 'spiritual' response to nature, as with relocators to mountainous regions in Canada (Locke, 2006, p. 26). Locke's (2006) definition of 'spiritual' response included "a sense of purpose beyond the acquisition of material comforts or a feeling of belonging that is not dependent on the approbation of other people" (pp. 26-27). However, the natural environment can prove insufficient if other needs are not met. Nelson (2006), interviewing an amenity migrant who intended to leave the area due to lack of *social* amenity despite high *natural* amenity, observed that trust within receiving communities can take time to build.

In addition to the attractions of natural amenity or an alternative lifestyle, social amenity, such as sense of community, is also often a motivating factor (e.g., Casado-Diaz, 2009; Nelson, 2006). Sense of community and social support have both been associated with physical and mental health (e.g., Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Thoits, 2011), raising questions regarding the well-being of individuals who relocate: Do non-urban communities actually offer a higher sense of community? If so, do newcomers benefit from this and do they get the social support they need?

Some studies have found that individuals in non-urban areas can experience a greater sense of community or belonging than urban residents (e.g., Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002). However, Wilkinson (2008) found no relationship between community size and social cohesion (sense of community combined with attraction-to-neighbourhood and within-neighbourhood

social interaction). Bishop, Coakes, and D'Rozario (2002) compared six rural communities in Western Australia and found sense of community to be slightly lower in the more remote communities (which were also the least established). They also found that the structure and dynamics of community varied between the towns, suggesting that finding a sense of community by relocating might not be straightforward, and context may be important. While all towns were described as friendly and helpful, instrumental support was sometimes more accessible than social support.

Some studies have found that length of residence can be a more important predictor of community sentiments than population size (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; see also Theodori & Luloff, 2000). Positive associations have been found between length of residence and feeling at home, sorrow at thoughts of leaving (Theodori & Luloff, 2000), and sense of belonging (Young, Russell & Powers, 2004). This, too, can vary with context (e.g., Hur & Morrow-Jones, 2008).

Some studies have examined the experiences of European lifestyle migrants moving to areas of high natural and cultural amenity such as the Spanish coast, with mixed findings. Some participants had vibrant and satisfying social lives while others experienced isolation and boredom (Huber & O'Reilly, 2004), anxiety, or depression (La Parra & Mateo, 2008). Australians who migrate domestically to areas of high amenity, however, do not face the language barriers or acculturation stress of those who relocate internationally. Insufficient research exists to predict outcomes for this population, though some have examined the experiences of new residents to rural towns in Australia. In the six rural towns discussed above, Bishop et al. (2002) found that new residents often experienced receiving communities as welcoming, however in the older, established communities, they often had to fit into existing, hierarchical social structures, and diversity could be less tolerated. While many

enjoyed a sense of community, this was not always without its negative aspects. Sharing confidences was not always felt to be safe in a small community, and having similar interests to local residents (e.g., sporting clubs, church) could be very important. It also could take time to become accepted.

This study is therefore a preliminary examination of the experience of relocation to an area of high amenity in Australia, from a psychological perspective. It is not known whether sense of community motivates such relocators in Australia as it can elsewhere (though some social issues seem likely), nor even the role of work within such a 'tree-change'. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) is particularly suitable when little is known about a phenomenon, when it is multi-faceted, complex, and somewhat contextual, as such a relocation is likely to be.

Method

Participants

Three participants were interviewed for this preliminary study, permitting long interviews to go into great depth and detail (totaling six hours of data). This allowed similarities and differences to be examined while maintaining a commitment to idiographic examination of individual experience. IPA uses relatively homogenous, purposive samples; these three participants were all white, partnered, middle-class, home-owning women between the age of 55 and 65 who had moved to the town of Cara between six months and three years prior to the study. All identifying information has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Lorelle was 58 years old and had tried living on the coast and commuting to the city for three years (her initial experiment, a 'sea-change') before deciding to retire inland to Cara (a 'tree-change') 12 months prior to the study. Her partner continued to work in the city, returning home for weekends. Brenda (55 years old) had moved from the city 12 months prior, though she and her husband were still commuting there for work. Brenda had migrated to Australia from another English-speaking country about 20 years

before. Jenny was 65, and had moved to Cara from a city three years prior to this study. She worked locally, spasmodically, but was currently unemployed, and her husband commuted daily to the city.

Location and Context

The town of Cara is a *semi*-rural tourist destination known for its natural (scenic), cultural (the arts), and social (community) amenity. Within driving distance of a city, Cara has a population of approximately 3,000 and a similar number in the surrounding district (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Cara is located in one of Australia's 'sunbelt' areas experiencing rapid growth and population instability (Burnley & Murphy, 2004) and has a long history of alternative lifestyle in-migration. More recent in-migration has included older retirees (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

The Researcher

While I attempted to stay as close as possible to the participants' experiences, my analysis is still a product of my interpretations—my making sense of the participants making sense of their worlds. I am a white, middle-class, 51 year old woman. I live and work as a counsellor in a community similar to Cara. I run social events for new residents to help them integrate into the community, should they wish, reflecting my assumptions that 'settling into a new town' is a real phenomenon that has potential to go well or not go well. It is from this perspective that I approached this research.

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited via posters on community noticeboards, and individuals who knew the researcher personally were excluded.

Interviews. I took an empathic, naive approach to conducting semi-structured interviews, aiming to uncover the

participants' own perspectives. Interview questions were largely of a very open nature, allowing participants the freedom to describe aspects that were important to them. An example of an early question was, "If you can cast your mind back to when you first got here, those first few months, what was that like?", allowing issues such as sense of community or work to arise spontaneously if appropriate. Gentle probing encouraged participants to talk in more detail. I allowed participants to lead the substance of the interview, provided they were within the bounds of the research question. Further questions were mostly generated in response to careful listening to the participant, with the aim of understanding the participant's "lifeworld" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 65). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of data. Following Smith et al. (2009), the data were analysed manually using IPA, initially approaching each participant's account one at a time. Staying close to the participant's experience and meanings, and immersed in her lifeworld, I identified emerging micro-themes. When one participant's experience appeared similar to my own, I took particular care to check the transcript to make sure I stayed close to her experience and not my own. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, I presented participants' own perspectives, or lay definitions, of concepts they raised (e.g., belonging) that may be defined slightly differently in psychological theory. This study was not testing, or examining, such theory. I created a table of micro-themes for one individual, and repeated the process for each participant.

I then examined all participants' themes together, looking for similarities, differences, and patterns. I identified super-ordinate themes reflecting what could be said about the group as a whole, without losing what I had learned about each individual. When appropriate, this process produced a super-ordinate theme that had opposite poles, with some participants' experiences at one end and others at the opposite end (as per Smith et al., 2009).

Analysis and Discussion

My interpretative phenomenological analysis resulted in four major themes relevant to how these individuals experienced relocation to Cara: a) The fit between the individual and the new location; b) Friendship and being a part of something vs. alienation and self-doubt; c) Making sense of social difficulties; and d) Relocation to an area of high amenity as an intense experience.

Theme 1: The Fit between the Individual and the New Location

Participants all spontaneously talked about the degree of fit between themselves and their new residential location, as a way of making sense of their experience. Areas where fit mattered most were, broadly, the physical environment and the social (including community). Lorelle expressed a successful fit in both areas; Brenda experienced a good fit with the physical environment but less so, socially; and Jenny experienced almost no fit at all in either. Jenny still wanted to return to the city, three years after relocation.

Lorelle's relocation involved a change in lifestyle from working in a city and living by the sea, to retirement on a small rural block close to Cara. She experienced this as a better fit in various ways, for example:

> I was working in the corporate world, and I'm not a corporate animal at all. I'm an organic gardener.

Lorelle also described herself as "not hugely a beach person" and "I'm more green hills and trees", language implying an aspect of self known as settlement-identity when referring to residential preferences (Feldman, 1990) and used by all three participants. Lorelle spontaneously described her previous location as not "the right spot for me" and enthusiastically reported the benefits, for her, of finding "what suited" her this time:

> … it's flowed, like it's probably not flowed for a long time ... for

many years I moved and travelled because of work commitments, rather than … going where, what suited me … it has … just reinforced for me, um, what a big difference there is between the two.

Lorelle thrived in a scenic environment, enjoying organic gardening and working on her rural block. Many elements reminded her of her place of origin, which made Cara feel "like home", something she repeated later as contributing to her experience of settling in after relocation.

Brenda, who described herself and her husband as not being "city folk", also thrived on the physical environment after relocating from the city. She, too, enjoyed the scenery, gardening, and growing food organically. What she described as the quaintness of the small town also suited her, and the fact that many shops were locally owned. Brenda, too, enjoyed living in a location similar to her place of origin, in regards to the environment, country living, and a degree of self-sufficiency. It seems that similarity between the environment and childhood environments can contribute to a good fit, for some. Brenda also reported that the new lifestyle and "being in tune with the Earth" had changed her as a person, helping her clarify what was important to her and bringing "other aspects" of herself to the fore. This is in keeping with Jones (1980) who found that relocation can provide opportunities for new aspects of the self to emerge (see also Oishi, 2010).

Both Lorelle and Brenda experienced the fit between themselves and their new location as contributing to the 'settling in' process. For example, Lorelle described her good fit as "like coming home. Just slipped in ... so I'm settled". Jenny frequently pointed to a lack of fit as an explanation for her considerable difficulties settling into her new location. Jenny thought she would probably always be a city person, explaining, "I couldn't live in a prettier place, but it doesn't do it for me." She preferred "concrete, fumes and screaming sirens". Jenny reported boredom from a lack of suitable activities and frequent involuntary unemployment. She

missed her busy, responsible work-life, which she described as:

> Fabulous. Buzzy. Exciting … a bunch of people around me. Goals, goal-setting is what I lost when I came to Cara.

Social fit was important too. Jenny felt a sense of isolation in Cara, which she put down to a lack of fit between her and the people she was meeting, describing herself as "a little bit wilder" than those people and "not a country person" like them. Jenny also felt that some of the retired people she met were in a different life-stage to her. She missed being surrounded by younger people at work, and having friends who were "on the same sort of wavelengths", finding many of the people she met too "conservative". This conservatism made people seem older to Jenny. She struggled to maintain her sense of self as she spent time with them:

> I sometimes go somewhere and I think, "For this next three hours I have to be someone else." I have to sort of fit in and say the right thing and not be me.

Brenda had chosen the area because she thought it was a good fit environmentally and socially. She found, however, that some social aspects did not meet her expectations. Brenda expected residents in the country to be very proactive in helping new arrivals to settle in, and was very disappointed when this did not occur. She particularly expected a good fit with one "alternative" sector of the local community, "Living the simple, possibly rural lifestyles". When those people did not approach her, however, Brenda wondered if she had less in common with them than she had assumed. Like Jenny, Brenda expressed a lack of fit in regards to the number of people she met who were older than they had expected, and retired. She both expressed frustration that social resources for the people they met often seemed to revolve around church activities, or bowls. Brenda believed they had more money than she did, and commuting to work left her less free time to engage in social activities or volunteering, adding, "It doesn't

fit in with them and their needs because we are a working couple."

Interestingly, Brenda and Jenny only experienced a lack of fit with the people they were actually *meeting*. They both observed people in the "alternative" (e.g., co-operatively owned) EthiCafe (pseudonym), with whom they expected to have more in common. However, they experienced considerable difficulties in establishing friendships with this sector of the community. Jenny believed that if she had been able to socialise with these individuals, it would have made a "huge amount of difference."

Lorelle, too, expressed the importance of a good fit socially. She, however, had been very successful in establishing friendships with people who were similar to her (unlike her previous experience living at the coast). This made a considerable contribution to her settling in. Lorelle linked similarity with others to feeling "at home" when she went to the EthiCafe, even if she was alone and didn't necessarily engage with them:

> I see people that I just sense a similarity with ... I feel like I'm in a tribe that fits for me ... I can go there and talk to no one ... and be happy and feel at home.

Finally, Brenda reported that her own experience of relocation was greatly affected by her husband's lack of fit with their new location and lifestyle. She described the "huge impact" this had on her and found her partner's unhappiness with Cara more challenging than her own social difficulties:

> …the trickiest thing, is the partner not being as happy as me ... So it might not be the actual place, and the tree-change itself. It could be just being where ... the other person is really unsettled.

Interestingly, Lorelle described how she felt more "at home" because her partner also loved the town, and that this also strengthened their relationship.

In summary, the fit between the person and the location can be an important aspect of how individuals relate to the experience of settling in to an area of high amenity.

Participants often attributed unhappiness after relocation to a poor fit or a positive experience to a good fit, raising issues of person-environment congruence. According to Hormuth (1990), people need to maintain continuity of self. They can do this partly through continuity of objects and places (including similarity to childhood environments), and through congruence between the environment and their values or how they see themselves (see Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Lorelle found such congruence after exchanging a corporate work-life for rural retirement in Cara. Some working individuals, however, may find they have little in common with the retired sector of their new community, and commuting can leave insufficient time to engage with that community. A lack of suitable local employment can contribute to a loss of sense of purpose and identity. Unlike Lorelle and Brenda, Jenny's new location did not remind her of her childhood, nor was it congruent with her self-concept. Such discrepancies can lead to stress and resistance to change (Hormuth, 1990). It is perhaps not surprising then, that relocators reported that fit with the location was so important. While participants may express a relationship between fit and settling in, this study does not *establish* such relationships, though it certainly raises the issue for future research.

Theme 2: Friendship and Being a Part of Something vs. Alienation and Self-doubt

Making new friends was an important aspect of settling into a new location for the participants in this study. This theme reflects how success in this endeavour can vary between extremes for different individuals in the same town. Participants' stories about seeking new friendships were inextricably entwined with experiences of perceived inclusion or exclusion, and the desire to be a "part of something". All illustrated their experience since relocating with stories of the opposite experience in past locations, and the one helps to illuminate the other.

One participant, Lorelle, when asked what her first few months were like, spontaneously referred to her success in

creating a friendship network:

> It was actually wonderful. I met
> some really good people, right up,
> straight away, that I've formed a
> wonderful group of friends.

Creating friendships after relocation was important to Jenny, too, however she had found it very difficult. After three years she had only recently begun to form a network which, while still insufficient, was an improvement on the extreme loneliness she had experienced, explaining that she could "go for weeks without actually having a social invitation of any sort." Brenda, too, was disappointed in her lack of friendships. After one year, apart from two new potential friendships, she felt totally reliant still on the one friend that she knew before she moved.

The relationships that Lorelle described as contributing to her successful experience of settling in also involved an element of caring, which included mutual support of a practical, as well as emotional nature. Social support was important to Jenny too, who talked about feeling there would be none available in an emergency, even after three years. Brenda valued a previous location where she had experienced reciprocal support amongst residents, but since relocating a year ago she still lacked relationships that could provide emotional or practical support. Lorelle's success was accompanied by a sense of belonging, mentioned spontaneously:

> …a group of friends opening up
> and a sense of belonging to a, a
> caring community and uh, and
> friends, finding more friends that
> are like me.

When asked to elaborate on this experience of belonging, Lorelle described it as a product, not only of being liked and accepted by people like herself, but also of establishing safe relationships where authenticity could create a sense of connection. And, on "connection":

> ... feeling safe to be authentic.
> Feeling safe to be vulnerable ...
> There's a loving feeling. There's
> safety. There's um … joy, there's
> … warmth.

For Lorelle, these warm, authentic relationships that she associated with her sense of belonging were crucial to successfully settling into a new town.

Conversely, Brenda and Jenny complained of a lack of such authentic, close relationships without which Jenny did not feel at home. Although things had improved recently for Jenny, sharing histories and confidences with new friends, she still very much missed having friendships with long, shared histories that were authentic:

> And people you are at ease with.
> That you're not watching what
> you say or think ... Whereas here
> I feel like I should watch what I
> say constantly.

Unlike Lorelle, neither Jenny nor Brenda said that they felt a sense of belonging. When asked (towards the end of the interview) if belonging was important, or had any meaning, Jenny replied that it was important. For Jenny, a sense of belonging comes when others make the first approach to her, not her to them. Brenda similarly described a lack of belonging stemming from a perceived lack of interest from others, and related to not mattering to anybody:

> with this whole lack of friendship
> thing ... the non-interest from
> anybody, anywhere ... no we
> don't belong. Don't have a ...
> feeling of belonging ... I don't
> even feel that I'm terribly
> important at (volunteer work) ...
> if I didn't go, no one would
> notice ... That somebody or some
> people um, know that you exist in
> the town, and um, would miss
> you, or be concerned for you.
> Well no one would do that.

Brenda frequently expressed a desire for existing residents to approach her and to take more responsibility for the integration of newcomers (cf. Bishop et al., 2002). Lorelle's satisfying social integration did include being approached by others, which she associated with being "a part of something" and she talked enthusiastically about mattering to a new friend. Similarly, when a friend told Jenny she was glad Jenny

had come along, she felt like she was getting her "old life back a bit."

It appears then that, as well as social support, belonging can be important to some relocators, and does not always come easily, even after three years. It can be linked with a feeling of mattering and close friendships with similar others where the participants could relax and be themselves (see McMillan, 1996). Being approached and invited by others was often important, and could also contribute to a sense of belonging.

Lorelle's successful social integration was accompanied by her feeling included and a part of something bigger than herself. However, she also seemed to experience *herself* as being larger, having boundaries beyond her physical body:

> That's community – that's being bigger than just … it's you know, it's not like I go out to there (hand gestures in front of self) and I "stop", you know? ... here my boundary extends. I go into town ... . I might stop here and talk to this person … Go into the second hand book shop, and browse. People talk to me ... recognise me, they know me (laughs). Yeah, my boundary is much bigger.

It seems that the place where Lorelle lives, and interacts with others in the street, was, in some ways, becoming an extension of herself. When discussing settling in, she described how her sense of safety (emotional and physical) in this location led not only to this expansion of herself but also to her "putting down roots"—a part of settling in that involved a commitment to stay, and invest in, this community.

Lorelle's explanation of "putting down roots" involved language that reflected her expressed interest in personal growth and the "spiritual". She described how her sense of safety in Cara led to her feeling connected, not only to others, but also to herself and to the Earth:

> I can feel my connection with the Earth much better when I'm grounded, and, and when I'm

> safe. I can let my energy drop, deeply into me.

Interestingly, while Locke's (2006) 'spiritual' response to nature included "a feeling of belonging that is not dependent on the approbation of other people" (p. 27), Lorelle's "connection with the Earth" was contributed to by social and physical safety, by being accepted and cared for by others in her new community. Lorelle described feeling a "part of a whole" as partially related to what she (spontaneously) described as "the sense of community" that she experienced in Cara. Elaborating on sense of community, "place" became important again, as did similarity to others:

> It means that um, you will be able to be more yourself in this place because there are other people … like yourself ... They want the place to be … a place of connection. It's not just … where you put your head down before you go to work at 6 o'clock in the morning.

Jenny and Brenda also valued "community" and being a part of something, however these were lacking for them in Cara, and such experiences lay in the past:

> It was like a bunch of the closest family you could have. Um, all living on each other's doorsteps. It was stunning. Yeah, I've found more community feeling in [the city] with all the talk of Cara and their community.

Jenny believed that the community in Cara would be more likely to provide instrumental support than social support, echoing Bishop et al.'s (2002) findings reviewed earlier. Brenda had been "looking for the tighter community" that she had experienced in another country. There, people (including shopkeepers) knew each other by name, and were all "part of the brethren". In Cara, she was disappointed when shopkeepers she saw daily treated her as just "another customer". However, having a good fit with the physical aspects of the location, she reported feeling "a part of Cara… physical Cara" when discussing belonging. She also felt "a part of

it" because many businesses were locally owned, and shopping locally made her part of a "team". For both Lorelle and Brenda, then, being a part of something can extend beyond close friendship networks to looser relationships in public areas of town, and the environment itself. Jenny's previous "community feeling" also included meeting people she knew while doing everyday activities in her city neighbourhood.

The participants in this study all talked about inclusion, friendships, and being a "part of something" (either in Cara or a prior location) and often about the exclusion, isolation and alienation they experienced when these did not occur. This theme now turns to the alienation and self-doubt that can accompany a lack of social integration after relocation.

Jenny felt geographically isolated living on a country block with little or no interaction with neighbours and having to drive 15 minutes to speak to somebody. She described this as "horrible". Her loneliness continued as she felt alienated from most of the people she met. As discussed under theme 1, she felt extremely different, culturally, to many of her new acquaintances. She experienced their behaviour as "foreign" and felt that she had to either pretend or not fit in, all increasing her sense of alienation:

> Trying to mimic the majority of people here that "weren't me"... maybe to make me fit in more. But it didn't make me fit in. It made me feel weird.

Jenny's experience of the main street of their small town was vastly different to that described earlier by Lorelle:

> I'd look around the street, and there was nobody I knew, and I'd just go home again. ...there were a few people who'd say hello to me, but that's as far as it went, and they weren't actually people that, even if they'd said, "Do you want a coffee?" I probably didn't really want to anyway (Jenny).

Jenny often observed, in two specific venues, people with whom she felt she had more in common. It is notable that she described "groups" that she wanted to become "a part of", but felt excluded from. This was a particularly painful aspect of Jenny's experience of relocation:

> ... it's agonising to be on the outside and not be part of the group. Just to watch the group around you being happy but you're not included in it. And that's how it felt in Cara. I just felt like a stranger on the street, which I was. And I wasn't included as part of anything.

Brenda, too, was frustrated at her lack of success at "breaking in" at one of these venues:

> If you're trying to break in to the community of EthiCafe ... if you want it to be part of your little family of, your social family, then you have to qualify to get into that, into that sect.

Brenda frequently talked in terms of breaking into groups with boundaries that she perceived as "closed doors". Although she did not report this as being quite so painful as Jenny did, she still felt isolated:

> I felt very isolated ... you can walk up and down the street, you can walk into the vet, ... and they don't know you from a bar of soap. And they don't have to do anything with you, because you're just a nobody ... They don't want to be burdened by some new person who's going ... "Where do I find whatever?"

Note Brenda's feeling like "a nobody" and a burden. It is also notable that she did not just feel isolated, but felt a challenge to her sense of self:

> ... and so you feel ... socially isolated and then you also almost lose confidence with your social skills and your, and you as a person.

Lorelle, too, reported such self-doubt as a consequence of alienation in her *previous* (coastal) location, feeling like a "misfit" and wondering, "Is there something wrong with me?" In contrast, her experience in Cara of

friendships with people similar to herself led to her feeling "validated", which she explained as a "tick" of approval. Jenny did not express such self-doubt. She did, however, find her experience of perceived exclusion, alienation and loneliness very distressing. When, after nearly three years, Jenny finally began to establish a small network, she felt very relieved, believing she had been "sinking into depression."

In summary, then, creating social networks was a major aspect of settling into Cara, for the participants in this study. When successful, relocators may describe a sense of safety, belonging, and being a part of something bigger than the self. For some individuals this can go beyond immediate friendships to include other, looser ties in the community, and even the place itself. Such a sense of security can entail the individual's sense of self expanding. Some may experience this as leading to well-being and even personal growth, as well as long term commitment and investment in the local community. It is notable that the *quality* of new relationships can be very important. These participants expressed a need for caring relationships with similar others, where they felt they could be themselves, where they mattered to others, and support was reciprocal. Some relocators can miss relationships with long, shared histories. Being approached by others can be particularly important to some individuals settling into a new town.

For some individuals, integration into the community can progress more slowly than they might expect or hope. Isolation and alienation can be experienced by relocators who feel they have little in common with the people they meet, or feel excluded from friendships with the people they do have something in common with. In this particular context—a small country town with one main street—participants perceived identifiable social groups with their own subcultures. These groups' boundaries can be experienced as impermeable by some newcomers, even after considerable time, but permeable by others. Failure to establish friendships after relocating can be a challenge to some

individuals' self-concept, and can be very painful, particularly when experienced as exclusion.

Theme 3: Making Sense of Social Difficulties

When responding to a lack of social integration, the participants in this study appeared to have engaged in considerable attempts to make sense of their experiences (even prior to being invited to participate in this study). Lorelle and Brenda had questioned the meaning of their lack of friendships (after this relocation or a previous one) along the lines of "Is there something wrong with me?" as discussed above. All participants offered information that seemed to act as self-reassurance that this lack of friendships was *not* due to any personal deficits. They expressed relief when they perceived evidence that "it's not just you" (Brenda) or "it wasn't all about me" (Lorelle). For example, Brenda stated that she had "hundreds of friends" in the past, and was emotional as she struggled to make sense of her lack of friends in Cara:

When I left [the city], my friends said ... I'm going to get a bit tearful ... "You are such a friendly social, sociable person. You make friends with anybody anywhere. You'll be fine."

Jenny spontaneously proposed various contributing factors to her social difficulties. She particularly stressed the lack of fit between her and a country environment as a way of understanding her difficulties, making frequent comparisons with her previous, happier social life in the city. She offered information that supported this explanation, such as friends from [prior city] also pointing out the lack of fit.

Participants talked about the other residents of Cara as a part of making sense of their alienation. Jenny talked at length about the many ways the people she met were very different to her and how this contributed to her alienation. Brenda had tried to "analyse … to work out the whole community", to understand their apparent lack of interest in her, including those in the alternative lifestyle sub-culture she saw at

the EthiCafe. She began to think this part of the community might be somewhat cultish, conforming to norms such as dress, way of life, and an alternative religious philosophy, preventing her admission to the group. Brenda's proposed explanation resonates with findings regarding the exclusion that can occur when a group has a strong sense of community that leads to apparently impermeable boundaries (e.g., Miers & Fisher, 2002). Jenny concluded that her lack of friendships in the EthiCafe was due to all the other residents' having known each other for a long time, so "don't need outsiders". While Jenny pointed out that she could be wrong, she shortly returned to this way of making sense of her experience.

Attempts to understand a lack of new friendships often involved such interpretations and assumptions about other people's behaviour. While this study cannot ascertain the accuracy of participants' assumptions, it is important to note that they made assumptions as part of the process of understanding, and perhaps did not let go of these assumptions easily. Their explanations sometimes involved generalisations, seeming to perceive some other residents as a homogenous group. To a lesser degree, participants also sometimes talked about how they may have contributed to their struggles. Jenny mentioned her shyness, for example, and Brenda acknowledged that commuting left her insufficient time to engage with her new community.

In summary, new residents who were unhappy with their progress socially had engaged in considerable attempts to make sense of their experiences. As well as experiencing fears of inadequacy when socially isolated, they also pointed to their past social successes. They often proposed various explanations other than self-blame, and various meanings of other residents' behaviour.

Theme 4: Relocation to an Area of High Amenity as an Intense Experience

The participants in this study sometimes described aspects of their relocation to an area of high amenity in terms of emotions and thoughts that were strongly positive or strongly negative. Jenny found relocating to Cara a particularly distressing experience and described her new lifestyle as "hideous". She described herself as "Homesick. Very homesick." and "lonely. Really, really lonely." Jenny described feeling like a "shadow" of herself when mixing with people very different to her, and was physically shaking when discussing this loss of identity:

> I suddenly get in with a group of
> 70-year-olds, or even my age
> who are conservative, and I just
> suddenly feel that I've died,
> actually. Look I'm shaking.

The intensity of Jenny's language, involving a part of her dying, was echoed when she described two important new relationships as an "absolute lifesaver".

The experience of such a relocation can also be intense in positive ways, as Lorelle described:

> It's been the most magical
> process for me, coming here. And
> I'm very grateful for it.

When asked what moving to Cara meant to her, Lorelle replied, "Oh, best thing I ever did". She described her first few months as "wonderful" and was "absolutely delighted" at how well this relocation had gone. The importance of this particular relocation was evident when, after making the decision to move, Lorelle felt:

> A lifting of weight off my
> shoulders at giving myself
> permission, to do this for me.

Similarly, when Brenda and her husband decided to relocate to Cara, she felt "absolutely ecstatic" that she was "getting the, the ultimate dream", and:

> It was the most exciting thing
> since probably childbirth, and
> that was 25-odd years ago.

After her relocation, Brenda found that every day she "almost had to pinch" herself, in response to the natural environment. Despite the social challenges that rendered Brenda "a bit tearful" at one point in her interview, she still felt "euphoria" on a daily basis and that "the gilt has hardly worn off the ginger

bread".

In summary, the participants in this study found that relocating to a place of high natural, social, and cultural amenity could, for them, be an intense experience at times. Strong, positive feelings and thoughts can be experienced in response to changes (or anticipated changes) in lifestyle and environment. However, such a relocation can also be experienced as very distressing, involving feelings such as loneliness and homesickness, and even threats to one's sense of self.

Summary and Conclusions

My interpretative phenomenological analysis of the data in this study revealed four major themes relevant to how individuals can experience relocation to Cara, a semi-rural area of high natural, social, and cultural amenity in Australia: a) The fit between the individual and the new location; b) Friendship and being a part of something vs. alienation and self-doubt; c) Making sense of social difficulties; and d) Relocation to an area of high amenity as an intense experience. In the lived experiences of these individuals, these themes were closely intertwined. Issues of identity and sense of self arose within almost every theme and employment status impacted in a variety of ways.

The fit between the individual and the new residential environment (both physical and social) can be an important aspect of how some relocators relate to, and make sense of, their experiences of settling in after relocating to an area of high amenity. They may describe positive or negative experiences in terms of a good or bad fit respectively, and may use language suggesting settlement identification (e.g., "city person") to describe themselves in this process. Important aspects of a good fit included: a love of nature; enjoyment of gardening and growing food; and relationships with people with similar values and interests. A lack of suitable activities, employment, environment, or friendships with similar others, can be experienced as a poor fit. Such a relocation can be an opportunity for new aspects of identity to emerge and some may experience their new location as idyllic, especially when person-environment congruence is high – as for one participant who enjoyed exchanging a corporate work-life for rural retirement. Some working individuals, however, may find they have little in common with the retired sector of their new community, and commuting can leave insufficient time to engage with that community. A lack of suitable local employment can contribute to a loss of sense of purpose and identity, especially when person-environment congruence is low. Some may find that their new location does not live up to their expectations of life in "the country". For some individuals, their spouses/partners' degree of fit and satisfaction with the new location may have a considerable impact on their own experiences.

Participants all stressed the importance of reciprocal instrumental and social support and close, authentic friendships with similar others. They expressed a desire, not always met, for established residents to approach them and to help them settle in socially. It seems that a successful social integration combined with a good fit between the relocator and the physical, cultural, and social amenity of the area can be accompanied by strongly positive thoughts and emotions. These may include feeling "at home", a sense of community, of belonging, inclusion, connection with others and with nature, a sense of being part of something larger than the self, and an extension of the self beyond the boundaries of one's body to include physical spaces. This can involve personal investment and commitment to the town, and can happen in less than a year.

Some relocators, however, may experience dissatisfaction socially, at least in the first three years. In the context of a small country town where varying cultural sub-groups can be perceived, relocators may experience a sense of exclusion from a group they perceive as having a good fit for them. It seems that a social venue (or even town) well known for its sense of community can, at times, be perceived as difficult to "break into". Interestingly, the same sub-group can

be experienced as having impermeable boundaries to some newcomers but not to others. For some individuals, perceived exclusion can be disappointing and even excruciating. When they failed to make friends, participants reported experiencing self-doubt, even a sense of alienation. In an attempt to fit in with people who seem very different, an individual may pretend to be more like other residents. This can be experienced as a loss of, or considerable threat to, identity. This resonates with findings that congruence between an individual's self-concept and the residential environment can be important for maintaining continuity of self (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). After relocating to an area of high amenity, a combination of poor fit with a sense of exclusion and alienation can be a very distressing experience. Even after three years, a relocator may still wish to return to their previous place of residence.

Participants in this study engaged in considerable efforts to make sense of any lack of friendships. As well as wondering if they were at fault, they seemed relieved by evidence to the contrary—including other people experiencing similar problems, and memories of past successful social integration. They searched for explanations of other residents' "unfriendly" behaviour. Their explanations included the belief that other residents had long histories together and did not need "outsiders", or that members of the alternative lifestyle sub-culture were almost a "sect" with impermeable boundaries. Sometimes new participants generalised about other residents, describing them as a homogenous group. This may reflect the meta-contrast principle: when individuals categorise others into groups, they can accentuate inter-group differences and intra-group similarities, reinforcing perceptions of out-group homogeneity (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Certainly, newcomers sometimes made assumptions about other residents and at times perceived a homogenous group. One participant also suggested that the established alternative-lifestylers made assumptions

about newcomers who dressed conventionally and appeared somewhat 'mainstream', not realising that they were, in fact, also interested in sustainable lifestyles. This research does not attempt to establish the veracity of participants' explanations, or relationships between outcomes and ways of responding to social challenges. The important finding here is that relocators had made considerable effort to make sense of their experiences when they failed to establish the friendships they desired.

It seems that relocating to an area of high amenity can sometimes be an intense experience, involving strongly positive or strongly negative thoughts and emotions. It can involve changes to identity and sense of self, either positive or negative, and may vary considerably between individuals. This suggests that further investigation is warrented.

Given the small sample size in this preliminary study, findings cannot be generalised and further research would be needed to ascertain whether the themes arising for these participants are part of a larger pattern. A longitudinal study would be useful, as would examining relationships between outcomes and contextual and environmental factors as well as various individual differences (and behaviours). These could include: need to belong; environmental exploratory tendency; settlement identification and other aspects of 'fit'; expectations of rural life; employment status; feeling accepted by the community; time available for creating social networks; and strategies used to create such networks. At a community intervention level, an action research project could usefully study ways to improve the experiences of new residents, however findings could be very particular to the community where the research takes place. At an individual level, the fact that two participants had almost polar opposite experiences suggests there will be no simple formula that helps all new residents, and individual interventions may need to be fairly phenomenological. Future studies could explore whether outcomes improve if relocators are informed about, for example:

how difficult such relocation can be for some; reasons other than personal inadequacy for why social integration can take time; and the importance of fit and person-environment congruence. Realistic expectations regarding relocation to, and life in, an area of high amenity may prevent disappointment and distress.

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