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Uncanny Phenomenon: Existential Experiences among Iranian International Students

by

Mina Didehvar

A THESIS

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Abstract

As the number of Iranian international students in Canada continues to increase in the light of the recent socio-political unrests in Iran, studying the acculturation experiences of this population has become increasingly important for providing effective counselling. The existing literature on adjustment of international students has been critiqued for pathologizing the acculturation challenges of this population, while neglecting their underlying existential importance. Existential concerns, which reflect individuals' conflicts with death anxiety, meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom, have been universally identified as a fundamental concern of humanity (Yalom, 1980). Cross-cultural transitions can provoke existential concerns since the challenges of acculturation can often touch on underlying existential meanings. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six Iranian international students to explore the existential inquiries that arose during acculturation. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) of participants' experiences resulted in three overarching themes: (a) Migration as a Boundary Situation, (b) Facing Existential Concerns, and (c) Coping with Existential Concerns. I discuss these findings within the context of acculturation literature and present implications for counsellors and researchers in the field of counselling psychology.

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Dedication

To each of the six international student who participated in this study:

Jana, Asal, Homayoon, Zohre, Koroush, Donya

I feel privileged to have been entrusted with your meaningful stories of crossing cultures. Your stories provided a deeper appreciation of the acculturation experience and allowed me to bring to light what has remained unspoken. I hope your stories continue to inspire other researchers to explore the depth of this experience.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The number of students who pursue their education in a foreign country has risen rapidly in recent decades, from 2 million in 2000 to over 5.3 million in 2017 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). Between 2008 and 2015, Canada saw a 92% increase in the number of international students resulting in 353,000 international students, of which 75% were pursuing post-secondary education (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2016). This number made a noticeable jump to 494,525 between 2015 and 2017, which represents a total that was not anticipated by the Federal government of Canada until the year 2022 (CBIE, 2016). Canada holds the third place after the United States and Australia in attracting international students, hosting over 642,000 international students in 2019 (El-Assal, 2020).

International students increasingly choose Canada as their study destination for two main reasons: the high quality of educational institutions, and the multicultural society, which is known for respecting individuals' diversity (CBIE, 2018). The government of Canada also offers an open post-graduation work permit for up to three years that is valid across the country, specifically to encourage international students to settle in Canada upon the completion of their studies (El-Assal, 2020). In addition, the federal government has developed an immigration policy that privileges Canadian-educated international students as skilled immigrants. These advantages include international students' familiarity with Canadian cultural norms and values (Nunes & Arthur, 2013), education, knowledge, and professional skills (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In turn, Canada benefits from the influx of international students. International tuition fees represent a significant source of revenue for the Canadian economy (Kwon, 2009), which totals approximately $22 billion and sustains over 170,000 jobs (El-Assal, 2020). A combination of complex geopolitical factors has made Canada a particularly appealing destination for Iranian

students, as evidenced by their drastic increase in recent years (CBIE, 2016). In 2015, there were 4505 international students from Iran in Canada, making Iran one of the top 12 source countries for international students during that year. Between 2015 and 2017, when Canada experienced a rapid growth in its number of international students, Iran rose on this list placing in the top three countries along with Vietnam and India, and became one of the fastest growing source countries of international students in Canada (CBIE, 2016).

The rise in the number of Iranian students in Canada, particularly over the last five years, is the result of a combination of multiple geopolitical factors. First, the U.S. economic sanctions beginning in 2015 exacerbated Iran's economic recession and unemployment rate (Panahi, 2012). Second, a lack of research funding, scientific facilities, and the neglect of educated professionals resulted in pervasive sense of hopelessness for their long-term prospects in Iran (Panahi, 2012). Third, the Islamic government that came to power after the Islamic revolution of 1979 has implemented an increasing amount of sociopolitical constraints. The new government imposed Islamic values across the political environment, educational system, and over civil liberties (e.g., freedom of speech, freedom of expression for women; Panahi, 2012), which created rigid political and social limitations for Iranians. These factors have led to increasing levels of disappointment amongst young Iranians, which in turn contributes to their decision to leave Iran. Throughout the governance of the Islamic government up to present, three million Iranian youth have left to study abroad, compared to half a million before the 1979 revolution.

The increase of Iranian international students in Canada after January 2017 was also caused by the travel ban placed by the Trump Administration on Iran and six other Muslim countries (i.e., Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen; Thrush, 2017). As a result, Iranian students who had received offers of admission from American post-secondary institutions faced

closed doors in the U.S. Instead, many Iranian students looked to Canada for opportunities to pursue their studies (Kane, 2017). In response, the University of Alberta (Huncar, 2017) and the University of Calgary waived their admissions fees as a welcoming gesture for Iranian international students who had been offered admission by American universities (Chiose, 2017). Other post-secondary institutions in Canada, such as McGill University and the University of Toronto, re-opened their window for admission and allowed the submission of late application forms (Chiose, 2017).

The U.S. travel ban created numerous difficulties for Iranian students, for example, they were granted single-entry visas that would not allow them to come back into the U.S. after traveling abroad or visiting their home country. Consequently, studying in the U.S. became a less attractive option for Iranian students (Azadi et al., 2020). The travel ban was amended in 2019 to allow international students from several countries, including Iran, to obtain student visas to study in the U.S. However, Iranian international students have continued to prioritize other countries, such as Canada, among their options of international education.

Apart from the aforementioned benefits Iranian students experience from completing their studies in Canada, the growing number of Iranian international students who subsequently choose to immigrate has contributed to brain drain. Internationally, Iran has one of the highest rates of brain drain, which refers to the migration of a large number of educated human resources from developing to developed countries, done in pursuit of a better lifestyle, education, and employment opportunities; Dodani & LaPorte, 2005). One-third of Iranian scholars and human resources in research are affiliated with academic institutions outside of Iran (Azadi et al., 2020). Compared to other developing countries, in which brain drain is often forced by economic reasons, the brain drain of Iranian graduates is mainly motivated by socio-political factors (Azadi

et al., 2020). The latest figure shows that among those who leave Iran to study broad, only 10% make re-entry, compared to 90% before the 1979 revolution (Azadi et al., 2020). This low rate of re-entry has led researchers to consider the cross-cultural transition of Iranian students as a form of migration (Azadi et al., 2020). Similar to migrants who leave their country of origin to seek better life standards elsewhere, many Iranian international students leave Iran with the intention of staying in host countries for better education, employment, greater civil liberties, and more religious freedom (Azadi et al., 2020). At the same time, their experiences and processes of adjustment differ from that of migrants and immigrants. In addition to contending with challenges that commonly accompany such relocation, international students are on temporary visas and must also meet academic demands in a new cultural environment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). These contextual considerations render Iranian international students outside of the traditional definitions of both international students and migrants.

Recent studies have shown the impacts of the socio-political pressures on the experiences of Iranian international students. For example, they have experienced additional financial difficulties due to sanctions placed by the American government on Iran, and the resulting currency devaluation (Nahidi et al., 2018; Azadi et al., 2020). Iranian students also face discrimination because they relocated from a Muslim country in the Middle East, which has been at the centre of ongoing negative media attention due to conflicts with the U.S. Nevertheless, considering their unique situation, Iranian international students have received little attention from researchers in North America (Nahidi, et al., 2018). My extensive examination of the relevant literature reflected a noticeable dearth of available information about their lived experiences in Canada, particularly following the recent economic and political restraints. Thus,

exploring the lived experiences of this population offers an important and timely contribution to the existing literature.

Personal Influences and Positionality

My acculturation experiences in Canada as an Iranian international student majorly inspired the idea of designing the current study. I came to Canada from Iran in 2017 to pursue my master's degree in Counselling Psychology. Similar to other international students, I spent a couple of months settling down—finding housing, navigating my new environment, understanding the new academic system, and making new friends. Shortly thereafter, I began my master's program, which presented me with academic challenges that are common to international students (e.g., academic writing prose and language barriers). These challenges and the related stress brought about a profound sense of alienation because of the extensive unfamiliarity (i.e., languages, people, physical surroundings). Based on my previous encounters with existential inquiries, it became apparent for me that my relocation to Canada had confronted me with existential concerns.

Existential concerns are profound and universal conflicts related to human experiences of living in the world. Yalom (1980) identified four main existential inquiries: (a) awareness of death, (b) meaninglessness, (c) freedom and responsibility for one's decisions, and (d) awareness of one's fundamental isolation. According to Yalom (1980), every self-reflective individual ultimately encounters existential questions in their lifetime. Existential inquiries often become prominent for individuals as a result of a life-changing event, such as a severe illness, marriage, divorce, graduation, or starting a new career (Yalom, 1980). Similarly, my cross-cultural transition started a new chapter in my life and was indeed a transformational experience, which faced me with existential inquiries.

As a graduate student, I became curious about researching the adjustment experiences of international students and such deeper level challenges they encounter during acculturation. My initial intention was motivated by a curiosity as to whether existential inquiries are a common and normal experience among international students. I was also curious to understand if my experiences were consistent with that of others. To my dismay, I discovered that the bulk of the available literature focused primarily on general acculturation challenges (e.g., experiencing institutional discrimination) and solutions for resolving such issues. Further, I observed that the literature often labeled the emotional experiences associated with cross-cultural transitions (e.g., feeling of loneliness) as psychological issues. I realized that less efforts have been made to capture international students' deeper concerns, such as reflecting on one's existential concerns, from a non-pathologizing perspective. This scarcity struck me as a critical opportunity to explore how Iranian international students come face-to-face with inquiries about their existence.

Exploring the existential concerns of Iranian international students is particularly important due to the diasporic situation in which they do not fit into either the category of international students or migrants. According to Yalom (1980), sociopolitical instability provokes individuals' confrontation with existential concerns as their lives start to lose its known meaning and structure. As a result, my international student status and cross-cultural experiences have particular relevance to the current study. The knowledge and insight that I developed through my own experience of acculturation allowed me to view the literature from a different perspective, which in turn enabled me to contribute to the literature in a deeper and more intimate way.

Current Study

I explored the existential experiences of Iranian international students during their acculturation in Canada. Given the paucity of literature on this topic, and my intention of

exploring it in depth and in its full complexity, I chose a qualitative methodology—Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodology focuses on the detailed exploration of individuals' lived experiences. My chosen method of IPA is composed of three central theoretical pillars: (a) phenomenology, (b) hermeneutics, and (c) idiography. Taken together, these influences permitted me to engage in an in-depth exploration of Iranian international students' existential concerns, which I further define and explain in Chapter Three. A central research question guided this study throughout the design, data collection, and analysis: *How do Iranian international students make sense of their existential concerns during their acculturation in Canada?* In the following section I will define key terms that are central to this research question.

Defining Key Terms

International students' life transition and settlement in a new country inevitably faces them with the process of *acculturation*. Acculturation refers to the "dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place for individuals as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). According to this definition, acculturation changes co-occur at the group level (e.g., the changes in cultural practices) and at the individual level (e.g., personal behavioural changes). As a result of acculturation, long-term psychological and sociocultural changes may take place for individuals, effectively allowing them to better fit within the host culture (Berry at al., 2006). The process of acculturation may be accompanied by challenges or stressors, such as discrimination, which has been referred to as *acculturation stress* (Berry et al., 2006). This term was first used by Berry as an alternative to the concept of culture shock, which only reflects the short-term negative emotional response of individuals to the cross-cultural transition (Berry, 1997). The majority of studies associate

acculturation stress with the manifestation of undesirable psychological symptoms among international students, such as depression and feelings of loneliness (Berry, 2005).

In this study the terms acculturation and adjustment were used interchangeably because both terms are used in the literature pertaining to international students to refer to the same concept. The terms adjustment or acculturation have also been used to describe the process that migrants, which are a group of newcomers who intend to remain in Canada, begin after landing. In this study, Iranian international students have been referred to student migrants because of the intention most of them have to seek employment and remain in Canada upon the completion of their studies. There are also key existential terms which are central to this study; however, the complexity of the meaning of those terms require an in-depth explanation that goes beyond the scope of this section. In the following section, I will further explain those key existential terms and contextualize them as they relate to the experiences of international students.

Overview of Chapters

In this introductory chapter I provided a background about the profile of Iranian international students in Canada, addressed my positionality, and outlined the main purpose of the current study. In the following chapter, I provide a critical review of the existing literature pertaining to the acculturation experiences of international students, as well as existential psychological theories. I then make inferences from cross-cultural literature to conceptualize the underlying existential inquiries of international students during acculturation, providing the foundation for this study. In Chapter Three, I discuss my chosen qualitative methodology (i.e., IPA), and its theoretical underpinnings. Moreover, I outline details about the process of data collection and analysis. Following, in Chapter Four, I present the results and use examples from participants' narratives to define and substantiate my findings. In Chapter Five, I discuss the

results within the context of related literature and provide implications for future research and counselling practice.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Understanding the adjustment experiences of international students has long been an area of interest in research (Pendese & Arpana, 2017). Unsurprisingly, researchers have studied this topic from various perspectives over time, which has led to the development of different narratives regarding acculturation experiences. In particular, two review articles were published in 2004: one by Yoon and Portman published in *Journal of Multicultural Counselling*, and the other by Popadiuk and Arthur published in the *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*. Those review articles highlighted the patterns and gaps in literature on international students in counselling psychology. In this chapter, I begin by summarizing these two articles and then provide my analysis of the scholarly developments that have occurred since their initial publication. Finally, I demonstrate the link between existential issues and acculturation experience of international students—the focal point of the current study.

The 2004 Review Articles on International Student Literature

The critical review conducted by Yoon and Portman (2004) highlighted four reoccurring patterns within acculturation research. First, that there is a tendency for researchers to characterize international students as a homogeneous group and underemphasize their individual and cultural differences. This characterization lead to an overgeneralization of the findings to international students as a whole, rather than the subgroup that was studied. Second, researchers often focused upon adjustment challenges with the intention of helping international students better cope with these difficulties. However, this focus has primarily attributed adjustment challenges to personal factors, underemphasizing the environmental and social factors that are fundamental to such adjustment. Third, a great number of studies focused on identifying psychological problems, reflecting the dominance of viewing this population from a pathological

perspective. Yoon and Portman called for more studies on international students' strengths and resources and recommended a shift in perspective, from adjustment problems to adjustment challenges while also integrating a developmental point of view. For example, rather than conceptualizing international students from a deficiency model (e.g., lacking skills and self-confidence), regarding them as being in the process of developing important cultural skills. Fourth, Yoon and Portman identified that counsellors encouraged international students to adjust rapidly to their new culture. Albeit well-intentioned, this tendency may promote assimilation, while underemphasizing international students' process of negotiating their own cultural background. Accordingly, Yoon and Portman suggested that counsellors could facilitate their bicultural competence to both maintain their cultural identity and learn the new culture.

Similarly, the critical literature review by Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) found several patterns in the representation of international students. First, there was a preference for focusing on group characteristics rather than individual ones, reflecting an underlying homogeneous view. Second, a majority of researchers' conceptualizations of culture shock represented a maladaptive perspective rather than a normal and necessary response to encountering a new culture. Popadiuk and Arthur argued that culture shock models (i.e., U-curve and W-curve) fall short in considering the long-term acculturation experience. Based on these models, researchers have tended to view culture shock as a problematic phase that international students need to overcome, after which they are adjusted to the new culture and free from challenges. Third, the majority of studies investigated the array of problems and stressors faced by this population, while their strengths and resiliency, as well as their contribution to the host culture remained considerably understudied. Popadiuk and Arthur therefore suggested that more studies need to explore the cross-cultural experiences from a strength-based perspective. Their related recommendations for

counsellors included: (a) to improve their multicultural competence, (b) increase their knowledge about students' cultural backgrounds, and (c) develop a holistic understanding of acculturation.

My critical examination of the articles above demonstrates that researchers had a tendency to view international students as a homogeneous group. This was caused by overgeneralizing the experiences of a specific ethnic group to all international students while underemphasizing within group differences. Ultimately, this tendency lead to the assumption that all international students experience similar levels of stress and are overwhelmed by their cross-cultural adjustment. Both Yoon and Portman (2004) and Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) agreed that the major emphasis within the acculturation literature has been adjustment problems while students' resiliency and strengths have been understudied. In addition, both articles highlighted the importance of cultural awareness to better understand international students' experiences. Popadiuk and Arthur found that the culture shock models have a tendency to represent cultural adjustment as problematic. Further, Yoon and Portman mentioned that literature attributed their adjustment difficulties to personal factors, effectively viewing them through a pathologizing lens as opposed to taking on a developmental perspective that would consider the impacts of environmental and cultural factors.

Critical Review of International Student Literature since 2004

As an international student in the field of counselling psychology, the aforementioned critical reviews resonated with my understanding of the literature and encouraged me to write my own literature review using a critical lens. Therefore, I conducted a critical overview of the literature on the adjustment of international students following the publication of these review articles, from 2004 onwards. To begin, I used a database developed for a scoping review and aimed to examine the extent to which intersectional identities and social locations were

addressed in international student research in counselling psychology (Wada et al., 2018). The inclusion criteria that guided the selection of research articles consisted of studies on such students in higher education, colleges, universities, and ESL programs for academic preparation purposes. The exclusion criteria consisted of research articles about international students in primary schools, secondary schools, and ESL programs for non-academic purposes. This search yielded 80 articles, although some did not focus upon either acculturation or adjustment experiences. The database nonetheless provided me with the initial corpus of systematically identified literature. Subsequently, I took more of an iterative approach to searching, reading, and analyzing relevant articles. My intention throughout this process was to retain the literature that would be the most related to my research topic and aims. Accordingly, the articles that I have included in my review are those that I have deemed to be of importance and relevance when considering the existential and acculturation experiences of international students.

My critical review of research studies on international students' adjustment experiences represented four new patterns: (a) from finding problems to understanding the experience, (b) from psychological distress to positive aspects of acculturation, (c) normal and temporary as opposed to pathologic and permanent, and (d) neglecting the underlying existential concerns. In the following section, I elaborate these emerging patterns.

From Finding Problems to Understanding the Experience

The majority of research studies from the 90s and early 2000s focused primarily on explaining the main sources of 'problems' and 'difficulties', as well as identifying the factors and stressors that contributed to adjustment problems of international students (Sandhu, 1994; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Mori, 2000; Bradley, 2000; Yoon & Portman, 2004). These studies were mostly quantitative and identified numerous issues, including: (a) language barriers, (b)

academic pressures, (c) financial issues, (d) settlement and housing, (e) homesickness, (f) discrimination, (g) isolation, (h) culture shock, (i) feelings of loss and uncertainty, and (j) change of status from a majority to a minority.

In recent years, however, a shift has occurred to move away from identifying general stressors to describing the experiences of international students in detail—a shift that was in large part propelled by the use qualitative approaches (Lertora et al., 2017). Contemporary studies have sought to capture international students' personal stories to enrich counsellors' understanding of their struggles, successes, everyday experiences, and coping strategies.

For example, a phenomenological study conducted by Burkholder (2014) examined the lived experiences of Turkish international students in the U.S. and captured the concept of *loss of time*. Burkholder referred to this concept as time spent with loved ones and the related fear the students had of their loved ones dying while they were studying abroad. This finding reflects the importance of spending time with family and friends, as time spent apart is considered a significant loss. Burkholder also discussed the impact of the sociopolitical climate of Turkey in how Turkish students framed their acculturation experiences. For example, students referred to the large-scale migration of Turkish citizens to Germany in the 1960's as a historical event that significantly educated Turks about the experience of migration and cultural adjustment. Based on this collective understanding of Turkish immigrants, cultural adaptation as a result of cross-cultural encounters became a familiar experience for these students. Lertora et al. (2017) carried out a detailed exploration of the experiences of nine multinational students who relocated to rural Texas U.S. These students experienced difficulties commuting because of a lack of public transportation in rural Texas and the dependency of American culture on having a car. For some, not having a car contributed to the feeling of being different from Americans. Notably, some

students spoke about their positive experiences of having an acquaintance in the city, who helped them with their basic needs upon arrival (e.g., being picked up in the airport).

Interpersonal dynamics between domestic and international students has been further explored along the shift towards a developmentally and contextually informed model of inquiry. The challenge for international students in developing a bond with domestic students has long been identified as their main barrier to adjustment (Brunsting et al., 2018). The development of connections with domestic students was identified as a way to improve language proficiency, learn the new culture (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011), and develop a sense of belonging in the host country (Van Home et al., 2018; Han et al., 2017). Co-national friendships in turn was found to prevent progress in developing language skills and ultimately in adjustment (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Beyond focusing on the problematic outcome of a lack of connection with domestic students, recent qualitative studies further explored the meaning of such relationships for international students from their own perspective. For example, some studies found that even though they aspire to build friendships with domestic students, many of them fail to develop a meaningful relationship (e.g., Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). A qualitative study by Guo and Guo (2017) on the experience of 26 undergraduate multinational students in Canada demonstrated that language skills and lack of similar interests were the main barriers to communication and development of such a meaningful bond. Moreover, in Khawaja and Stallman's (2011) study on 22 international students in Australia, participants stated that they often did not feel that they were understood and included, which made it hard for them to collaborate with a group of Australian students. Despite these difficulties, they still showed interest in connecting with

domestic students by trying to expand their social skills, learning about hobbies enjoyed by domestic students, and intentionally making efforts to communicate with them.

Following from these difficulties, international students often seek friendships with other international students from their home country, as well as those and those from other cultures, due to their shared status and interests (Yan & Berliner, 2011). In addition, some studies have highlighted international students' interest in maintaining their relationship with friends and family back home. In a qualitative study that explored the experiences of seven Chinese international students studying in Australia, the participants reported that they relied heavily on their families and close friends back home for emotional support (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008). In addition to offering emotional support, relationships with family members back home provides a foundation for preserving one's identity and ties to one's culture throughout the disruption that is inherent to a cross-cultural transition (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Thus, realistically, there is a need to consider the importance of their relationships with fellow international students and families back home, even though bonding with domestic students is crucial for enhancing their adjustment (Berry, 2001).

Some researchers, including Sawir et al. (2008), argued that creating bonds between international and local students is a mutual responsibility; domestic students also need to show interest in understanding the culture and values of international students. Similarly, Berry (2000; 2001) mentioned that developing connections with locals and integration into the host culture is often successful when people from the host culture show interest in connecting with non-dominant groups. Overall, the studies examined above demonstrate how the academic focus has shifted from solely locating fault within international students for a lack of connection with local students to more broadly capturing their personal experiences navigating such relationships.

This shift to understanding international students' personal unique experiences is also representative of an effort to view them as a heterogeneous group. More recent studies have acknowledged that students' varied acculturation experiences were informed by personality differences, personal experiences, life circumstances (Unjore, 2014), age, gender, and major of study (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Similarly, Brown and Holloway (2008) described international students' acculturation as "dynamic" and "unpredictable" (p. 232), which may fluctuate throughout their journey and vary from person to person.

From Psychological Distress to Positive Aspects of Acculturation

The two review articles I introduced at the beginning of this chapter critiqued the simplistic and ethnocentric views of international students' acculturation processes. In particular, I highlighted the assumption that psychological distress is inevitable response to acculturation stressors. This assumption has remained somewhat fixed, since many contemporary studies have continued to explore a wide range of psychological symptoms resulting from acculturation stress (Wang et al., 2012). Depression, loneliness, social isolation, helplessness, loss of status, and identity conflict were identified as major psychological consequences (Brown & Brown, 2012; Kwon, 2009). However, my review of the literature reflected a gradual shift in this trend that emphasizes a developmental model of acculturation challenges and advocates for the importance of studying international students' strengths, growth, achievements, coping skills, and resiliency.

One notable example that reflects this shift is Moores and Popadiuk (2011)'s study on positive aspects of adjustment among seven multinational students in the U.S. The authors stated that the participants experienced a growing sense of confidence and developed new strengths and capabilities resulting from living independently. Some participants reported building relationship with American friends over time, as well as a sense of belonging in their new environment. They

also maintained their cultural identity by remaining connected with their families and cultures. They further experienced a broadening of their perspective and became more open-minded, which allowed them to see their culture of origin from other viewpoints. Despite facing hardship, participants gained insight into their challenges as a normal part of their cross-cultural experience. Moores and Popadiuk also highlighted their participants' sense of flexibility— to constantly readjust themselves and learn from new experiences. Similarly, other studies described international students as successful in coping with their adjustment challenges, among other positive attributes (e.g., Young et al., 2013). Lertora et al. (2017) and Burkholder (2014) illustrated that participants regarded their experiences as positive and constructive overall, despite challenges.

In contrast to the large body of literature that has problematized and pathologized international students, there is dearth of research about their strengths, resiliency, contributions to the internationalization of academic institutions, and positive aspects of adjustment. According to Popadiuk and Arthur (2004), this "problem-focused bias" (p.135) attributes blame to international students for being a burden to the educational system and not contributing to society. The following section discusses the mental well-being of international students in the process of acculturation in greater detail.

Normal and Temporary as Opposed to Pathologic and Permanent

Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) argued that traditional conceptualizations of transitional experiences portray culture shock as dysfunctional and maladaptive, and in so doing label international students as pathological. Consequently, international students are considered to have a deficit. More contemporary models, however, have acknowledged that psychological changes are inevitable and are in fact part of the normal process of adjustment (Berry, 2001,

2006; Brown & Halloway, 2008). In addition, by highlighting their potential to adapt over time, several research findings yielded results that fundamentally question the pre-existing notion of international students as permanently inadequate.

For instance, Brown & Brown (2012) demonstrated that psychological changes temporarily affected international students' mental health during the initial transitional process where they actively adapted to the new environment. In another study, Kambouropoulos (2014) found that psychosocial problems such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, homesickness, and lack of sense of belonging mostly affected international students in the first 12 months of their residence abroad. In both studies, participants gradually learned to cope with their difficulties within the transitional process. Examining the mental health of international students at a single time period (Brunsting et al., 2018), particularly from a pathologizing model of acculturation, are important points of consideration when reading research that conceives of international students' mental health difficulties as permanent. Smith and Khawaja (2011) argued that an alternative exploration requires a model that conceptualizes acculturation in the course of time.

Moreover, some studies opened up new grounds in conceptualizations of the mental well-being of international students, by underscoring the impacts of pre-existing mental health issues and cultural factors. In a longitudinal survey, Wang et al. (2012) followed the adjustment patterns of 507 Chinese students in the U.S. at four time periods: before arrival, first semester, second semester, and third semester. Their results showed that only ten percent of their sample reported high levels of psychological distress across all four time periods, including pre-arrival. Similar results were found by Unjore (2014) who urged individuals to consider the importance of assessing pre-existing and chronic mental health problems of individuals before attributing these conditions to cross-cultural transitions, as transition stressors can trigger or intensify pre-existing

problems. In addition, other studies have found additional factors that may contribute to psychological issues, both cultural or personal in nature. For example, Wei et al. (2012) analyzed the experiences of 143 East Asian graduate international students residing in the U.S and found that students' psychological stress was associated with their efforts to satisfy their supervisors while also facing barriers related to their English proficiency. This effort may reflect that making their supervisors proud has symbolic and cultural significance.

While the advancement towards a strengths focused model of acculturation should not be discounted, researchers have yet to explore the underlying existential forces that may be at the heart of international students' concerns. The following paragraphs further describes the fundamental concerns of international students.

Neglecting the Underlying Existential Concerns

The experience of crossing cultures can trigger feelings of meaninglessness, confusion, and isolation (Basma & Gibbons, 2016). Events such as New Year's Day or becoming ill can deepen one's sense of loneliness or meaning of life, which may not be alleviated even with social support (Sawir et al., 2008). These existential concerns have been universally described by philosophers and writers throughout history as a fundamental concern of humanity. Existential crises often occur when individuals experience high-anxiety periods, situational crisis (Andrews, 2016), or life-threatening situations that confront them with death (Yalom, 1980). International migration can trigger existential concerns because the challenges migrants experience can touch upon various underlying existential meanings, including: (a) loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008); (b) confusion about sense of identity, and the meaning of life (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Russo-Netzer, et al., 2019); (c) the loss of loved ones and material belongings (Basma & Gibbons, 2016); and (d) cultural identification and membership (Brown & Brown, 2012).

The losses and crises associated with migration may in fact prompt individuals to reflect on their existence. They may come face-to-face with their inevitable existential isolation, having to find meaning in suffering, ultimate freedom, and having to take responsibility for their lives (Basma & Gibbons, 2016). However, despite the well-established importance of understanding and facing these concerns, and the fact that cross-cultural transitions may give rise to them, there is little in the form of research exploring how international students experience them.

Despite the existential aspects of acculturation experiences, the feelings associated with acculturation stress have been labeled as maladaptive behaviours or as psychological problems (Yoon & Portman, 2004). For example, in his study on factors that contribute to the psychological distress of international students, Sandhu (1994) borrowed an example of an Afghan international student in Hull's (1987) study to portray the psychological nature of acculturation problems without exploring its existential nature:

> I am not doing anything but sitting in my room drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. None of this has any meaning. Sometimes I think I should just kill myself. My roommate thinks it is because I have no parents, no country, and no religion. The psychiatrist keeps giving me pills but they are not helping. Why do I feel like this? What should I do? My grades are O.K. (p. 307)

Sandhu (1994) concluded from the statement above that the interviewee was experiencing depressive symptoms resulting from acculturation stress. At the same time, the underlying emotions of the Afghan student may also represent existential inquires. The student discussed the absurdity of his life in the absence of loved ones, country, and religion, which constitute a sense of identity and personal meaning. The questions that he asks himself shows his engagement at a deep level of thinking about the meaning of his struggles, as well as his sense of personal

responsibility for his situation. Because such manifestations represent existential concerns, labeling them as psychological issues gives them a negative connotation, as opposed to the growth-promoting connotation associated with existential concerns. The lack of research into the underlying existential importance of such feelings has contributed to the overemphasis on these possible manifestations of existential inquires as pathological.

Thus, my aim is to fill the gap in the existing literature and explore how Iranian international students make sense of the existential concerns that may arise during acculturation. Adopting an existential viewpoint promotes a developmental and strength-based perspective that invites in the rich tradition of existential psychology. The following section describes the theory of existential psychology and its relevance to the experiences of this population.

Existential Psychological Theories

Existential psychology originated from philosophy (van Deurzen, 2012), and offers a way of thinking about human nature and their subjective experience of living in the world (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). The technical and dehumanized conditions of modern society expose individuals to fundamental questions about their existence such as, “Who am I?,” “What is the meaning of my life?,” “Is life worth living?” (Yalom & Josselson, 2014. p. 266). At the core of such existential questions, there exists essential realities about human nature. Yalom (1980) noted four fundamental concerns related to individuals’ existence in the world: (a) “death is in conflict with our unconscious desire to live”, (b) “freedom is in conflict with one’s freedom of choices and their responsibility to choose and being responsible for their choices and actions”, (c) “existential isolation refers to one’s inherent existential isolation”, and (d) meaninglessness comes with pressure of living a limited life that is as meaningfully as possible, “despite there being no structured plan or guidelines that guarantees one’s ultimate happiness or bliss” (Yalom,

1980, p. 8-9). According to Yalom, the challenge of being alive and living in this world eventually lead individuals to inquire about their existence. Even though confronting ultimate concerns or "givens of existence" remind individuals of their limits in life and thus provokes anxiety, facing them is often a transcendental experience (Yalom, 1980, p. 8).

Origins

Since the beginning of recorded history, philosophers, poets, writers, and theologians from different cultures have wrestled with ultimate concerns in various ways (Yalom, 1980). According to van Deurzen (2012), existential philosophy dates back 3000 years to the work of Socrates. He is known to have encouraged people to think deeply about their beliefs and the meaning of their existence in the world, effectively giving birth to existential therapy and counselling. The Greek philosopher Epicurus discussed the idea of mortality and the unconscious death anxiety that exists in human beings, which occasionally become conscious as a result of life-threatening circumstances (Yalom, 1980).

Definition

Rollo May explained that the word existence roots in the word "*ex-sistere*", which means "to stand out", "to emerge" (May, et al., 1958, p.12). As a result, existential psychology is about the human process of being, becoming, and emerging. This process is continuous because the world constantly faces us with new choices and responsibilities that prompt us to search for and construct meaning in our lives.

Beginning

Existentialism is the philosophy of the age of crisis, failure, deprivation and instability. The term existentialism came into formal use in the 1940s and 1950s, when people were grieving the profound losses of the World Wars. Citizens tried to make sense of those horrifying events, a

process that resulted in them encountering a new sense of meaninglessness and absurdity in life (van Deurzen, 2012). The dehumanized and fragmentized condition of postwar Western societies (May et al., 1958) and the emergence of industrialization led individuals to become alienated from each other and more importantly from themselves (May et al., 1958). Rollo May, in his book *Existence* (1958) stated that, “the sickness of the soul of the Western human” (p. 8) was beyond individual and social problems, and indeed was more about one’s relationship with themselves, their loss of will, and love in life.

Existential philosophy emerged in response to the split between truth and reality in the Western world (May et al., 1958). This split stemmed from the dominance of science and objective views of human nature over the subjective experience of the individual. Pioneering existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, along with other existentialists in Europe, described the truth of Western culture as being reflective of a mechanical view of people (van Deurzen, 2012). This view had made people out to be like machines to fit into the industrial and political collectivism of their time. For existential philosophers, the truth of human nature that was missing in this mechanical conceptualization was the personal lived experience of individuals and their *existence*. For Kierkegaard (1950), the main challenge of life was to find a truth, a reason, for which one can live and die. Other existential philosophers such as Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger argued for a new type of science that would focus on human subjectivity, and the reality in which “they immediately live, feel, and act" (May et al., 1958, p. 14). With regard to mental well-being, existential philosophers argued that anxiety, meaninglessness, isolation, loneliness, and isolation were not necessarily related to psychological disorders. Rather, those psychological manifestations reflected the common state of modern society where individuals had lost their genuine existential connection with themselves (May et al., 1958).

Ludwig Binswanger, a European psychotherapist, (1881-1966) is known as the first person to use existentialism within psychotherapy (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). In 1958, existential psychology was widely introduced to Americans through the publication *Existence* (May et al., 1958). The existential psychology that emerged in the U.S. was distinctly influenced by humanistic psychology. Therefore, existential psychology is often grouped with the broader field of humanistic psychology because both perspectives maintain a positive view of human potential. In North America existential psychology is widely recognized through the work of Irvin Yalom (1980).

Existential Theory of Personality

Existential psychology emerged to propose a new way of viewing human existence, focusing mainly on the meaningful and intimate way of living despite the mechanical and inauthentic culture of modernity (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). It borrowed its main conceptualization from the psychodynamic internal conflict model, which describes conscious and unconscious drives as being in conflict with each other (May & Yalom, 2000). In existential psychotherapy theory, the main conflict stems instead from the tension between individuals and their awareness of ultimate concerns (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). According to Yalom (1980), facing givens of existence provokes anxiety that individuals try to avoid by turning to one or more defense mechanisms in an effort to evade awareness of ultimate concerns. The concept of existential neurosis attributes the causality of psychological problems to a person’s inability to confront existential givens, which in turn leads them to living a life of inauthenticity.

International Students and Existential Concerns

The following section is devoted to explaining each of the existential concerns and its relevance to the acculturation experiences of international students. Since few studies explicitly

examined the existential concerns of international students, the link between these concerns and the experience of cross-cultural transition is not established. Given the paucity of literature, I made inferences from broader research on other population (e.g., immigrants) to explain the existential experiences of international students.

Meaning

Humans naturally seek meaning, yet there is no inherent meaning or set of guidelines for life, except what one creates for oneself (Yalom, 1980). This fundamental lack of meaning for existence, along with the meaning-seeking nature of people, creates the existential dilemma of meaninglessness. Existential meaning refers to a sense of purpose, cohesion, and direction that gives individuals a reason to pursue how they want to live despite the absurdity of the world around them (May & Yalom, 2000). Victor Frankl (2006) wrote in his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that humanity's primary motivation is to find meaning, which has vital importance for individuals—without it, we perish.

Existential meaning has been implicitly identified in some studies on international students. For example, researchers highlighted that experiencing unfamiliar cultural values and customs upon entering a new country is a challenge to one's sense of meaning (Sawir et al., 2008). This experience is often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty, identity crises, and a loss of purpose and meaning (Farnhum, 2004; Madison, 2006). Migrants have left home, a place where they have constructed a sense of meaning, direction, identity, and predictability in their lives (Madison, 2005). Becoming a minority and facing the unfamiliarity of the host culture can bring up the existential dilemma of meaninglessness wherein one questions the meaning of one's life (Basma & Gibbons, 2016).

The quest for existential meaning among migrants involves reconstructing the lost sense of meaning and direction. Often, migrants engage in a meaning-seeking exploration process in their new environment, during which they question their understanding of themselves and the meaning of their transition (Maglio et al., 2005). Ideally, this process results in a balance between maintaining a part of their culture of origin and adopting elements of the host culture (Berry, 2005). According to Berry's acculturation model, successful cross-cultural integration involves redefining and adopting values and habits from the new environment, while also incorporating elements of one's native culture and former experiences into one's new life structure (Berry, 2001, 2006). Meaning making helps immigrants to reframe their challenging circumstances as they strive to reflect on their life adversities and draw meaning and purpose from acculturation experiences (Maglio et al., 2005; Lau, 2015).

Meaning making has also been popular in the field of constructionist psychology, such psychologists have encouraged individuals to create personal meaning and purpose to carry on with their lives. Accordingly, some studies have explored the significance of meaning making as a way of dealing with acculturation stress and life challenges in the host culture. In particular, international students have been found to endorse meaning making as an effective strategy to cope with the stress of their cross-cultural transition. For example, Flynn (2011) surveyed 140 Chinese international students in Canada and found that meaning-making in the forms of *sense-making* and *benefit-making* were important means for students to process their acculturation stress. Flynn defined sense-making as contemplation, self-talk, and acceptance, whereas benefit-making referred as seeking opportunity, optimism, and enjoyment. Similarly, by surveying 606 Chinese international students in Australia, Pan et al., (2008) found that constructing a sense of meaning had a positive impact on their level of life satisfaction, and that meaning making

partially mediated the relationship between acculturative stress and life satisfaction. Accordingly, students who have a higher amount of acculturative stress are less likely to seek meaning, and therefore experience a lower level of life satisfaction. Thus, meaning-making positively contributes to the adjustment of migrants by motivating them to cope with the negative effects of transition and derive meaning from it challenges (Russo-Netzer et al., 2019).

A constructivist understanding of meaning, however, is different from existential conceptualizations. Existential meaning originates from facing the absurdity of one' meaning foundation and the lack of inherent purpose (Yalom, 1980). Although the aim of meaning making in both fields is fostering a sense of purpose and direction, existential meaning making pertains to the creation of meaning from one's encounter with existential meaninglessness. Due to the lack of literature about meaning-making among migrants, Russo-Netzer et al. (2019) suggested that future studies should explore the process of meaning-making among migrants. However, this exploration should also aim for a greater focus on existential meaning of acculturation challenges and international students' encounters with existential concerns.

Death

The impermanent nature of human existence is a reminder that there are limits to life—the inevitability of mortality (Langdridge, 2013). Death is known to be the ultimate existential concern and the origin of many of humanity's fears and anxieties (Yalom, 1980). Since the beginning of recorded history, there is an abundance of folklore that humankind has desired and sought to uncover the secret to transcend mortality——for example, the myth of Gilgamesh, who hunted for the elixir of life. People may also develop irrational beliefs and denial-based defence mechanisms to cope with their death anxiety (May & Yalom, 2000). Specialness and

invulnerability are two common irrational beliefs in relation to death as people unconsciously hold on to a belief that they alone are impervious to death (Yalom & Josselson, 2014).

Confrontation with death anxiety may lead to a radical positive shift in individuals' perspectives about their lives, and ultimately facilitate personal growth as individuals develop more appreciation for the blessing of being alive (May & Yalom, 2000). In Tolstoy's *The death of Ivan Ilych* (1981), he stated that it only takes becoming aware about one's mortality for one to be reminded about the necessity to find meaning in one's life. Such an awareness can prompt individuals to take responsibility for themselves and to live a more authentic life. Similarly, in *Mama and the Meaning of Life* (1999) and *The Schopenhauer Cure* (2005), Yalom describes his terminally ill patients' experiences of facing death as an awakening experience in which they learned that their life simply cannot be postponed. Relatedly, burgeoning research on posttraumatic growth (PTG) postulates that people who experienced traumatic events gain a renewed appreciation for life and relationships (Callhoun & Tedesch, 2006).

To my knowledge, there is little literature explicitly dealing with the experience of death anxiety among migrants, particularly international students. One reason for this might be that cross-cultural transitions do not necessarily confront them with the literal experience of death. However, migration contains covert elements of death and awareness of mortality due to experiences of loss and separation from loved ones (Basma & Gibbons, 2016). The intensity of losses associated with migration can be similar to experiencing the death of a loved one (Parkes, 1998), leading to the emergence of the term migratory grief. Migratory grief refers to the grief stemming from the separation from one's home country (Miller & Gonzalez, 2009). This experience of loss, however, is not solely limited to the loss of connection with loved ones. Loss in other forms such as "retirement, unemployment, and career transition all contain themes of

death or nonbeing at many levels" and are faced by immigrants (Maglio et al., 2005, p. 81). Similar results have been documented by Lau (2015) who studied the resettlement experiences of 20 skilled immigrants in Canada. Lau found that the loss of employment reflected a symbolic death of participants' identities and pre-migration accomplishments, which lead to an increase in their awareness of death. Therefore, migration can indeed provoke death anxiety; yet, it may manifest in forms of what Maglio et al. (2005) referred as "little deaths" (i.e., non-physical death such as loss of professional identity, p. 81).

International students, similar to immigrants, face migration losses for all that is left behind. Often, international students face multiple losses: (a) their mother language (Banjong, 2015); (b) a sense of belonging (van Horne et al., 2018); (c) significant relationships, and community support (Brown & Holloway, 2008); (d) shared values and native traditions (Brown & Brown, 2012); (e) financial security (Banjong, 2015; Kwon, 2009); and (f) social status, and a mastery of their previous environment (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Abstract losses, such as identity (Furnham, 2004; Kwon, 2009) are often dismissed. Brown and Holloway's (2008) ethnographical study highlighted that international students grieve their home culture and family relationships. Similarly, international students often report feelings of guilt, since they are physically absent from aging family members and are unable to provide ongoing care and support to significant others back home (Burkholder, 2014; Nesteruk, 2018). However, these losses are not socially acknowledged (Nesteruk, 2018), all the while international students are expected to adjust as quickly as possible (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Further, the existential aspect underlying such losses has remained understudied.

Isolation

Yalom (1980) introduced three types of isolation: (a) interpersonal, (b) intrapersonal, and (c) existential. Interpersonal isolation describes separation between oneself and other people, whereas intrapersonal isolation refers to becoming fragmented and dissociated within one's self and denying one's wishes and desires. These two types of isolation are more tangible and recognized forms of isolation in the literature than existential isolation, which represents a fundamental and inevitable sense of separation between one's existence and the world (Yalom, 1980). Existential form of loneliness may exist regardless of whether or not one has meaningful relationships and feels integrated within one's self. In fact, existential theorists argue that no relationship or entertainment can eliminate existential loneliness since it is rooted within the human experience of being born and dying alone (Yalom, 1980; May & Yalom, 2000).

Individuals are most confronted by their existential loneliness by the idea of nothingness, and death (Josselson & Yalom, 2014; Yalom, 1980). Such deep sense of isolation also arises when one is confronted feelings of not-being-at-home (Yalom, 1980; Heidegger, 1996). In *Being and Time* (1996), Martin Heidegger introduced the notion of *unheimlich* (in German), which translates to the *uncanny* or a feeling of not-being-at-home in the world. According to Heidegger (1996), our everyday life is often unremarkable and taken-for-granted, because individuals are busy with their default routines and familiar lifestyles. The feeling of not-being-at-home often occurs when a situation or condition (e.g., illness, accident) strips away the everyday familiarity and routine structures of individuals' lives and makes the world seem unfamiliar and precarious. In other words, from Heidegger's (1996) perspective there is an emptiness and nothingness embedded in the world and our existence; yet, this concept often hides away in the familiar and everyday life that individuals create for themselves. Running into life-changing experiences

brings one face-to-face with the loneliness and nothingness of the world and evokes uncanniness. Yalom (1980) further explains this concept:

> We are surrounded, "at home in," a stable world of familiar objects and institutions, a world in which all objects and beings are connected and interconnected many times over. We are lulled into a sense of cozy, familiar belongingness; the primordial world of vast emptiness and isolation is buried and silenced, only to speak in brief bursts during nightmares and mythic visions. Yet there are moments when the curtain of reality momentarily flutters open, and we catch a glimpse of the machinery backstage. In these moments, which I believe every self-reflective individual experiences, an instantaneous defamiliarization occurs when meanings are wrenched from objects, symbols disintegrate, and one is torn from one's moorings of "at-homeness." (p. 358)

Based on Yalom's statement, losing one's familiarity in the world provokes anxiety and a deep isolation from being a stranger in the world. For migrants, such deep experiences appear following separation from their home and families and "confrontation with the alien and the non-ordinary" environment of the new country (Madison, 2006, p. 19). Nevertheless, there is a noticeable dearth of information about such deep encounters with existential isolation

Research about feelings of isolation experienced by international students has primarily focused on exploring other forms of isolation, including interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation, also known as emotional isolation (Basma & Gibbons, 2016). One reason for this might be the nature of existential isolation—the researcher needs to access a much deeper level of participants' experiences than other forms of isolation which are more accessible (Yalom, 1980). Feelings of loneliness are often associated with the loss of connection with significant others and extended family members, while also becoming acquainted with an unfamiliar culture and

language (Sawir et al., 2008). Further, there are also losses of tangible sources of social and emotional support, which has been referred to as emotional isolation (Sawir et al., 2008). Qualitative researchers have highlighted emotional loneliness as a main challenge for international students during the early stages of their acculturation (Banjong, 2015; Kambouropoulos, 2014; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), suggesting that it that it could precipitate greater stress and depression, which in turn would impact students' adjustment and academic success (Banjong, 2015).

Homesickness is another common response of international students experiencing loneliness, or a sense of alienation and unfamiliarity in their new environment, particularly for those who migrate from a collectivistic society to an individualistic one (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). International students from collectivist societies like Iran, where the self is identified in relation to a group, rely heavily on their immediate and extended families for social and emotional support (Nahidi et al., 2018). Thus, being separated from one's family while facing the individualistic values of a host country exacerbates one's sense of emotional isolation (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). However, despite the large number of studies about emotional isolation, there have yet to be any studies about the experience of existential isolation among this population. One of my intentions in undertaking the current research is to move beyond a description of emotional isolation to achieve an understanding of the existential questions and dilemmas that accompany/underlie these emotional experiences

In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm (1956) describes how throughout history, humans have tried to overcome their isolation in different ways, only to find that love is the best means to compensate for the pain brought about by isolation. *Mature love* unites individuals for the purpose of overcoming isolation while still allowing them to preserve their internal integrity. In

order for there to be mature love, individuals need to confront and acknowledge existential isolation (Yalom, 1980). Counsellors can create a safe place for individuals to face and accept their existential feelings of isolation and help them foster opportunities to connect with those close to them so as to ease their pain of isolation (Basma & Gibbons, 2016; Yalom, 1980).

Freedom

The concept of existential freedom assumes that there is no predetermined or structured map to guide individuals in life (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). Other than the conditions imposed on people upon their birth (e.g., race, place of birth), humans have the freedom to choose how they want to live their lives and the kind of person they want to become (Yalom, 1980). This gift of freedom is simultaneously anxiety provoking because of individuals' intrinsic need to have structure in life and feel grounded (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). Facing existential freedom thus involves a conflict between one's awareness about the absence of external structure and one's natural desire for routine and structure (Yalom, 1980).

Freedom also comes with personal responsibility for the outcome of one's decisions, which, in existential psychology, is described as self-authorship or self-creation (Yalom, 1980). Sartre (1956) encapsulated this sense of responsibility when he stated that human beings are "condemned to freedom" (p. 631). In *When Nitche Wept,* Yalom (1992) referred to freedom as an inescapable responsibility for life decisions. Awareness of self-creation may face individuals with the underlying feelings of groundlessness (Yalom, 1980). Yalom (1980) argued that groundlessness is the most "fundamental anxiety, an anxiety that cuts deeper even than the anxiety associated with death," because it faces individuals with their absolute isolation and the absurdity of life (p. 221). This existential feeling becomes apparent in decision making or autonomous actions, when one realizes that there is no "structure, grand design, magic, or

something bigger than them" that can make decisions for them or guide their lives (Yalom, 1980, p. 222). Rather, it is solely an individual responsibility to make decisions and be accountable for the outcomes. Therefore, individuals attempt avoid the anxiety of groundlessness by shying away from situations that would make them aware of this fundamental concern, such as decision making. Nevertheless, an important part of individuals' responsibility includes coming to terms with the limits of one's existence.

While away from home, many international students are exposed to a world that is often quite different from their home country and are confronted with an array of choices and decisions. Moreover, student life has been described as "open, fluid and flexible", carrying within it an inherent "freedom" (Sawir et al., 2008, p. 128) that forces individuals to decide the direction of their life and be responsible for their choices (Sawir et al., 2008; Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). Even though the nature of cross-cultural transitions inevitably facilitates international students' confrontation with concepts of freedom and responsibility, researchers have yet to explore these concepts in an existential sense.

In one study of existential freedom in the context of resettlement, Basma and Gibbons (2016) noted that Arab immigrants' migration prompted feelings of anxiety and confusion. Participants' existential inquiries were caused by the differences between Middle Eastern cultural and religious values and those in the West. For example, Muslim Arab immigrants' belief in Fatalism, "the belief in a predetermined way of life that is governed by God" (Basma & Gibbons, 2016, p. 156), clashes with individualistic notions of freedom and self-authorship in the West. This existential confrontation was profound for participants because it challenged their worldview and understanding of human freedom.

Using an existential framework in counselling has helped individuals to acknowledge their responsibility in owning their thoughts, feelings, actions, and responses (Basma & Gibbons, 2016). This is particularly important due to role of decision-making and action-taking in the adjustment of migrants and immigrants, which has been shown to be an important coping strategy (Lau, 2015). Using action-based strategies when encountering postmigration barriers and stressors represents a sense of freedom and responsibility in creating their own desired outcome, while it also brings forth the underlying feelings of uncertainty and groundlessness. By addressing the existential concerns of international students, counsellors can assist them with taking on responsibility in life and acknowledge groundlessness (Yalom, 1980), isolation, meaninglessness, and death anxiety. In so doing, individuals can live more authentically (Heidegger, 1996).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the existing literature that informed existential experiences of international students in the context of their acculturation. I began by summarizing two critical review articles published in 2004 by Yoon and Portman, and Popadiuk and Arthur on presentation of international students in the literature. Then, I provided my critical analysis of the development of research on adjustment of this population from 2004 onwards. My literature review highlighted that the current literature is moving towards indicating a more developmental and heterogeneous perspective by attempting to understand their unique lived experiences as well as their growth, strengths, and coping strategies.

However, the existing literature provides limited insight into the existential experiences of international students despite the role of cross-cultural transition in prompting individuals to reflect on their existence. Alternatively, possible underlying manifestations of existential

concerns such as the loss of meaning and purpose were mainly identified as psychological issues— anxiety and depression. In addition, this possible misrepresentation overshadows the rich and strength-based tradition of existential psychology, reflecting on which may facilitate their adjustment. The combination of extant literature across the fields of migration and immigration on the issue of existential concerns provides a foundation and an objective for an investigation into the existential experiences of Iranian international students. In the following chapter, I present how and why I chose a particular qualitive research methodology to meet this research purpose.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In the present study, I interviewed Iranian international students about their existential experiences to answer the following question: How do Iranian international students make sense of their existential concerns during their acculturation in Canada? In this chapter, I present description of the methodological framework and theoretical tenets of IPA, followed by my rationale for choosing IPA as my methodology of choice to address my research question. I also describe the process of recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Following this, I address the issues of language and translation, reflexivity, and ethics. Lastly, I discuss methods of evaluating the rigor and quality of the qualitative research.

An Overview of IPA

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodological framework in psychology that mainly examines the personal meaning of particular life experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA was developed in 1996 by Jonathan Smith as an experiential research methodology in health psychology (Smith & Osborn, 2015). It particularly explores individuals' lived experiences and examines how they make meaning of the particular situations they are facing such as personal life events (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In other words, it is concerned with identifying "what *matters* to participants, and then what these things *mean* to participants" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 105). IPA's exploration of meaning and sense-making reflects the role of cognitive psychology as its foundation (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA examines how people understand a significant object or event that is happening in their lives (Smith et al., 2009). IPA draws upon three theoretical underpinnings: (a) phenomenology, (b) hermeneutic, and (c) idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Together, these underpinnings represent an interpretive phenomenological epistemology (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). In the following

paragraphs, I explain each of these theoretical underpinnings and discuss their influence on the development of IPA as a methodology.

Husserlian Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of phenomena—their nature and meanings (Smith et al., 2009). Historically, phenomenology was founded by the German philosopher Edmond Husserl (1859-1838) for the purpose of describing individuals' lived experiences without incorporating any preconception about the meaning of those experiences (Hein & Austin, 2001). For Husserl, phenomenology involved studying the nature of a phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) "in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12), and the key for arriving at this understanding is through focusing on consciousness (Smith et al., 2009). Individuals are required to make conscious efforts to be aware of their perceptions, memories, or wishes, thus developing a phenomenological attitude. This phenomenological attitude allows individuals to suspend their presuppositions and "the taken for granted world" in order to focus on their conscious perception of the world, including thoughts, memories, judgements, and values (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13). By adopting a phenomenological attitude, Husserl aimed to arrive at the universal structure of a phenomenon.

To discern the exact nature of a phenomenon, Husserl proposed the process of suspending or bracketing (Hein & Austin, 2001). Bracketing refers to putting aside one's pre-existing theoretical and scientific knowledge (Finlay, 2011) as well as preconceptions and personal views of the phenomenon being studied (Hein & Austin, 2001). By putting aside previous understandings of a phenomenon, one obtains a pure essence of the experience. In everyday life, individuals tend to interpret and categorize things in their mind based on previous subjective experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions, which may be imposed onto the

research (Smith et al., 2009). By requiring that researchers bracket their assumptions and personal experiences, Husserl's phenomenology aims to *transcend* everyday assumptions to view the subject of study naturally or without bias (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

By highlighting the importance of describing lived experiences, Husserl's phenomenology opened up a new perspective in qualitative research. IPA incorporates the key concept of Husserlian phenomenology which emphasizes studying human experiences through the first-person accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The way IPA diverges from Husserlian phenomenology is through capturing the meaning of a particular experience as lived by a particular person, rather than focusing on the essential quality of a given experience (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, in IPA the researcher's preconceptions are not considered disruptive to the process of data analysis, yet in turn they contribute to interpretation of data and the process of researcher reflexivity. IPA uses bracketing to not simply put aside the researcher's subjective assumptions—as practiced in Husserlian phenomenology, but to acknowledge and make sense of one's biases and preconceptions (Smith et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Husserlian phenomenology played a significant role in the development of the phenomenological foundation for IPA.

Heideggerian Existential Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl's, further developed the notion of transcendental phenomenology to describe the human experience, and his work resulted in the development of existential and hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger argued that prior to understanding the human experience is understanding human existence, which is tied to one's experience of being-in-the-world (Hein & Austin, 2001). He also emphasised that understanding is always through interpretation. Thus, Heidegger's phenomenology examines an interpretive understanding of being in the world (Heidegger, 1996).

The existential aspect of Heidegger's phenomenology emphasizes the meaning of human existence (Harris, 2016). Through his existential phenomenology, Heidegger highlighted the significance of being-in-the-word and its meaning for individuals as a phenomenon that can be studied itself—a concept that he referred as *Dasein* (Hein & Austin, 2001). Dasein is a German word which means "human being" and consists of "*da* meaning *there* and *sein* meaning *to be*; thus, Dasein literally means there-being" (Kennedy, 2014, p. 52). The concept of Dasein refers to the experience of existence or "the situated meaning of a human in the world" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). In his phenomenology, Heidegger reflected on the human issues people encounter as a result of their existence and how they make sense of those issues (Finlay, 2011). For example, "aging and death, being and becoming, embodiment and identity, choice and meaninglessness, belonging and needs, freedom and oppression" (Finlay, 2011, p. 19). Moreover, for individuals the experience of being-in-the-world and its meaning is influenced by their place of birth, language, culture, and historical context (Heidegger, 1996). Therefore, considering social context in the phenomenological understanding of one's existence is essential.

The complementary part of Heidegger's phenomenological framework is hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation and meaning, which examines the inevitable interpretation embedded in understanding (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Kennedy, 2014). Historically, hermeneutic roots go back to the interpretation of bible text and afterward developed as a philosophical approach for the interpretation of different literary works (Smith et al., 2009). The main objective of hermeneutics is to reveal the meaning of the text, particularly the original meaning that authors intended to communicate.

For two main reasons hermeneutics places value on interpretation and eliciting contextual meaning from participants' accounts as described in the following paragraphs. First, meaning is

often hidden and implicit in participants' accounts. Finlay (2011) argued that interpretation in turn helps to draw out the explicit meaning of lived experiences in the context of individuals' particular life circumstances and fully uncover the meaning of a phenomenon. Moreover, human beings often resort to poetry and other artistic forms of expression to relate the meaning of their experiences. Sometimes these mediums serve to communicate meaning more powerfully than through linguistic accounts (Hein & Austin, 2001). The interpretive aspect of hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges novel ways of expressing meaning and explores the underlying significance of such expressions to better understand the lived experiences (Finlay, 2011).

The second reason why hermeneutics emphasizes interpretation is that producing pure knowledge about a phenomenon is impossible (Reiners, 2012). According to Hein and Austin (2001), Heidegger rejected the idea of producing pure knowledge that is untouched by interpretations; instead, he understood that individuals are always influenced by contextual factors that impact their understanding of phenomena. Therefore, researchers cannot detach from their personal understanding of an object during data analysis (Hein & Austin, 2001). In fact, they become involved with the data to such an extent that they come to empathize with participants' experiences—because they automatically draw on their own experiences or understanding of the situation being studied (Finlay, 2011). The extent to which researchers relate to participants' experiences depends on their own subjective world and the degree to which it bears similarity with the phenomenon being studied.

The Hermeneutic Circle

The concept of the hermeneutic circle refers to the complementary and "dynamic relation between the part and the whole" in texts (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). The hermeneutic circle, unlike its definition, does not involve going through circles of reading (Grondin, 2017).

The concept of circle refers to the "unity" and "coherence" that is fundamental to understanding any kind of text (Grondin, 2017, p. 4). To understand the entire meaning of a text, considering its parts including sentences, phrases is essential (Smith et al., 2009). Similarly, to obtain a coherent understanding of a part of a text, one also needs to zoom out and consider the text holistically and contextually.

van Manen (1997) describes the hermeneutic circle as the interplay of attaining to the data at three levels of interpretation. First, researchers should read the whole transcript and highlight key phrases that reflect the ultimate message of the participant. Second, through selective readings, the researcher looks for important sentences. Third, through detailed reading, the researcher examines the significant sentences to analyze the underlying meaning of each of them with respect to the phenomenon. The process of analysis is dynamic and demonstrates a unique style of interpretation that requires the researcher to move back and forth between different stages and to consider each piece in the context of the entire text. IPA researchers consider each section of the transcript in the context of the whole transcript; however, the meaning of the whole transcript consists of each section of the transcript (Laverty, 2003).

Double-Hermeneutic

In the process of interpreting a participant's psychological world, the researcher's world and experiences inevitably come into play and create a shared and "intersubjective space" (Finlay, 2011, p. 113). Double hermeneutic explains the dual level of interpretation that occurs in the process of analysis, (a) participants try to make sense of a phenomenon and (b) researchers try to interpret participants' interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). This notion highlights that the findings of IPA studies always reflect the interpretation of the researchers, as it is their attempt

to understand and share the participant's account of their own meaning-making. Therefore, researchers' biases, perceptions, and worldviews may impact their interpretation of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Awareness about the role of double hermeneutic in data analysis and results of IPA studies can make researchers mindful of their own impacts as they are trying to understand participants' experiences.

Idiography and IPA

In addition to the hermeneutic circle and double hermeneutic, idiography is the third theoretical orientation that IPA draws upon (Smith et al., 2009). The term idiography originates from the Greek word "idios", which means "personal or private" (Abbot, 2001, p. 9). The idiographic approach to research focuses on detailed analysis of each individual's experiences and assumes that the results cannot apply to anybody else. The idiographic approach developed as a response to the nomothetic approach, which originates from the Greek word "nomos" meaning law (Abbott, 2001, p. 10). Nomothetic approaches assume that people share similar characteristics, thus psychological studies can create general scientific laws about human behaviours that apply to all people (Abbott, 2001). Therefore, nomothetical approaches employ large samples in an effort to arrive at "causal laws" about individuals' psychological behaviours (Smith et al. 2009, p. 59). Since most studies in psychology have historically relied on nomothetical assumptions, Smith et al. (1995) argued that in order to move psychology forward as a science, the examination of the experiences of individuals in their own context is required. According to Smith et al. (2009) cautioned against informing our understanding of individual accounts based on the results of nomothetical analysis because the uniqueness of individuals' experiences is lost when one makes statistical claims about their experiences.

Idiography centers on individuals, placing emphasis on detailed and in-depth descriptions of personal perceptions and experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The goal of data analysis in idiographic research is to draw inferences about personal meaning within specific contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The focus of idiography on particular cases and experience makes it suitable for single-case studies (Smith et al., 2009). For studies with multiple cases, purposive sampling is used to target a small and relatively homogeneous sample——"a closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 28). The results of each study based on idiographic approaches can generate new insights about the particular phenomenon being studied and employ a new way of "theorizing experiences rather than empirical generalizability" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 28).

The current study employed an idiographic approach by recruiting a small sample of international students and studying their particular experiences of a particular phenomenon—more specifically, existential concerns experienced by Iranian international students. To maintain the idiographic approach, I asked questions about their emotions, specific moments of joy or hardship, actions, wishes, and struggles in great details. In the process of data analysis, I explored each individual's unique lived experiences and perspectives and how they attributed meaning to those experiences.

Selecting a Qualitative Methodology

Larkin (2015) argues that choosing a particular methodology is similar to choosing to view your data from a particular perspective. All qualitative studies are concerned with the meaning of a certain object or an event for participants embedded in their contexts. What differentiates qualitative studies from one another are the research question(s) and the epistemological and theoretical tenets that underpin the research question(s). To choose a

methodological approach, researchers should explore the relevant literature to narrow the specific question(s) they will attempt to answer, define how they will interpret participants' accounts, and have a clear sense of the gap in the literature that their study will address. The objective of my study was to use a qualitative research approach to examine the existential experiences of Iranian international students and explore the meanings they perceive as a result of facing existential concerns. I was particularly curious about participants' thoughts and emotions associated with encountering issues related to human existence. IPA is a suitable approach for my research question for several reasons as described in the following paragraphs.

First, emerging from the phenomenological tradition, IPA focuses on subjective personal experiences, which matches with the epistemological position of my research question. More importantly, phenomenological research pays attention to fundamental existential concerns related to the experience of being in the world, such as death, freedom, and meaninglessness (Willig & Billin, 2011). Second, IPA employs an in-depth and detailed analysis of individuals' interpretation of a significant life situation they are facing and explores their embodied experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Due to the complexity and the depth of existential concerns, my research question required a methodology that goes beyond the study of everyday experiences and allows for deeper levels of analysis concerning the significance of individuals' experiences. For example, a methodology that examines "how it is for them to be in a particular situation" and "what it is like to have a particular experience" (Willig & Billin, 2011, p. 118).

Third, IPA is a methodological approach that is suitable for studies that are emotionally complex (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA allows for the examination of cognitive, emotional, existential, and linguistic states of participants, and careful interpretation of their mental and emotional states from their personal accounts (Smith et al., 2009). As such, this multi-

dimensional analysis of participants' states leads to a rich analysis that aims to capture "the totality of a person" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 26). Fourth, IPA acknowledges and allows for consideration of researchers' influence on the research process, and their understandings of the phenomena of study (Smith et al., 2009). Given the recommendation that the researchers engage in reflexivity to understand their preconceptions of the phenomena of interest I include in this chapter a reflection about how my interest in this research topic came about as a result of my personal experiences facing existential concerns.

Participants Recruitment

There are no specific guidelines in IPA about what constitutes an appropriate sample size (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). However, IPA research often utilizes small sample sizes due to its idiographic theoretical orientation. Using a small sample serves the purpose of IPA to obtain accounts that are rich in meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The quality and richness of accounts takes precedence in IPA studies over the number of participants and those two objectives are only attainable by investigating the experiences of a small sample (Smith & Osborn, 2015). As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), three to six people constitute a reasonable number of participants in IPA studies, which allows the researcher to gather enough meaningful accounts to create themes without being overwhelmed by the amount of data. A small sample size warrants engaging in purposive sampling among those who share a particular lived experience that corresponds with the research question. In the next section, I describe how I narrowed down my sample and defined the characteristics required from potential participants.

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria for this study were (a) being an Iranian international student in a degree program, (b) coming to Canada directly from Iran and holding a temporary student visa to

study in Canada, (c) having lived in Canada at least for six months, (d) being fluent in Persian (Farsi), and being willing to speak about personal experiences in detail. For the purpose of this study, being an Iranian international student was defined as being an Iranian citizen, having been raised in Iran, and having Persian as their mother language. Participants must hold a temporary student visa and have lived in Canada for more than six months at the time of participation to be eligible to participate in this study. This residency requirement served to locate international students who had had the opportunity to navigate their new environment and try to meet their basic needs (e.g., housing), as well as to gain some experience living abroad.

Recruitment Procedure

Recruiting participants for this study began after receiving approval from the Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (Appendix A). I recruited participants using different strategies. Initially, posted my recruitment letter on Iranian international students' group chats and Iranian Graduate Students' Association group chat in Telegram—an instant messaging application similar to Messenger, which is popular among Iranians. Afterwards, I posted copies of my recruitment poster on notice boards at various locations on the University of Calgary's main campus. I then made use of online recruitment by posting my recruitment letter (Appendix B) on my social media profiles (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn).

A total of nine potential participants contacted me to express interest in taking part in my study. In my initial response, I introduced myself and the purpose of my study (Appendix A) and outlined the eligibility criteria. Out of the nine people who expressed interest, three did not meet the inclusion criteria because they were not in a degree program or did not hold a student visa. The remaining six volunteers were then contacted by email to schedule the first interview and later on the second interview. I also sent each participant the informed consent form (Appendix

C) in advance to inform them about the study in more detail. All participants were living in Western Canada and all the interviews were held at private workspaces in the library.

Data Collection

Interviewing is a predominant forms of data collection in qualitative research (Suzuki & Nagata, 2018). A qualitative research interview is a professional form of conversation between an interviewee and an interviewer with the purpose of obtaining knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The data are mainly constructed from the interaction and exchange of views between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The key instrument for obtaining data is the interviewer, who is required to have interviewing skills and knowledge about the phenomenon being studied (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The semi-structured one-on-one interview is a preferred way of collecting data in IPA studies (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The semi-structured interview, by nature, is a purposeful and open conversation about participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are more flexible than structured interviews, in which the interviewer asks a predetermined set of questions in a sequential manner. Instead, in semi-structured interviews the interviewer maintains a balance between the researcher guiding the interview and giving space to participants to lead the conversation (McCormack & Joseph, 2018). This flexibility allows for the development of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees and facilitates detailed personal discussions about experiences of participants (Smith et al., 2009).

I recruited six participants with whom I conducted two semi-structured interviews in the Persian language. I met them twice over the span of two months and each interview lasted one-to-two hours. All 12 interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of the first interview, I explained to my participants the aim and the procedure of this research,

guided them through the informed consent form, and explained possible ethical concerns and the risks and benefits associated with participation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). During the first interview, I clarified that I would inquire about their general experience of international migration and its impact on them and their lives, whereas we would have a more in-depth conversation about existential concerns in the second interview (Appendix G). At this time, I also explained that a Persian speaking research assistant external to the University of Calgary would transcribe the data. I explained that this person would be required to sign a confidentiality agreement form (Appendix H) and would not have access to participants' consent and demographic forms.

Existential Concerns and Art

During the design stage of my study, several dilemmas surfaced that required me to go through a process of decision making. The most challenging dilemma was whether or not to use the term existential concerns in my recruitment materials. In conversations with my thesis supervisor, we foresaw the possibility of discouraging potential volunteers to participant in the study by using this term that sounds too much like an academic jargon. Thus, we are afraid of deterring potential participants who may have encountered existential concerns but feel intimidated by the perceived need to express their abstract thoughts in a philosophical manner. They might therefore not consider themselves eligible to participant in the study. Moreover, we wondered how to establish a relationship where participants feel comfortable discussing existential concerns in a natural and sensitive way with the researcher whom they meet for the first time. We anticipated the difficulty of reaching a deep level of conversation in a-90-minute interview. To pre-empt these challenges, we implemented several strategies as described in the following paragraphs.

First, I decided to avoid using the term existential concerns in my recruitment poster. Instead, once participants who saw the letter contacted me, I responded to them with the recruitment letter in which I clearly explained the purpose of this study. I particularly mentioned that the aim of this study is to go beyond what we already know about international students' challenges by asking participants to reflect on their experiences at an existential level (Appendix A). Moreover, I thought about defining existential concerns in simple ways using examples that define existential concerns, as well as language equivalence in English and Persian (Appendix A). I used those definitions in recruitment materials and during the interviews.

Second, to be able to get to an existential level in conversation, I decided to have two interviews with each participant. I designed the first interview to get to know the participants and ask general questions about their sojourn experiences. At the end of the first interview, I asked participants to bring pieces of art (e.g., painting, photography, poem) that represented their personal feelings and experiences in order for us to reflect on their meaning in the second interview. Art is often considered a visual language (Eubanks, 1997) that allows for the expression of people's intentions and emotions in creative, powerful, and spontaneous ways. In fact, some believe art is a more effective means to convey complex concepts compared to words (Godman, 1976). Existential concerns in particular have long been represented in different forms of artistic expression that ultimately led to the development of existential art therapy as a creative way of dealing with existential concerns (Moon, 1995). The use of visual and written art brought by participants enriched our conversations and facilitated their expressions of powerful emotions and deep thoughts about their experiences. Our discussions, however, varied to some extent based on the piece of art that they brought with them to the interview and their insight and awareness of their existential experiences. Out of six participants, two brought poems, one

brought music, and two brought keepsakes that were gifted to them by their loved ones before moving to Canada. My intention was not to analyze the pieces of art that they brought to the interview sessions. Rather, I intended to elicit rich data from probing participants about the significance of those meaningful elements for them.

Furthermore, in the second interview, I inquired about their personal existential experiences during their adjustment. To facilitate the conversations about existential experiences, I presented participants with cards that had existential concerns written on them (i.e., loneliness, anxiety, identity, meaning, freedom, death, guilt, and responsibility). The cards served the function of a keyword to prompt them for existential experiences. Moreover, my follow-up questions about their experiences including their feelings, thoughts, actions, and challenges directed our conversation to a deeper level.

Data Analysis

The main purpose of IPA is to unpack the meaning of participants' experiences. Doing so requires the researcher's prolonged engagement with transcripts to be able to enter participants' world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA provides a flexible procedure that guides researchers in conducting analysis in a systematic way, while also welcoming their personal creativity and different ways of interpreting data (Smith, 2017).

Analysis Procedure

I followed the procedure outlined by Smith et al. (2009), which describes data analysis using IPA in an instructive and step-by-step fashion. These steps involve: "(a) reading and re-reading each transcript, (b) initial noting, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) clustering and identifying patterns among emerging themes, (e) moving to the next case, and (f) looking for patterns across cases" (p. 82). As recommended by Smith and Osborn (2015) and Smith et al.,

(2009), I was careful not to carry out these in a linear way since IPA is not prescriptive and rigid in nature. Rather, I adopted a hermeneutic circle perspective and followed the steps in a dynamic and flexible way—moved back and forth between the steps and considered both the parts and the whole. In the following paragraphs, I describe my analytical process that followed the guiding principles of Smith et al. (2009) and provide examples to illustrate each step.

Multiple Reading and Initial Noting. The first step of analysis requires researchers to fully immerse themselves in the data as a way to step into their participants' world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Through multiple readings of the transcripts, researchers grow more familiar with the account of each participant leading them to develop new insights. It is important to highlight rich parts of the data in which participants disclose how a particular experience was significant to them. As Smith and Osborn (2015) and Smith et al. (2009) recommend, researchers should be constantly mindful of their purpose to make meaning of what is important in the eyes of participants.

While I read each transcript multiple times, I also highlighted significant parts in them, according to the first two steps on the IPA procedure. There is no rule associated with how researchers should comment upon the data and how they may treat the process of initial noting as a "free textual analysis" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). However, the process of making notes occurs at three levels—descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive comments should focus on the literal content of participants' accounts and serve to paraphrase or summarize the most relevant aspects of it (i.e., the most meaningful to participants). Linguistic comments should bring to attention participants' use of important language such as repetitions, use of symbols, contradictions, as well as capture their emotional responses including laughter and becoming teary. Conceptual comments should contain

preliminary interpretations of the researcher about the broader meaning of participants' experiences. Aligned with the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009), I summarized my descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, in a separate document. Table 1 contains an example of my initial notes, in which descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments are demonstrated in regular, italicized, and underlined text respectfully.

Table 1

Sample of Initial Notation

Original Transcript	Initial Notations
Interviewer: What I understand from you is that you are really trying to blend into the society. **Participant**: Unlike before, I don't see myself different from my Canadian friends anymore. However, there are some memories and cultural issues that I cannot share with them... I mean, I can, but it's not as meaningful and they might not have any interest in them. You know, in general Western culture is more privileged and more accepted among people. So, I am more eager to know about their culture rather than introducing my culture to them. In addition, because I live in Canada, I need to know more their culture not mine.	- Unable to share deep cultural concept with Canadian friends. - She figured out that if she shows more interest in the host culture, she feels less difference between herself and her friends. - Reflecting the supremacy of western culture over her cultural background. - Portraying the reality of her culture being in minority - <u>Is she silencing herself and her cultural interests in her interaction with Canadians?</u> - <u>Does this attitude reflect a pressure for assimilation?</u> - *'you know?': Seeks my understanding and affirmation of her perception about* - *'I mean': she corrected herself and shared a deeper level insight about the meaning of her communication with her friends*

Developing Emergent Themes. At this stage, I went through my initial notes and transformed them into emerging themes. The emergent themes are concise phrases of participants' statements that aim to represent both the most important information shared in

participants' original accounts, and the psychological meaning that I interpreted from their statements. The notion of hermeneutic circle played out more significantly in this part of analysis as I was focusing on their statements in each section of the transcript while being influenced by my interpretation of the whole transcripts. For example, one of the participants shared that she was "feeling stupid" in the new environment and was performing very poorly even in "simple academic tasks". Based on this part of her narrative, I interpreted her experience as lack of self-esteem in the new academic environment impacting her performance. However, considering her experiences in the context of the entire transcript, I understood that her lack of self-esteem was not only related to her newcomer status, yet a pre-existing issue that she was also experiencing in Iran. Therefore, at this stage I considered the dynamic relationship between each part and the entire transcript and moved back and forth between them. Table 2 contains an example of the development of emergent themes.

Connecting Emergent Themes and Looking for Patterns across Cases. After developing emergent themes, this stage involved clustering themes and looking for connections across them. To facilitate the process of organizing the emergent themes, I began with listing all of them based on their chronological order in each transcript. I later grouped them together with similar concepts and provided each cluster with a superordinate descriptive phrase. I also removed the themes that were not fitting with the new emerging list of subthemes. After creating superordinate themes, I searched for connection among them to develop overarching themes, which required a comprehensive understanding of the data. I created a graphic illustration of the process of developing emergent themes, grouping them into subthemes, and the emergence of superordinate and overarching themes. I completed this process for each transcript before moving to the next case. The reason the entire steps of data analysis in IPA studies should be

completed for every individual case before analyzing across cases is the importance of maintaining the individual nuances of each transcript due to its idiographic framework. After completing data analysis within each case, I sought patterns across cases. I used all six graphic illustrations that I created for each case to facilitate integrating and reorganizing the existing themes, and to develop a master abstract of the entire accounts of participants.

Table 2

Sample of the Development of Emergent Themes

Original Transcript	Initial Notation	Emergent Themes
Interviewer: What I understand from you is that you are really trying to blend into the society. **Participant**: Well, yes… and unlike before, I don't see myself different from my Canadian friends anymore. However, there are some nostalgic memories and cultural issues that I cannot share with them... I mean, I can, but it's not as meaningful as sharing it with my Iranian friends. It also depends on how much attention and interest they show in the topic. You know, in general Western culture is more privileged and more accepted among people. So, I am more eager to know about their culture rather than introducing my culture to them. In addition, because	- Unable to share deep cultural concept with Canadian friends. - She figured out that if she shows more interest in the host culture, she feels less different from her friends. - Reflecting the supremacy of western culture over her cultural background. - Portraying the reality of her culture being in minority - Receiving less curiosity about her cultural background? - Is she silencing herself and her cultural interests in her interaction with Canadians? - Does this attitude reflect a pressure for assimilation? - *'you know?': Seeks my understanding*	- Lack of deep cultural understanding - Felt sense of closeness to Canadian friends - Western supremacy attitude - Cultural minority - Self-scrutinizing/ self-effacing her interests - Assimilation characteristics

I live in Canada, I need to know more their culture not mine.	*and affirmation of her perception* - *'I mean': she corrected herself and shared a deeper level insight about the meaning of her communication with her friends*

I summarized the findings of my data analysis in table form, which demonstrated the development of overarching, superordinate, and subthemes for all cases (Table 3). Lastly, I wrote a narrative account about participants' experiences using their phrases to allow for the presence of their own perspectives. I also included participants' accounts about contextual factors that influenced their experiences, as well as my interpretation of those impacts on their cross-cultural experiences. I included part of these accounts at the beginning of the Chapter Four.

Balancing the Act of Attending to Existential Issues and Overinterpretation

During data analysis, it was particularly important to keep my research question in mind and unpack participants' general cross-cultural experiences to arrive at existential aspects within their accounts. The stance I took for data analysis was an existential frame of mind in order to explore if the latent meaning of narratives could potentially be existential in nature. To do so, I sought to highlight the implicit meanings of their reported cross-cultural experiences. In cases where their narratives contained no latent existential meaning, I chose to drop my interpretations.

I carefully adhered to Yalom's definition of existential concerns to discern participants' existential concerns from their general adjustment issues. For example, all participants spoke about their experiences of feeling limited when expressing themselves in English, and some of them also mentioned that at times they felt like they had to silence their interests and disagreements in order to be accepted by their Canadian friends. These feelings could be

interpreted as existential given that they suggest a possible loss of familiarity with their sense of self. However, I chose to exclude them from my analysis because participants did not speak about them in the context of a loss of familiarity with their own selves, but rather in the context of their struggles with the English language. Therefore, regarding concerns such as these ones as being existential in nature and including them in my analysis could be considered overinterpretation on my part. In spite of these exclusions, the reader still may argue that I overinterpreted participants' accounts. Admittingly, there is no objective way to distinguish existential concerns from adjustment challenges. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to make this distinction readily apparent, but rather to offer a novel perspective about acculturation challenges, be it an existential one.

The Issue of Language and Translation

In this study, the original data were collected in Persian, while the results are reported in English. This language difference involved translation between Persian and English during data analysis and parts of data collection. Translation primarily constitutes a subjective interpretation of participants' worldviews mediated by the impacts of the translator's social status, cultural background, and lived experiences on this process (Wong & Poon, 2010). That being said, translation goes beyond a mechanical transformation of data from one language to another and represents a cultural and linguistic cross-cultural encounter across nations (Wong & Poon, 2010). Language differences introduce its own challenges such as difficulty conveying the meaning of metaphors that are less common in other languages and the resulting loss of original meaning in the translation process, which in turn leads to the loss of the validity (van Nes, et al., 2010).

Despite such challenges, there is a growing concern about the lack of discussion about translation issues in qualitative research studies (Temple & Young, 2004; Sparks, 2002; Wong &

Poon, 2010). Therefore, these scholars recommended that researchers often provide an explicit description of the translation process and the particular challenges that they encountered (van Nes, et al., 2010; Squires, 2009; Wong & Poon, 2010). In the following, I explained the translation process coupled with some of the challenges and decisions that I faced throughout this process.

The first stage of translation occurred during initial noting. I chose not to translate the whole transcript because in IPA studies researchers mainly analyse the most significant parts of each transcript. Having highlighted those parts, I translated participants' accounts into English while I made notes of their statements. The translation that took place at stages of initial coding and developing emergent themes was mainly grounded on word-by-word translation.

The greatest challenge with translation was translating quotations due to the culturally bound words and metaphors that were used, as well as the complexity of Persian language itself. Since Persian is a poetic language full of symbolization and irony, most of my participants used metaphors or poetic language to describe their feelings and experiences. Those metaphors echoed my participants' insightful reflections on the experience of cross-cultural transition and its profound impacts on them. Word by word translation of their statements often did not make sense in English or sounded dramatic at times. I attempted to translate semantically and make use of English equivalences, while keeping the Persian words they used in brackets to preserve the originality of their nuances and emotions. Since those metaphors or culturally bound words often more meaningfully represented their emotions and most of them were tied to existential experiences, I further elaborated on their meaning in the Chapter Four. Despite these efforts, some of their direct quotes may still sound unfamiliar to non-Persian speaking readers.

Furthermore, I attempted to include the English words that they used during the interviews as much as possible. Interestingly, participants seemed more comfortable using English words when it came to concepts more common in Canadian society, such as *individual responsibility*, *boundaries,* and *personal rights*. These concepts have individualistic connotations and are less common in everyday Persian language.

Throughout the initial noting process and developing emergent themes, I sought feedback from Persian language peers and my thesis supervisor to make sure that my analysis aligned with participants' experiences. In addition, the direct quotes that I translated were reviewed and discussed by two independent readers fluent in both languages and most went through several editions. Appendix I contains selected original quotes with their translations to English.

Reflexivity

Reflectivity is a crucial part of qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009; Macbeth, 2001). In the process of reflexivity, researchers monitor their own biases, assumptions, emotions, thoughts, and personal experiences of the phenomenon being studied during all stages of the research (Smith et al., 2009). Reflectivity is a way of "self-appraisal in research" (Berger, 2015, p. 220), in which researchers shed light on their positionality in relation to the target population and the phenomenon being studied to understand their impact on the research process and analysis (Berger, 2015). Positionality includes one's personal characteristics such as gender, race, socioeconomic status (Finaly, 2002), age, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, ideologies, personal life experiences, and personal familiarity or unfamiliarity with the phenomenon being studied (Berger, 2015). One's positionality provides a perspective to interpret the data from a particular perspective, which is possibly different from another researcher. Through reflection, researchers are able to reflect on their own biases and assumptions without

letting them dominate participants' experiences (Horsburgh, 2003). The purpose of reflexivity is to understand the inevitable role of the researcher in constructing knowledge and to strengthen the rigor of the qualitative study (Horsburgh, 2003).

Positionality

I am a 27-year-old Iranian female, identified as heterosexual, able-bodied, secular, and from a middle-class family. I position myself as an insider researcher in a broader sense—a member of the population of my study that shares the same mother language, nationality, and international student status with study participants. I also position myself as an outsider to the participants' experiences of being male, studying fields different from mine, having a large group of Iranian and other international students in their departments, and their intentions of migration that are different from mine. Thus, in many aspects I position myself as both an insider and outsider researcher.

The idea of the current study was inspired by my subjective experiences of encountering existential concerns in Canada as an Iranian international student. The use of art for prompting participants about existential concerns was also inspired by the literary and artistic aspects of my cultural background. The issue of existential concerns has long been expressed in the work of Iranian poets, writers, and artists. My passion for art and reading literature shaped my understanding of existential concerns and how art can help with manifesting such inquires. In the following paragraphs, I further explain how the process of reflexivity—through the analysis of journal entries and conducting a pilot study—further shaped the current study.

Pilot study

The process of reflexivity started in the first year of my master's studies through journaling my experiences as a newcomer international student in Canada. At that time, I was

contemplating the changes in my life as a result of relocation and starting graduate school. Journaling was a way of self-soothing and making sense of the existential inquires that my new status as a "newcomer" and an "international student" brought about in my life. In the third semester of my master's, as a part of my qualitative research course I completed a personal narrative autoethnography study of my own experiences with existential concerns as an Iranian international student in Canada. Autoethnography aims to understand cultural experiences by systematically analyzing personal experiences (Ellis, 2004). I used personal narrative autoethnography as it fit well with the purpose of making sense of my personal experiences and as a means of reflecting on existential concerns.

For data collection, one of my classmates conducted a one-on-one semi-structured interview with me about my general experiences as an international student and further inquired about my existential experiences. I used the similar cards as the current study that had existential concerns written on them to help me with prompting my feelings and facilitating talking about existential experiences. The data analysis started with transcribing the interview and writing a reflection about being asked about my existential concerns. I also analyzed past journal entries that I had written over the span of previous 10 months of living in Canada and attended to their existential aspects.

Documenting my experiences, studying my own experiences, being interviewed about my existential concerns, and ongoing reflective journaling, brought forward a greater understanding about my sojourn experiences. Reflexivity helped me with becoming aware of the adjustment issues that I experienced overtime, and more importantly different existential inquires that arose during my adjustment. My experiences were also impacted by the unstable political climate in Iran during 2018 and 2019. This personal experience increased my sensitivity during

data collection and analysis about the influences of sociopolitical unrest of one's home country on existential experiences. Attending to existential issues highlighted for me the deeper concerns that international students may face and contemplate, yet often remain unspoken in studies.

After Interviews

The process of reflexivity continued after each interview. Being reflective during data collection brings awareness to certain topics that a researcher tends to avoid probing or paying more attention to (Berger, 2015). Researchers also search in themselves for feelings, thoughts, reactions, and sensitivities that arise during the interview (Berger, 2015). After each interview I documented my emotions (e.g., feeling connected or disconnected to participants' experiences), preconceptions, biases, and thoughts about the content of interviews. After the first interview, I also took note of questions that were left unanswered and that I intended to probe in the second interview. Reflexivity particularly helped me with gaining insight about my presumptions and biases and being more open about hearing different perspectives during interview sessions.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative studies often encounter unique ethical challenges resulting from researchers' in-depth personal interaction with participants (Ponterotto, 2010). Other than relatively identifiable ethical considerations that researchers address for obtaining ethical approval such as informed consent, they also encounter deeper ethical and moral dilemmas during the research process (Floyd & Arthur, 2012). For example, potential ongoing personal and professional relationships with participants, maintaining anonymity, and managing insider knowledge (Floyd & Arthur, 2012). During the process of designing my study, I encountered several ethical dilemmas, which I attempted to address with the following strategies.

Managing potential future relationships was one of my ethical concerns. Even though I exempted my friends from participating in my study, there was a high chance of running into my participants at future cultural events or in academic settings. In the interview sessions, I discussed with participants that we might see each other on such occasions, but we can 'cover the truth about how we know each other or come up with alternative stories'—what Floyd and Arthur (2012) called "white lies" (p. 175). Protecting the identity of my participants not just in the transcript but also in reporting their background was another ethical concern, given the small community of Iranian international students. As such, I changed or removed their demographic information such as field of study and any detailed information that might reveal their identity.

To address concerns about the influence of my insider knowledge on data collection, I used several strategies. I was constantly alert not to take their experiences for granted—most of their challenges initially felt familiar to me. To address this issue, I asked participants to fully describe their experiences to me while adopting a not-knowing stance. Surprisingly, sometimes what I assumed to be a similar experience turned out to be a different perspective. There is also a risk of overemphasizing certain topics that resonate with the researcher's experiences during data analysis (Drake, 2010). In addition, researchers may analyze data based on their personal experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Drake, 2010). As recommended by Berger (2015), I continuously separated myself from the participant and avoided imposing my experiences on their realities. Moreover, I sought consultations with my thesis supervisor and fellow graduate students about challenging parts of interviews and continued journaling about my researcher and researched experiences.

Validity and Quality of Research

The issue of quality control in qualitative research is complex due to the lack of universally recognized criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative studies within the field of psychology (Hays & Singh 2012). Yardley (2000) was among researchers who outlined four guiding principles, including (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigour, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance for critically assessing the quality of different qualitative methods. Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2015) found Yardley's (2000) criteria appropriate for assessing and improving the quality of IPA studies. For evaluating the quality of this study, readers can refer to Yardley's core principles.

The first principle, *sensitivity to context*, refers to researchers' sensitivity towards the existing literature of the phenomenon being studied and their awareness of the sociocultural and contextual factors that influence participants' experiences (Yardley, 2017). Having a solid understanding of literature can help with choosing a research question, guiding the research process, and supporting the finding of the study (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Awareness of sociocultural factors is central to understanding the meaning of participants' experiences. I was sensitive to the sociopolitical factors that influenced my participants' decision for migration and further impacted their adjustment and lived experiences. The social context of relationships between the researcher and the participant such as the positionality and personal characteristics of the researcher, and the flexibility of the interview and the freedom of the participant to discuss what they consider important are also important factors (Yardley, 2000). These factors influence the depth of interaction between the researcher and the participant and the quality of data.

Yardley's second principle, *commitment and rigour*, emphasises the thorough process of data collection and analysis (Yardley, 2000). The concept of rigour refers to the researcher's

careful participant recruitment both in terms of (a) choosing participants whose experiences are relevant to the subject of the study (Smith & Osborn, 2015), and (b) collecting sufficient data which enable the researcher to conduct a comprehensive analysis (Yardley, 2000). Commitment refers to researchers' long-term engagement with the data, and their duty to develop competence and skills of conducting in-depth and detailed data analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

The third principle, *transparency and coherence*, refers to disclosing step-by-step and detailed descriptions of all aspects of the research process and creating a cohesive and complete document (Yardley, 2000; Yardley, 2017). Other than being clear about the whole research process—including data collection and analysis—transparency encompasses researchers' reflexivity on their impacts on the research process and data analysis (Yardley, 2000). In order to develop coherency, the chosen methods and theoretical underpinnings should support and be compatible with the chosen research question(s) (Yardley, 2000). By reflective journaling, conducting a pilot study, stating my positionality, and following the IPA data analysis guidelines, I attempted to address the issue of transparency and coherence.

Yardley's (2000) fourth principle, *impact and importance,* focuses on the data results having potentially significant implications for the population being studied. The results of a valid study should add unique insights to the literature of the phenomenon being studied either in the research or clinical practice (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Moreover, the results may have social influences or make a difference at political, social, or individual levels. The results of this study, which are summarized in the next chapter, uniquely contribute to the existing literature on existential concerns in light of migration, In Chapter 5, I will highlight these unique contributions, including the impacts of sociopolitical issues on the experiences of international students.

Chapter Four: Findings

In this chapter, I present the results of this study, which investigated existential concerns of Iranian international students during their acculturation in Canada. I begin this chapter by providing the demographic information of each participant. Following this, I present the findings that were developed through data analysis in terms of overarching, superordinate, and subthemes.

Participant Demographics

Six Iranian international students participated in this study, four of which identified as female and two as male. At the time of the interviews, participants ranged in age from 24 to 32, with a mean age of 28. Of these participants, two reported studying in PhD programs and the remaining four were pursuing their master's degrees. Except for one participant who arrived in Canada in Fall 2018, the rest of the participants landed in Summer and Fall 2017. Participants were studying in faculties of engineering, science, and social sciences and they were all receiving full funding—to live and study in Canada—from the University for the duration of their studies. Three participants reported being in a relationship, one was married, and the remaining two were single. All six participants came to Canada alone and three of them had relatives or close family friends in Canada. In the following section, I further introduce each participant and provide a brief summary of their existential experiences in Canada.

Jana

Jana is a female graduate student in her mid 20s. She is married and initially came to Canada by herself. Jana's husband joined her a couple months after her arrival in Canada. She introduced herself as being emotionally dependant on her family members, particularly her mother. Nevertheless, she moved to Canada to challenge this sense of dependence on her family

and to become an independent person. She also migrated to escape Iran's societal and political restraints that were impacting her freedom (i.e., freedom of expression, freedom of speech). As a result of being separated from her family, she experienced a hard time coping with living on her own in Canada. Her husband's migration to Canada significantly lessened her feelings of loneliness and helped her establish her new life in Canada. Reflecting on her cross-cultural experiences, Jana experienced personal growth, which she believes could not have happened without enduring the pain of separation.

Homayoon

Homayoon is a male graduate student in his late 20s and is in a long-term relationship. His girlfriend is also an international student who studies in a different province. He moved seeking a better education and to discover his potential in Canadian society. He believes that Canadian society provides greater opportunities for personal growth compared to Iranian society. For Homayoon, living in Canada is less stressful compared to Iran, where he had uncertainty about his future career and financial status in light of its general socio-political problems. He found a sense of peace in Canada, which gave him space for identity exploration and improving some aspects of his lifestyle (e.g., physical health and fitness, diet). To become a member of Canadian society, he felt committed to explore a Canadian lifestyle and adapt some of its elements (e.g., exploring nature, outdoor activities). He also found his English skills as the main barrier to integrating into the society; thus, he felt dedicated to improving his English.

Zohre

Zohre is a female PhD student in her early 30s. Her decision to leave Iran and continue her education in Canada was heavily influenced by being discriminated and oppressed both within her family and the broader society. She mentioned that similar to many Iranian women

from the post-revolutionary generation—Islamic revolution of 1979—she had to wear the compulsory hijab in public spaces even though she does not believe in this religious practice and tolerated the discriminatory labour laws against woman. Zohre told me that she never stopped empowering herself through education and seeking economic independence. However, to truly live as a free person in a more equal society, Zohre decided to leave Iran and escape from dealing with conservative aspects of her family and culture. Her cross-cultural transition was full of challenges and achievements. Feeling shy and vulnerable, one of her main challenges was changing the way she interacts with people. Her lack of English skills was a barrier to demonstrating her leadership abilities and communicating effectively. She spoke about gaining freedom and autonomy in Canada as the main achievement of migration. The process of experiencing and overcoming migratory challenges made her feel born again: "It felt like being born again with more confidence. I am proud of my growth".

Asal

Asal is a female PhD student in her early 30s. She is from a middle-class family and her parents, particularly her mother, worked hard so that she could continue her education. She achieved her master's degree from one of Iran's best universities, but the academic system failed to meet her expectations. After graduation, she had little hope of finding a well-paid job in her field due to Iran's economic recession. She also did not feel motivated to continue her studies at the same institution. She chose to migrate to Canada to continue her studies in a better academic system with the possibility of having more financial security. Besides the advantages of migration, she experienced separation from her family and homeland. Asal made sense of migration as being a trade-off, in which she endures the pain of separation and loss for the benefit of growth, financial stability and more freedom.

Koroush

Koroush is a male graduate student in his early 20s. He comes from a large family and was raised in a community where most people knew each other. Koroush's main reason for coming to Canada was his desire to seek a better education in a North American university and to explore a new country. He also hoped to find a peaceful life in Canada and a well-paid job after his studies as he could not envision a successful future for himself in Iran. For Koroush, the main challenge of cross-cultural transition was experiencing the loneliness of being away from his family and friends. He engaged in identity exploration and re-framed some of his values and beliefs to facilitate his acculturation. Koroush understood this process as a necessary step for his cross-cultural adjustment—a process that is similar to being born again in a different environment.

Donya

Donya is a female graduate student in her late 20s. She studied at one of Iran's top-ranking universities where she obtained her master's degree. After graduation, she understood that to further her education in an academically rich environment that would expose her to new perspectives, she needed to pursue her studies outside of Iran. Donya purposefully chose Canada because she wanted to study and live in a multicultural society, where everybody—including herself as a newcomer—is accepted regardless of their race and background. Separation from her family and Iran was the main challenge of cross-cultural transition for Donya. Loss of her network and being new to Canada was also challenging, particularly when she realized that as a newcomer, she has to put more effort into establishing friendships with her Canadian peers and being included among them. Similarly, she had to work harder than her cohort to gain her supervisor's trust because of her lower language skills and unfamiliarity with Western culture.

Donya sees herself as continuing to undergo what she described as a process of “identity reconstruction” in hopes of developing a “bi-cultural identity”, which to her means a combination of Western and Persian cultures and values for becoming better acculturated in Canadian society.

Facing Existential Concerns during Acculturation

Arriving at a conclusion in this study was challenging for several reasons. First, the complexity of existential concerns and the use of academic jargon in existential literature reflected a language that was noticeably different from my participants’ accounts. Therefore, identifying the link between the academic concepts and participants’ narrative was challenging. Second, it was particularly challenging to view participants’ experiences at deeper levels and relate their challenges of transition to the exiting literature of existential concerns, given the fact that fewer studies have investigated existential concerns in the context of cross-cultural transition. As such, the results of this study may raise even further questions for readers instead of giving them answers. This highlights that further studies are required to understand and explore the nuances of existential concerns in the context of cross-cultural transition.

My analysis of participants’ narratives resulted in three overarching themes: *(a) Migration as a Boundary Situation (b) Facing Existential Concerns, (c) Coping with Existential Concerns*. These broad overarching categories consist of a total of 9 superordinate themes and 11 subthemes, as is illustrated in Table 3. The superordinate themes reflect the higher order concepts of participants’ account, whereas the subthemes demonstrated the idiosyncratic characteristics of each participant’s experiences. Not all of these superordinate and subthemes are relevant to experiences of every single participant. However, analysis of particular experiences allowed for keeping with IPA’s idiographic commitment.

Table 3

Summary of Overarching, Superordinate, and Subthemes

Overarching Theme	Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
Migration as a Boundary Situation	The Uncanny Phenomenon	Separation and Loss Defamiliarization Belongingness
Facing Existential Concerns	Isolation	
	Meaninglessness	
	Freedom	Awareness of Self-creation Awareness of Assuming Responsibility
	Awareness of Death and Mortality	
	Guilt in Relation to Others	
Coping with Existential Concerns	Meaning Making	Making Canada Home Connection with Iranian Community Creativity Self-Reflection
	Dealing with Isolation	Confronting Existential Isolation Romantic Relationship

Theme 1: Migration as a Boundary Situation

Understanding the nature of existential concerns requires deep personal reflection (Yalom, 1980). This process is often catalyzed as a result of running into a boundary situation, defined as “an event or an urgent experience, that propels one into a confrontation with one’s existential situation in the world (i.e., facing one’s own death, collapse of meaning in life)”

(Yalom, 1980, p. 159). A boundary situation pulls individuals away from their familiar and everyday concerns and encourage them to re-think their existential situation. For my participants, relocation and separation from their families and homeland served as a boundary situation, which set the ground for confrontation with existential concerns. This overarching theme explains the context and significant elements that provoked their confrontation with existential concerns. It also introduces feelings of not-being-at-home or uncanny in the world as what mainly instigates such confrontation. I provide detailed explanation for the aforementioned concepts in the following paragraphs.

The Uncanny Phenomenon. Participants' encounter with the unfamiliar environment of a new land evoked a sense of uncanny or not-being-at-home in the world. They started dwelling on the meaning of home, belongingness, and their need for familiar environments, language, and known ways of communication with their society. These experiences echo Heidegger's concept of uncanny in the context of leaving one's home for the foreign or unknown environment. Although such feelings may be interpreted as common homesickness in the foreign country, the critical exploration of such experiences reveals that they mimic feelings of uncanniness and defamiliarization. Within the superordinate theme of the uncanny phenomenon, three subthemes of *separation and loss*, *defamiliarization*, and *belongingness* emerged, which I explain in the following.

Separation and Loss. Participants in the current study shared powerful stories of the experience of separation from their family members or homeland as a result of migration. In the case of cross-cultural transition, separation initiates the feeling of uncanniness and longing for a familiar home. Zohre's narrative described her loneliness away from Iran:

> If you imagine a world map [and everyone I know as small lights], I was feeling that a lot of lights were shining together in Iran. Far away from them and on the other side of the world map in Canada, I was a little light that nobody could see and was shining by myself in my small place.

Reflecting on her experience, Zohre's account represents a sense of loneliness and invisibility embedded in her experience of separation from home. Similarly, Donya narrated:

> I feel that I am uprooted. I feel that I am only a disconnected piece that tries to connect with its roots and people, but it is not the same as being grounded in the real context. I feel alone and like a disconnected piece separated from my land.

Donya's felt sense of separation represents a sense of what Fromm (1956) refers to as "being cut-off", which resulted from becoming separated from her land (p. 7). For other participants, separation was accompanied with feelings of loss. Jana described that "international migration means loss and separation from everybody and everything". Koroush's statement stood out for me because he articulated that separation from family led to a secondary loss that he took for granted when living in his hometown: a loss of a "simple feeling of inner peace".

Belongingness. The sense of belonging is connected to feeling-at-home, as is not-belonging and feeling not-at-home (Madison, 2006). The reason for such a feeling may be the function of *home* as a "symbol of security" and familiarity it serves for individuals (Madison, 2006, p. 12). The uncanny feeling often challenges the meaning of home and makes one feel not belonging in their familiar world. Yalom (1980) described this feeling as: "in those moments one's relationship to the world is profoundly shaken" and this feeling is accompanied with "an empty and lost" feeling in the world (p. 358).

In the context of cross-cultural transition, relocation and resettling in a new country naturally provokes a sense of lack of belongingness for individuals (Madison, 2006). My participants spoke about their common feeling of lack of belonging in the new environment as a result of cross-cultural transition. However, reflecting on their experiences raised for me the question of whether the lack of belonging as a newcomer also represented the existential feeling of not belonging in the world. Even though my data does not clearly support this idea, this is a question to think about when exploring the experiences of newcomers in a new environment.

Some of the participants (Zohre, Asal) spoke about their feelings of not belonging in Canada and their longing for their homeland, despite their struggles in Iran and decision to leave for a more fulfilling life elsewhere. This notion was previously conceptualized by Madison (2006) as mentioned in the following statement:

> A person may leave home yet never shake its haunting presence, long for home yet undoubtedly see no future for him or herself there. Paradoxically, they maintain a 'special connection' to a homeworld even though they may rarely have *felt at-home* there. (p. 18)

There is a connection between Madison's aforementioned statement and Zohre's experience, who was forced to leave Iran and to cut her emotional ties to her homeland. She narrated:

> In the first year [of residing in Canada], I had this feeling of being displaced. I was thinking that everyone would like to stay in their home country, and I also wanted to stay in Iran, but I had to leave because of fundamental differences in values and feeling that I didn't have a place in Iran anymore. There is also nothing left behind to go back to because it's just going to be the same oppressive situation…I am like a separate island; I don't have a relationship with Canadian society either. I don't know what it means to be

> blended within the society, I don't know what it means to be a normal member of this community…I have to build my own community.

Zohre's use of the English word "being displaced" describes the internal pressure she felt to leave home even though it is clear from her words that she had an emotional connection with Iran. Having renounced her sense of belonging to her homeland, Zohre has yet to find her place in Canada—and thus belonging nowhere. Referring to herself to a "separate island" metaphorically reflects this disconnection from the world and the resulting loneliness. Feeling separated from her surrounding and lacking the means to go back home, she had no choice but to be self-reliant and find a way to sustain hope. Her idea of "building my own community" speaks to her ultimate need to feel at-home in her new environment, because most often the lack of such a feeling creates an unsettling emotion. This notion is aligned with Garrett's (2011) conceptualization of home as a "self-construct" rather than a particular place (p. 55). By building her own community, she creates a home that best fits her needs and values, rather than having to follow the traditional expectations of her culture and family.

To describe her feeling of not belonging, Jana used the word "rootless". The root and soil metaphors in English, Persian, and some other languages speaks to the universal existential need to be grounded, as Jana noted:

> I could never grow roots here [referring to Canada]. Like many other migrants, I am like a plant that is pulled out of its soil and placed in water. I would grow small roots but never roots like the plants that are placed in soil.

Using metaphoric language, Jana describes her feeling of being separated from her homeland, referred as "soil" (خاک), and relocated to an unfamiliar place—thus feeling uprooted. She refers to herself as a plant, which needs sun, water, and to be rooted in soil to live. Once its uprooted, it

is matter of life and death, it might not survive. Although some plants—or migrants such as Jana—withstand by only being placed in the water (i.e., the unfamiliar environment), not being grounded in the soil makes them more fragile than the ones that are. This fragility comes from the underlying feelings of groundlessness in the environment where she did not grow roots; therefore, she does not feel a sense of belonging and being settled. Another participant, Asal, used the metaphor of a "scar" to explain her persistent feeling of a lack of belongingness in Canada when she said:

> It [migration] has a deep sadness that you can't change, and I may never be able to cope with it completely. Like an old wound, it doesn't bleed at all, but it never heals. This wound always remind you that you don't belong here. That you lost something, but you traded for it.

In Asal's narrative, I sensed a feeling of grief and loss for leaving Iran, which she considers home and has sentimental value for her. She understood her separation by justifying it as a "trade-off" to achieve academic success, the possibility of having more financial security, and more freedom in Canada.

Defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is an existential term that explains a sense of unfamiliarity in the world when one faces the existential state of not-being-at-home or feeling of uncanniness. Perhaps Yalom's (1980) example of Albert Camus's experience of defamiliarization in a foreign country described in his book *Troubled Sleep*, may better explain the concept of defamiliarization in the context of international transition:

> Here I am defenseless in a city where I cannot read the signs ... without friends to speak to, in short, without diversion. In this room penetrated by the sounds of a strange city, I know that nothing will draw me toward the more delicate light of a home or another

> cherished place. Am I going to call out? cry out? Strange faces would appear .... And now the curtain of habit, the comfortable tissue of gestures and words, wherein the heart grows sluggish, rises slowly and finally unveils the pale face of anxiety. Man is face to face with himself: I defy him to be happy .... (p.358)

Camus's narrative demonstrates his encounter with a world of familiar objects (i.e., the room, the city, the signs on the street, noises). Paradoxically, they are all strangely unfamiliar to him because they are detached from the "personal and collective meaning" that those elements had for him in his own country (Yalom, 1980, p. 358). This defamiliarization, in turn, leads to the inevitable situation in which one must squarely face one's own existence.

Some participants of this study shared their experiences of confronting unknown and defamiliarized situations in Canada. For example, they pointed out the major differences between Iran and Canada in climate, architecture and spirit of the countries, which made them feel not-at-home. Zohre said: "…everything is cold, the street is frozen, everything closes early, there is no cozy cafe". It is apparent form Zohre's narratives that these differences evoke a sense of unfamiliarity for her. Asal described that coming from a historical city in Iran with lots of ancient landmarks and attractions makes it hard for her to live in a city that has a much shorter history compared to Iran: "I realized that this city has less collective memory, urban memory [compared to ancient countries like Iran]. History connects me to the experience of living, which is less apparent here. I didn't know it would affect me to this extent". Asal further explained that she feels unable to do her favourite hobby here, which is walking around the city. She said:

> It is very meaningful for me to be in a city where you can walk in the streets, see the shops and people commuting. This means a lot to me and it's among one of my most beautiful memories of living in Tehran. It's strange that urban walking isn't as popular in

the culture of the city I am living in. It's like all the urban spaces are mainly designed for cars and streets.

Asal describes, urban walking and exploring the city creates a feeling of being-at-home, where she draws meaning from her connection to the historical artistic, and vibrant street life. Paradoxically, this connection to the past, where people walked these same streets, passing the same historical landmarks for hundreds of years, grounded her to the present. On the contrary, her Canadian city is more car friendly and lacks historical landmarks, creating a sense of defamiliarization.

Some of the participants discussed a lack of deep conversations with their Canadian friends. This issue is often viewed in the international student literature as a result of being relatively new to the host culture. It is apparent that language skills and cultural differences can be barriers for newcomers to having genuine connection and deep dialogues with host nationals. However, just as Camus lamented the lack of "friends to speak to, in short, without diversion" viewing this communication gap from an existential lens reflects a sense of defamiliarization in the everyday interaction of the participants with the people around them.

Donya, Jana, and Homayoon shared that even though they could establish friendships with their fellow Canadian peers, they noted that the relationship was not as deep as their relationships with Iranians. Homayoon believes that the lack of deep connection is due to the cultural differences and lack of his fluency in English: "I actively try to improve my English in all its aspects like grammar, vocabulary, slang to lessen this deep disconnection in relationships with my Canadian friends". In addition to the language, Donya pointed out the impacts of cultural differences in her relationship dynamics in Canada:

> Canadian people are very kind, they are very respectful, but the problem is that they don’t become very close and friendly with you. It is perhaps a characteristic of Canadian culture, maybe they have more defined boundaries in their relationships, I am not sure. For that reason, I cannot become very close with them. For somebody like me who is new in this country and away from her family, having close friends is essential. I can never talk to my Canadian friends about things that are significant in our culture and connect with them deeply on this topic. I am used to sharing my culture with people from my background and I really miss that part. I hesitate to speak about my culture with my Canadian friends, especially things that don’t make sense in Western culture.

From her narrative I understood that Donya tries to interpret her Canadian friends’ ways of communicating and establishing friendships, which is somehow unfamiliar to her. Reading her statement, there is a feeling of defamiliarization in her interactions with the society that she is adapting to. Donya mentioned that she misses talking about meaningful aspects of her culture in her own language and with people from her country. Therefore, seeking relationships with Iranian friends in Canada, in turn, leads to a sense of familiarity in her new environment.

Theme 2: Facing Existential Concerns

While the former theme focused on the path to encountering existential concerns catalyzed by cross-cultural transition, this overarching theme elaborates the participants’ experiences of facing existential concerns in Canada. It is important to note only one of the six participants, Donya, had previous knowledge about the concept of existential concerns. Other participants did not specifically refer to their experiences as existential even though they appeared existential in nature. This aligns with Yalom’s (1980) statement that any individual eventually faces existential concerns during the course of their life in some capacity, yet they

might not be aware of existential concepts based on its psychological terms. Thus, the results of this section represent my interpretation of participants' existential concerns based on their narratives viewed from the framework of Yalom's ultimate concerns. Overall, this theme centers on their confrontation with meaninglessness, isolation, freedom and groundlessness, awareness of mortality and guilt. Sometimes their experiences represented more than one particular existential concern, as existential experiences are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, my analysis reflects the interplay of existential concerns introduced above.

Facing Ultimate Isolation. For the majority of participants, separation from home and their loved ones came with feelings of isolation. They often spoke about interpersonal isolation (i.e., isolation from their loved ones and people in the new society) because of their geographic distance from Iran and difficulty communicating with people in the society. In some of those narratives, the underlying existential nature of their loneliness stood out for me. For example, Donya noted that she felt "isolated from the whole world" and her isolation was "the inevitable gap" that exists in all relationships. Similarly, Zohre's experience of facing existential isolation vividly demonstrates her disconnection from the entire world, which is evident in the following narrative: "When I felt alone, the image I had of myself as soon as I started thinking about my life was seeing myself like a dot standing all alone on the vast map of Canada without anyone and anything". Zohre and Donya's experiences still represent an interpersonal isolation, but deep down they are concerned about their absolute isolation as a human, which manifests itself as existential isolation. Donya further described her existential isolation as a "big void":

> When I would come home at night, it was pure silence, it was pure loneliness, and there was nothing else. It was the hardest [part of migration], I mean all of the academic struggles that I was experiencing at the university was still manageable. I could overcome

> them by putting more effort into my studies, but there's nothing you can do about isolation, it's like there's no solution for it. There were moments when I felt that if it was no Netflix for example, or no music playing, I would go crazy. I couldn't stand it, like if I tried tolerating it for one more second, I would die (laughter). It was a strange feeling.

In her feeling of loneliness, she talks about a profound disconnection from everyone and everything. She used the word "pure" (محض) to describe the intensity of her loneliness, which was reminding Donya of her ultimate isolation. She clearly felt helpless managing such feelings and mentioned that facing existential isolation without music or by simply distracting herself was very challenging.

For Koroush, the experience of existential isolation was triggered by an incident in which his family forgot to call him at the time of his sister's wedding in order to allow him to virtually attend the ceremony as they had promised. He explained that he waited for their call the whole night and even called all his family members, but nobody picked up the phone. Koroush narrated that he felt extremely unimportant and forgotten "even by my mother" and thought that his ties with his family were broken and he was erased from his loved ones' lives. He blamed himself for leaving his family and coming to Canada, which he considered as the reason for being forgotten by them. Koroush described his loneliness as: "I felt deeply alone, I felt like an abandoned island far away from a large continent". His experience can be interpreted as an interpersonal isolation, because he grieved being far away from his family members—the large continent. However, through an existential lens, Koroush's experience may show his profound sense of separation from the world around him. Being an "abandoned island" metaphorically demonstrates his feeling of being forgotten and the resulting loneliness and distance he felt from everybody in that moment. He further reflected more deeply on what that experience truly meant to him:

> What bothers me, and I take the blame for this, is the thought that when I was not at my sister's wedding, I was not in her wedding photos and videos, I was not beside her that night, it's as though I never existed. In a few years when my sister flips through her wedding album, she won't see my picture, and maybe she'll have no memories of me from that night.

Koroush's concern speaks to a feeling of nonexistence in his loved one's minds and therefore his own non-existence because naturally people feel alive as long as they are remembered (Yalom, 1980). Similarly, the experience of being forgotten reflected his non-existence in their everyday lives; how their lives continue, and he is not part of it anymore. These feelings unpack the non-existence embedded in existential isolation. Koroush was touched by that experience to the extent that he recalled it as "a striking blow" (ضربه مهلک) reflecting on its profound impact.

Meaninglessness. The concept of meaninglessness (absurdity of the meaning and foundation on which one's life rested, Yalom, 1980) following cross-cultural transition came up in various ways in the accounts of the majority of participants. Koroush spoke to the meaninglessness of his values (i.e., mainly religious values) in the new society: "I do believe in certain values and religious practices like fasting and always tried to practice them. Those values are insignificant in this community, and the Iranians around me somehow don't care about them. Facing this was very confusing". The invalidation of his beliefs and values gave rise to feelings of confusion and doubt about practicing his values, and made him question his belief system. The significance of this experience relates to the subjective meaning that religious practices held for him, from which he drew a sense of identity.

Donya's experience of meaninglessness was related to the loss of "meaningful cultural and spiritual concepts" that enriched her life. She noted: "I found that meaningful elements of

my culture lost their significance and spirit away from home and I feel their absence in my life here". Donya further narrated her story of celebrating her first Persian New Year away from home, in which she put a lot of effort into buying Haft-sin items and following all the traditions (i.e., Haft-sin refers to seven symbolic items that start with the letter S, pronounced as *sin* in the Persian alphabet. Each of those items symbolizes nature, health, fertility, wealth, etc.). However, when she set her Haft-sin table, she felt "empty" and "sad", as she noted:

> I looked at my [Haft-sin] table and it was very meaningless. In that moment I thought that spending New Year (عید) with your family and watching people in the street rushing to buy goldfish (ماهی) and wheat grass (سبزه) (i.e., Haft-sin items) at the last minute is the meaning of New Year. I didn't feel a sense of New Year away from home.

Donya's narratives reflect that despite her efforts to keep her connection with meaningful elements of her culture, she realized that those concepts are less meaningful out of their geographical context.

Experiencing a sense of meaninglessness was also caused by seeing the bigger picture of injustice, chaos, and absurdity in the world. Two of participants (Koroush and Jana) deeply reflected on their moral thoughts about injustice and world's inherent meaninglessness. Jana mentioned that: "Life is full of injustice, war, always some people are in pain, that's why I cannot feel happy from the bottom of my heart". In talking about the unfairness of life, she also alluded to her doubts about her cross-cultural transition:

> At some point you ask yourself is it [transition] worth all the challenges and separation from family? Then you generalize this feeling to your entire life and ask yourself what is the meaning (ارزش) of life? I endure all this pain for what? Even if I become president here but I cannot see my family, it's worthless. Why should I live

here? You basically question the meaning of everything you did in life. In those months that I had these thoughts I thought about killing myself a lot. If it was not for my family, I would have done that".

Jana expressed hopelessness after having realized the inherent meaninglessness of life and questioned the meaning of her decision to come to Canada. This issue particularly impacted her because migration was meant to create a new direction and purpose in her life. Understanding that life is somehow absurd and migration in turn separated her from her life's meaning—her family—triggered suicidal thoughts. The emergence of suicidal thoughts indicates that her foundation of meaning was disrupted, leaving her with a feeling of meaninglessness and a lack of purpose and reason to continue in the struggle in which she saw herself trapped in.

Koroush experienced a relatively similar experience as he explained that living in Canada led to random thoughts about the living situation and "struggles of people in the Middle East" in comparison with people in North America. Contemplating on sociopolitical problems of developing countries and how wealth has been distributed unfairly in the world deepened his thoughts about the unfairness and absurdity of life. He narrated:

> I was confused about the philosophy of human existence when I came to Canada. My uncertainty kind of led me to think more deeply about killing myself. I told myself, look, this world is not fair at all. So many people are poor, so many people are hungry. Why violence? Why war? Aren't we all going to die? So, what's going to happen? Why do we study? Why do we work? Might as well sit in a corner until it will be all over. It made me doubt the philosophy of human existence (فلسفه وجودی انسان).

It's apparent from Koroush's accounts that it was challenging for him to deal with the question of life's meaning. He wished to "eliminate the injustice", but he felt very insignificant in front of

the governing systems. Such thoughts resulted in existential reflections about the purpose of human life and failing to find a meaningful reason to continue his life, initiated suicidal thoughts.

Facing Existential Freedom. Aligned with the existential conceptualization of freedom, all participants but one (Zohre) discussed their experience of facing existential freedom in some capacity. Homayoon and Donya stated that they enjoyed the freedom of making their own decisions about their lives (e.g., how to spend their money) more than back home when they were living with their parents. On the other hand, they realized that having more freedom necessitated more responsibility (Jana, Homayoon, Koroush,). In addition, Asal, Homayoon and Donya, realized that they now hold all the responsibility for building their lives in the absence of parental support and commonly held societal expectations that guided how their lives should unfold within Iranian culture. This challenge of building one's own life and being responsible for the outcome of their decisions is often referred as self-creation in existential psychology (Yalom, 1980). Within this superordinate theme, two subthemes are illustrated: awareness of self-creation and awareness of assuming responsibility.

Awareness of Self-creation. From an existential perspective, individuals are authors of their own lives because there is no inherent universal guide and structure for directing our lives. Some participants alluded to their awareness of self-creation following cross-cultural transition. For example, Jana shared that by having to decide for herself, in the absence of parental guidance (e.g., moving out and finding a new place to live), she became aware of the "individuality" (فردیت) inherent in her decision-makings.

Being responsible for one's life is often expressed as anxiety-provoking because individuals face groundlessness. Asal's experience is good evidence for demonstrating the subjective awareness of self-creation and facing groundlessness, as she illustrated:

> In the C-train station I saw a mother holding the hand of her 3-year-old child and then all of a sudden it reminded me of my mom, and I missed feeling close to her. The reason I felt that way is because recently I have been pondering my childhood. I can't necessarily connect it to my migration, but I cannot deny the connection either. I had a lot of support in Iran, but here for the first time in my life I have to manage everything by myself. I think this is why I have been watching very old movies. These movies take me back to my childhood memories where I had peace of mind and security because I had a caregiver. I didn't have a wonderful childhood, but I had a mother that would take care of everything. I knew that I was not responsible for all aspects of life, I was not my own anchor in life, and did not have to think about important decisions.

Asal's accounts show her desperation for external direction and support and a trustful caregiver—mainly her mother—who could assist her in making life choices and taking on part of her responsibilities. Having to accept responsibility for all aspects of her life as well as becoming her own parent in the absence of her family, particularly her mother, deeply exposed her to the isolation and groundlessness inherent in the act of self-creation.

Similar to Asal's concern, Homayoon pointed out his feelings of "confusion" and groundlessness in the absence of parental guidance and the socially accepted path his that guided his decisions (e.g., going to university at a certain age). He mentioned that he wishes having that structure back because it is overwhelming to be responsible for every decision in life.

Awareness of Assuming Responsibility. Informed by the awareness of self-creation, participants realized the necessity of assuming responsibility for their own lives, choices, and actions. Homayoon mentioned that he realized that in Canada he has more "freedom" and more personal "rights", which requires more "responsibility", the issue he initially neglected when he

came to Canada: “I became so involved with [experiencing] freedom that I forgot about, I mean I cared less about my responsibilities towards my education, the university, or my family”. He further mentions that: “Social rights and freedom stand side by side with responsibility and keeping them together is a very balanced dance and you have to walk carefully, on the edge of it, otherwise falling to one side is dangerous”. His accounts reflect his in-depth realization of the interconnection between freedom and responsibility.

Jana commented that in the absence of her family, she was now in charge of her life: “I am responsible for my life with my husband, for lifting my mood, and my spirit”. Koroush also became mindful of his personal responsibility in this new environment: “Somehow, I realized that everyone is responsible for their own lives. I mean, it was a good lesson that I learned here. I learned this from [Canadian] society”. From accounts of Koroush, Jana, and Homayoon, it is apparent that cross-cultural transition as well as separation from their families and home country played a key role in their awareness of assuming responsibility and self-authorship.

Homayoon and Koroush also spoke about their sense of social responsibility. Reflecting on this change, Homayoon mentioned that in Canada, he focuses more on his personal rights and responsibilities due to the nature of the society which in his eyes, is more individual-centered. For Homayoon, this stands in contrast to his life in Iran where his life was involved in some capacity in helping his social circle and activities that benefited the collective. As Homayoon shared:

> In the past, I contributed a lot more to things that were not directly related to me, but here I got this sense that I needed to focus solely on my own schoolwork. I mean for example, when I was in Iran, I was paying attention to the life of the people around me, like my

> friends and university cohort and so did they. Everyone engaged in living a more social and collective life which would benefit all instead of just one individual.

Homayoon expressed regret for not being involved in other people's lives as much as before and mentioned that he decided to be more socially responsible in his life in Canada. Koroush also noted that beyond his responsibility for his life, he feels socially responsible for making a difference in other people's lives. He spoke about his dream of building a library in his hometown to help with promoting education and having a positive impact on the lives of his people. By building a library, Koroush also wishes to leave a positive image and memory of himself in the minds of his people, which is evident from a Persian poem that he shared with me to better express his feelings:

> Life is like a scene on a stage,
>
> We each show our art in this scene,
>
> Everyone sings their unique song before leaving the stage,
>
> The scene however continuously goes on,
>
> Merry are the ones whose songs are remembered by the masses.

This poem supports the idea of retaining a positive image in people's memories. Although, existentially speaking, being remembered through impacting people's lives indicates his wish for being immortal and continue his life in the memories of people after his death. Yalom (1980) connects one's desire to leave a memorable impact on others before they die to their unconscious intention to stay immortal. In the next section I will further explain my participants' accounts of their awareness of death and mortality.

Awareness of Death and Mortality. For all six participants of this study except Homayoon, cross-cultural transition represented a situation in which they deeply reflected on mortality and the impermanence of human relationships. As Jana explained:

> Their physical absence was somehow similar to their death and I really grieved for their loss, but it also made me realize that one day I may lose my loved ones for any reason and I need to somehow mentally prepare myself for that day. I can say that this experience [separation from loved ones] somehow brought me face-to-face with potentially the worst loss that I could experience, which is my parents' death.

It is apparent that separation from her family symbolically represented impermanent loss and made Jana mindful of her loved ones' mortality. Donya mentioned that migration reminded her of the impermanence and "temporary nature of human relationships even with loved ones". Awareness of death for Asal represented being overly worried about becoming ill or psychically harmed. Even though she initially denied its connection to death anxiety, when I further probed, she stated:

> I am not worried about death; I am more afraid of physical harm…hmm this sounds ridiculous (laughter), imagine one doesn't want to be harmed but wants to die. I guess this is a funny contradiction that I just realized in my statement, but I don't think about death in general, I don't think about it at all. I am more sensitive about any harm to my body, I don't get involved in dangerous sports or anything that may put my body in danger, because I am alone here and if I become sick nobody can take care of me.

Asal's concern is in accordance with Yalom's (1980) perception of death anxiety. He suggests that one of the issues that implicitly reflects death anxiety is one's obsession about health or being physically harmed. In addition, people most often deny their death anxiety, which is

considered a normal human response (Yalom, 1980). Considering the hermeneutic circle and Asal's previous accounts about awareness of self-creation, death anxiety for Asal seems to be connected to her experience of facing groundlessness and having to be responsible for her life while being alone in Canada. This issue is evident when she said: "I am alone here and if I become sick nobody can take care of me", reflecting the interconnection of groundlessness, loneliness, and death anxiety.

The connection between isolation and death anxiety was also present in Donya's narrative. Donya mentioned that she does not often think about death; however, since her relocation she has become mindful of dying alone: "If something bad happens to me here and I die in my apartment, my body would stink for a few days and nobody would realize. Then who would tell my family, what would they do? This makes me feel scared". Donya's narrative explicitly shows her fear of dying alone in a foreign country while being away from home; however, this fear has another side to it, as she further said:

> What scares me about dying here is that even after my death, I am alone. It's very sad when a person dies, and no one notices or cares. It shows the depth of loneliness…It's not the subject of death that bothers me, because I'm not afraid of death, I'm afraid that I am going to die alone. It's as if your death doesn't matter to anyone, that you die alone and no one understands, it's very sad.

From an existential perspective, the underlying root of her fear reflects the fact that at the most fundamental level, dying is the loneliest human experience (Yalom, 1980). Even if one is surrounded by people, individuals die alone and this is often anxiety-provoking (Yalom, 1980).

In the case of Zohre and Koroush, the whole process of cross-cultural transition, experiencing challenges and loses, and having to manage them was similar to "a symbolic death

and rebirth”. Zohre said that she experienced “a complete collapse” and had to “recover” from the hardships of relocation. Similarly, Koroush shared that he experienced “reconstructing myself” in the new country where he chose to live, which was similar to “being born again”.

Guilt in Relation to Others. The notion of existential guilt refers to one’s feeling of guilt for not fulfilling their potential. Yalom (1980), stated that “one who fails to live as fully as one can, experiences a deep, powerful feeling which I refer to here as existential guilt” (p. 279). The issue of existential guilt based on Yalom’s perspective did not come up in my participants’ narrative. However, they all spoke to their feelings of guilt from a more social and relational perspective. Although this perspective does not fit into Yalom’s conceptualization of existential guilt, the repetition of narratives about feeling guilty for leaving Iran and their loved ones encouraged me to write about this issue. In fact, the content of the participants’ narrative is opposite to Yalom’s notion of existential guilt, because in a way they felt guilty for prioritizing their own growth and being less responsible towards their loved ones, co-citizens, and Iran.

Zohre and Asal noted that they “rescued” themselves from Iran’s sociopolitical problems, but “left everybody else alone in Iran”. Asal stated that she feels “superior” and “privileged” to be in Canada but when she thinks about “people who are in trouble [in Iran]”, she feels guilty”. Donya mentioned that sometimes she thinks it was “selfish” of her to leave her parents and to come to Canada for an education and to improve her life. Koroush described his strong sense of guilt for leaving Iran in the middle of an economic recession and political turmoil. He shared:

> I feel that I may not have that previous status (جایگاه) among my people. I'm afraid that my friends [in Iran] tease me by telling me that if you were capable (عرضه), you could have achieved your goals here [instead of Canada]. During those difficult situations that we experienced in Iran; you were not with us as we struggled to make ends meet when

everything was expensive [because of sanctions imposed on Iran]. So, you don't get to have a say.

It's apparent that leaving Iran led to his fear of losing his sense of unity with his fellow citizens. Therefore, he thought that he no longer permitted to have a say in the political matters of his country or the struggles his people are facing. His feeling of guilt more deeply accompanies with his thinking that he has lost his right and in a sense his status (جایگاه) to be part of Iran.

Using metaphoric language, Homayoon explained one of the most tragic stories of Shahnameh, the Book of Kings, to explain his sense of guilt. Shahnameh is a historical book of epic poems and has significant cultural value for Iranians. Using a metaphor from Shahnameh is in itself a very emotional form of expression of events in Iranian culture. Homayoon's narrative is as followed:

> I feel guilty for leaving my loved ones, especially my grandfather who is dying, because you are not supposed to leave your loved ones when they need help. This guilt is accompanied by a sense of sorrow or maybe the better word for it is feeling heartbroken (دلشکسته) like Rostam when he killed his son and experienced a deep sadness. I cannot escape from this sadness. It is part of my identity as a person who left his home in misery It's [the sadness] always going to be with me as I live my life here.

Homayoon identified with Rostam, one of the legendary characters of Shahnameh, who killed his own son in an epic war without knowing it. The rest of that story reflects the many sorrows and feelings of guilt that Rostam, the father, experiences. Homayoon shared feeling guilty for leaving his grandfather and taking for granted the time he spent with him while he was in Iran—implying he didn't value it enough. Now that Homayoon's grandfather is more likely to pass away, Homayoon relates his grief and regret to what Rostam experienced in Shahnameh's story.

Symbolizing his experience with Rostam's unwanted betrayal against his own son (for taking his life) significantly shows how guilty Homayoon feels for not being with his grandfather and other loved ones. He said that feeling guilty for losing relationships when leaving their home country is part of migrants' "identity" and lived experiences.

Theme 3: Coping with Existential Concerns

The third overarching theme, coping with existential concerns, captures the diverse ways, in which participants dealt with the experience of facing ultimate concerns. The majority of participant's used personal coping strategies to deal the anxiety resulting from isolation and meaninglessness. Participants did not particularly mention how they dealt with the awareness of mortality. Perhaps they all denied their fears about their own death and instead spoke about other concerns such as their parents' death and being worried about one's health, which seemed to overshadow their existential death anxiety. Nevertheless, as I mentioned before in this chapter, denying death is one normal way of dealing with one's death anxiety (Yalom, 1980). Participants' accounts highlight these themes of meaning making and coping with isolation.

Meaning Making. Even though some participants experienced feelings of meaninglessness, they still attempted to discover meaning and purpose in their new lives in unique ways. This aligns with Yalom's (1980) conceptualization that human beings are always seeking meaning and purpose in their lives, yet this meaning is not given. Therefore, everyone should find their own meaning in life. Participants from this study noted a sense of commitment and determination to actualize their goal of studying and living in Canada. I found this sense of commitment to adjusting to a new environment and becoming academically successful as the driving force that directed their lives in Canada. For example, Donya said: "I put a lot of effort to come here, I'd better make it. I want to learn to live here and adjust to the society". Her accounts

speak to a sense of determination or even a pressure to carry on with her life in Canada as meaningfully and successfully as possible.

Frankl (2006) divided one's meaning of life in three categories: (a) finding meaning in making a difference in the world by creation or invention; (b) finding meaning in living experiences and one's encounter with the world; (c) finding meaning in enduring pain or a destiny that one cannot change. Aligned with Frankl's category of the meaning of life, some of the participants spoke about deriving meaning from daily experiences, encountering hardships, and simple acts like gardening or listening to music. This superordinate theme illuminated four subthemes: making Canada home, connection with Iranian society, creativity, and self-reflection.

Making Canada Home. By infusing elements of *home* into their lives, some participants attempted to manage their uncanny feelings in the new environment. By doing so, they also brought meaning, a sense of identity, and familiarity into their lives. Zohre's narrative shows her attempts to surround herself with her culture and to live more meaningfully:

> I chose a crowded neighborhood and I decorated my house with Persian handicrafts. I have so many plants just like our place in Iran. See, in Iran when you walk in the streets you see a lot of handicrafts, carpets; however, the people [Iranians] like to put modern things in their house because they see enough of artistic elements in the streets. Here, because I don't see those elements in the streets, I put them in my home so I can see them. I see enough of modern things in the streets.

Zohre indicates that the way she decorated her place in many ways represents her home country and her parents' house in Iran, making her feel that connected to it. Similarly, Donya and Asal mentioned that they decorated their house with Iranian handicrafts which brought meaningful elements like they had in their bedrooms in Iran. Zohre commented that she brought her poetry

books and Persian novels in order to keep them on her bookshelf simply because she always had those books in her bookshelves in Iran.

In his office, Koroush kept a watch that his father gave him to feel his presence when working there. He said: “sometimes I look at it and think about my father”. Jana mentioned that she wore a neckless that her mother sent her when he was in Canada: “It’s funny but I was talking to that neckless for hours, especially in the evenings because you cannot call your family because it is early morning in Iran…wearing the neckless felt that I had my mother with me all the time”. Wearing the neckless was a symbolic way of keeping Jana’s emotional connection with her mother and feeling her presence.

Connection with Iranian Community. Given the disconnection that participants felt in conversations with their Canadian friends, most of them were seeking relationships with other Iranian international students. Jana, for example, shared that “speaking Farsi with Iranians was relaxing, it was like a respite from English”. Similarly, for Zohre, “having Iranian friends and attending cultural events” at the University was a source of connection to home, “otherwise living in Canada would be much harder”. Except for Homayoon and Donya, who mainly interacted with Canadian friends, the rest of the participants noted that they mostly interacted with Iranian friends. However, they all mentioned that they would like to improve their connections with Canadian peers to feel more connected to their new environment.

Creativity. Some participants included painting, writing, music, Persian cuisine, and gardening as modes of coping with their loneliness and creating meaning in their lives. Zohre mentioned that she draws meaning and comfort from music and literature: “My entire life is filled with music, it saves me. When I am at home, I always play music or sing. I always write, it also relaxes me”. For Donya, cooking kept her connected to home and her mother, as she noted:

“the smell of Persian food makes me feel at home, it is nostalgic”. Donya cooks Persian dishes to remember home and to reconstruct that feeling in Canada. Asal mentioned that she paints and also spends hours with her plants: “they are like my babies; I talk to them…taking care of them washes away my worries”.

Self-reflection. Referring back to Camus, there is also a saying that “the first person you see when you travel is yourself”. An unfamiliar environment and loneliness therein throw one into a deep reflection of life so far. All participants in this study shared meaningful accounts of their self-reflections during the process of acculturation and the development of new insights about their self and experiences (i.e., their cross-cultural experiences, pre-existing mental health issues). For some of the participants, self-reflection facilitated their adjustment by changing their perspective about their experiences. It helped them to derive meaning from their acculturation challenges as well as the personal changes they experienced in Canada. Their reflections demonstrate their resiliency and growth as well as their ability to cope with their challnges.

For Zohre and Koroush, cross-cultural transition created an opportunity to explore and reflect on their childhood and pre-existing issues. Their narratives represent their efforts to find meaning in their hardships. Zohre shared that throughout her life, she always dealt with the issue of low self-esteem. After her migration, this issue became even more significant and severely impacted her life. However, she narrated of being able to manage this issue:

> I was too focused on my problems that I couldn’t see what was going on in my environment. I don’t know what happened but at some point, I started to zoom out and observe other people and their ordinary mistakes instead of only focusing on my own inadequacies. This realization initiated my change. I was also talking to myself a lot, I

> was remembering my achievements. I was telling myself that if I was stupid, I couldn't have come to Canada by myself and begun a PhD program.

The issue of self-esteem came up several times in my interview with Zohre and her narratives reflected for me that she gradually learned to be more self-compassionate and less critical about her flaws and mistakes. This issue brought about significant change to different aspects of her life including her self-esteem, resulting in developing a more constructive perspective: "I feel proud of myself for starting my life from scratch and re-building it. It was a slow process but now I've learned that I shouldn't beat myself up and I will continue building my life in Canada". According to Frankl (2006), such deep engagement with one's experiences and reflections about their experiences creates meaning for individuals.

Koroush narrated that struggles of cross-cultural adjustment including "the pressure of school" and "feelings of loneliness" deepened his pre-existing mental health issues. He explained that for a couple of months his research was not moving forward, and he was feeling very "depressed" and isolated from people around him. During those months he had serious suicidal thoughts and re-called complications surrounding his birth (i.e., prolonged labour, delayed birth, Hypoxia), which led his parents to think that he was not going to survive. He was bullied at school because he took pills, which stigmatized him as being mentally ill among his peers. Koroush recollection of those childhood experiences and memories deepened his "depression" in Canada. However, his reflections also provided an opportunity to realize "where I stand now, I achieved my goals [i.e., studying abroad] despite my childhood [developmental] problems and people telling me that I am mentally ill". Koroush's narrative spoke of a sense of accomplishment through overcoming his adverse childhood experiences. Surviving those

circumstances and achieving his goals represent the new narrative and meaning that he derived from to his hardships.

Jana reflected on deriving meaning from enduring the pain of separation from her family. She mentioned: “I’ve almost learned how to live independently as a mature woman, but this achievement only comes true when you tolerate the pain of separation and isolation. This is a bitter reality that I learned”. Jana found meaning and a sense of growth from the hardships of migration. According to Frankl (2006), experiencing hardship can create meaning for individuals if that experience brings about a positive change in their lives. For Jana, developing a sense of self-reliance was indeed a positive and meaningful change in her life.

Dealing with Isolation. Participants coped with existential isolation in different ways. Donya and Asal confronted isolation by plunging into those feelings of loneliness and accepting them as a given part of the human condition. For Zohre and Jana, relationships, particularly romantic ones, were the best cure for coping with the pain of isolation. This superordinate theme illuminates two subthemes: confronting existential isolation and romantic relationships.

Confronting Existential Isolation. Some participants mentioned that loneliness cannot be fully shared even with significant others. Donya shared a story about a time when she was suffering from feelings of isolation and was desperately searching for a way to escape it. She mentioned that was inspired by one of her friends who advised her to accept her feelings of loneliness as an existential reality:

> She [her friend] used to tell me that my only choice is to accept loneliness, to accept its silence, and just live with it as is. It has to be a part of me in order for me to feel at peace. She told me that the only person you have in the world is yourself and that you should love yourself more than anyone. That’s when you can truly love another human being.

Donya further mentioned that accepting loneliness brought her a sense of peace and comfort. She also mentioned that facing loneliness is a prerequisite for developing mature love and genuine relationships. Similar to Donya, Asal noted that "I have accepted my loneliness, it's part of my personality. Loneliness is like a shelter where I go and spend time with myself". It is evident from Asal's accounts that she embraces her loneliness and appreciates moments of being alone.

Romantic Relationships. Some participants (Zohre, Jana) identified love and being in a romantic relationship as a means of lessening their feelings of isolation. Zohre noted that starting a romantic relationship in Canada made her feel "happy" and "at peace". Before her romantic relationship, she was imagining herself all alone in Canada, but love has helped her to better deal with her feelings of loneliness. Similarly, Jana mentioned that since her husband's arrival to Canada, she feels less emotionally vulnerable and handling the absence of her family is easier for her. She said: "The feeling that someone you love also loves and cares about you is very valuable. This helps me feel less alone". It is apparent that Jana's physical separation from her husband made her aware of the value of love and deep connection with a romantic partner.

Koroush and Donya indicated that the absence of a romantic relationship in their lives deepened their sense of isolation. Donya mentioned that the absence of love made her lonelier in Canada. Although she realized that "love cannot eliminate loneliness, but it lessens its pain". The absence of love took a toll on Koroush, as he narrated: "because I have not fallen in love, I feel that every day I am becoming lonelier and I need a companion to feel less uncanny (غریب) in Canada." For Koroush, friendship has been a source support and care, but it doesn't replace his need for a romantic partner. He mentioned that the absence of romantic love is similar to a "big void that is not being filled even with the love and care of friends".

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The key question that guided my study was: How do Iranian international students make sense of their existential concerns during their acculturation in Canada? In this chapter, I discuss and interpret key findings of this study about participants' encounters with existential concerns and the meaning that these concerns represent in the relevant literature. Following this, I provide recommendations for future research and practice, particularly within the field of counselling psychology. Lastly, I address the strengths and limitations of this study.

Boundary Situation and the Uncanny Phenomenon

The underlying meaning of participants' experiences revealed a link between separation from home and the emergence of feelings of uncanniness in the face of the novel and unfamiliar environment of the host culture. This profound sense of unfamiliarity and lack of belonging due to encounters with new languages, people, and physical surroundings served as a boundary situation, in which participants deeply reflected upon their existence, possibilities, and limitations as humans.

Findings from this study suggest that being separated from one's homeland and loved ones instigated the boundary experience. For my participants, separateness came with being cut-off and disunited from home—the source of meaning, identity, and a sense of security (Grarret, 2011)—leading to feeling alone and invisible in the new environment. This finding is consistent with conceptualizations of separation being a primary cause of anxiety in attachment theories. Similarly, Fromm (1956) suggested one's experience of separateness as a key source of anxiety, leading to feelings of helplessness and loneliness. In separation, individuals have less authority to "grasp the world, things, and people" (Fromm, 1956, p. 7), which explains my participants' feelings of invisibility and loneliness.

Another new finding of this study suggests that the feeling of uncanniness feeds into existential questions revealing a connection between existential concerns and the experience of unfamiliarity, including those of migration. In describing their feelings of uncanniness, participants of this study noted feeling “rootless”, “uprooted”, and “different" from their peers in Canada. They also felt not-at-home when faced with an unfamiliar climate, architecture, and language in Canada. The inherent existential basis of such experiences pushes aside the everyday concerns and confronts individuals with their existential situation. These feelings exemplify Heidegger’s (1996) notion about the emergence of the feeling of uncanniness in unfamiliar and ambivalent situations.

While there exists very little research about the feeling of uncanniness in the context of cross-cultural transition, Madison’s (2005) doctoral dissertation was an exception. My findings are consistent with those of his phenomenological study about the existential experiences of 20 voluntary multinational migrants, who left their countries for Europe in a quest to explore their identities. Despite having left their countries voluntarily, Madison’s participants dwelled on the meaning of home and the absence of a sense of belonging in the world. Therefore, Madison emphasized that relocation may evoke feelings of uncanniness due to encountering a new and unfamiliar environment.

Existential Issues Masquerading as Adjustment Problems

A considerable portion of the literature on international students has been criticized for pathologizing adjustment problems and labeling students as deficient. In this study, I adopted an alternate, novel way to understand acculturation challenges by attending to their underlying existential meaning. Doing so allowed me to focus on the latent, but at times quite explicit manifestations of existential concerns that could easily be misinterpreted. For example, what has

typically been viewed as suicidal ideation and major depression among this population could in fact be a crisis of existential meaninglessness. Upon migration, some of my participants faced a disruption in terms of what they considered to be the meaning, purpose, and direction of their lives. Having come to the question, what should I live for now?, some of them struggled to find meaning and set goals, resulting in a temporary loss of hope. This crisis of meaninglessness manifested in the form of depressive symptoms, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal ideation for some of them. To some readers, these findings may seem like an overinterpretation of my data. However, it is common for people to question the meaning of their lives or fall into depression after having achieved important goals (Mullins, 2009). As stated by Yalom (1980), the "problem of meaning is the significant one; it is the most perplexing and insoluble question of all" (p. 422). One's awareness of life's absurdity and failure to find meaning can lead to an existential crisis and "in severe form it may lead to a decision to end one's life" (Yalom, p. 422). In addition, other existential therapists have previously cautioned counsellors mistaking existential meaninglessness with symptoms of psychological disorders (Yalom, 1980).

Another example of existential concerns masked as adjustment problems is existential isolation. Feelings of isolation are typically understood as a form of psychological distress in the literature on this population. Nevertheless, the results of this study highlighted my participants' existential isolation present in their dominant narratives of interpersonal loneliness. Their experience of existential isolation brought up feelings of 'pure isolation from the entire world' and magnified their sense of disconnection from loved ones. They felt groundless and alone in the absence of parents who were anchors of their lives and the societal structure that was guiding their life decisions. Several participants reflected that being alive is an existentially lonely experience that cannot be fully shared with another person. However, this experience was

intertwined with a feeling of longing for their families and homeland, which often was interpreted as interpersonal isolation. Therefore, data analysis required caution on my part to be able to distinguish incidences of those two forms of isolation.

To clarify, those parts of their narratives that were about missing their friends back home were excluded from my analysis as I understood them to be about interpersonal rather than existential isolation. Some examples that reflected participants' feelings of interpersonal isolation were: "I miss the presence of my mom", "I felt alone when I had to celebrate the New Year by myself", "At times I felt alone in the meetings where I was the only person with lower English skills". By contrast, reflecting on Yalom's statement about the "fundamental separation between an individual and the world", I considered the possibility of existential isolation when participants went deeper than their previous statements and spoke about feeling alone and separated from their surroundings. For instance, statements such as "seeing myself like a dot standing all alone on the vast map of Canada without anyone and anything" and "I felt deeply alone, I felt like an abandoned island far away from a large continent" were included in my analysis as existential isolation.

This finding both supports and adds to those of previous studies that show that existential isolation is often mistaken for emotional isolation in therapy and in research studies (Yalom, 1980). For instance, pointing to this conceptual difference, Basma and Gibbons (2016) stated that Arab refugees faced existential isolation in the aftermath of war. However, their existential isolation often manifested itself in the forms of interpersonal or intrapersonal loneliness, and that is because ultimate loneliness is a difficult concept grasp. Overall, these new findings challenge pathologizing views of cross-cultural adjustment difficulties, and instead offer a more comprehensive view into their underlying significance. In addition, these results call for more

sensitivity on the part of counsellors and researchers to differentiate existential inquiries from typical adjustment issues.

Resiliency and Growth

The dominant focus of literature on adjustment problems of international students infantilizes them as vulnerable and deficient, rather than portraying them as adults capable of handling their own challenges. This study, however, demonstrated their resiliency, growth, awareness, and ability to reflect on their adjustment challenges and existential issues and use them for creating meaning, reflecting on their pre-existing mental health issues, and making Canada a new home. My participants generally saw migration as a turning point despite the difficulties it brought about for them. Wrestling with the losses and stressors of migration symbolizes death in many aspects of their lives such as relationships, belonging, language and leadership skills. The sense of mastery gained from overcoming these challenges was in turn embodied as being born again with more confidence and resources to further establish their lives in Canada.

Results suggested that participants dealt with their existential inquiries in a variety of ways. Some participants responded to their experience of existential isolation by accepting it as a reality, while actively seeking meaningful relationships to alleviate the distress that accompanied this feeling. Romantic relationships in particular seemed to lessen the pain of isolation. This is aligned with Yalom's (1980) perspective that love is the best way of coping with the dread of isolation and separateness, although it does not erase one's existential isolation. Fromm (1956) emphasized that love provides union and company for individuals to share their feelings of loneliness with each other only under the condition of maintaining and respecting their individual sense of integrity and uniqueness.

Moreover, despite meaninglessness, and difficulties find purpose in life, participants' reflections on their entire journey of cross-cultural transition seemed to present a newfound sense of meaning within their struggles. In order to manage their feeling of uncanniness, they looked to create meaning by focusing on making Canada their new home. Some ways of establishing a sense of home in Canada included expanding social networks with Iranian students and families, as well as hoping to create friendships with Canadians.

Sociopolitical Factors Foregrounding Cross-cultural Transitioning

Despite the recent shift in literature on international students, that began to point to the heterogeneity of this population, a considerable portion of this literature still perceives them as homogenous. In addition to this critique, I would argue that this population is also depoliticized. The results of my study showed the relevance of the current geopolitical context to the experiences of Iranian international students. Even though my participants held the status of international students, they referred to themselves as "migrants" and pointed to Iran's collapsing economy and sociopolitical unrest as the main reason for their decision to leave Iran. Moreover, the country's ongoing struggles continue to affect them because of the emotional connection they have with their homeland and loved ones.

Given their intention to remain in Canada and the lack of hope for a future in Iran, my participants' experiences are arguably similar to those of immigrants and refugees. Still, there are notable differences between international students and members of these other two groups of newcomers. These differences mainly involve the temporary nature of international student's visas and the demands of their schooling, whereas immigrants arrive in Canada as permanent residents and are ready to try to establish their careers (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Although the political unrest in Iran plays a major role in their intention to stay in Canada, they are different

from refugees. Students are relatively more privileged than refugees, who often arrive to Canada through refugee camps or having walked across the border as asylum seekers. They further benefit from having a Canadian degree, which is advantageous as job seekers compared to skilled immigrants (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). These differences render Iranian international students different from these other two groups of newcomers, which may leave them feeling unrecognized and struggling to define themselves.

Guilt from Multicultural Understanding of Existential Psychology

All six participants in this study extensively noted feelings of guilt for having left their families in Iran and blamed themselves for being “selfish" and “rescuing” themselves while leaving their loved ones in great hardship. The guilt expressed by my participants may not outwardly reflect existential guilt in the sense of them failing to fulfill their potential. However, my interpretation of their guilt as existential is a response to Yalom’s call to extend the meaning of existential guilt in order to be culturally inclusive. He mentioned that: “believing that life is incomplete without goal fulfillment is not so much a tragic existential fact of life as it is a Western myth, a cultural artifact” (Yalom, 1980, p. 470). van Deurzen (2012) also critiqued existential psychology for its individualistic nature which fails to take into account the social and environmental factors that people who are oppressed must contend with in their lives.

Building on this critique, I considered pressure for achievement and self-actualization as representing the values of Western societies, which may not apply to the experiences of individuals from non-Western cultures. From a multicultural perspective, their feelings of guilt for choosing to further their own growth speak to how meaningful it would have been for them to remain with their families while their country is in a state of turmoil. For my participants, accomplishment and achievement are also defined by remaining in their country to fight

alongside their loved ones for better days in Iran. As a result, their migration to a privileged country like Canada came with a sense of guilt over betraying a value that is important in their collectivist culture. This value transcends their sense of self and speaks to the importance of human relationships to their sense of accomplishment.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Researcher

The results of this study point to contextual factors, in this case the worsening economic conditions and political unrest in Iran, gave rise to manifestations of existential concerns for participants. These concerns were their feeling of guilt in relation to having left their home country while in a state of unrest and their sense of meaninglessness from chaos and injustice in the world. These results suggest that future research about existential concerns should consider how socio-political and economic issues might impact expressions of existential experiences. Taking into account these factors is necessary to bring into the light possible social influences that may evoke existential issues for individuals; however, such possible influences have been mostly neglected in the field of existential psychology (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

Furthermore, the results of this study offer insight for more comprehensive models of acculturation. Studies that explored the cultural and behavioural changes in international students and migrants often failed to consider that those changes may also cause a more fundamental shift in their worldview and orientation toward one's being. This issue may be the result of lack of consideration for existential concerns in existing models of acculturation such as that of Berry's (2005). In assuming the likely emergence of existential inquiries in addition to behavioural and psychological changes, researchers' conceptualization of acculturation can capture a deeper understanding of changes in individuals. Therefore, future studies may benefit from aiming for developing and validating an entirely new model of acculturation that takes into account people's

existential experience. Having discussed the existential nature of migratory challenges, future studies could aim to create existentially themed instruments suitable not only for international students, but for college students in general. Given the complexity and implicit nuances of existential concerns, such an instrument may assist counsellors with identifying the extent to which they are experiencing existential inquiries.

Lastly, this study challenges the way we define the international student population. In the present study, participants identified themselves as student migrants given their intention of relocating to Canada because of the unique socio-political circumstances in their home country. This finding may not be applicable to international student populations whom the literature assumed to be prototypical— who temporarily leaves one's country for the purpose of pursuing education and then decide whether or not to return by comparing opportunities available in the host and home countries or elsewhere (Arthur & Nunes, 2014). However, the world is replete with unrest and turmoil. As expressed in the term academic refugees (New York Times, 2014), academia is becoming an important avenue for certain populations to seek safety and protection of their human rights and freedoms. Given these intentions, a possible change in the definition of those international students is warranted. In accordance with McGill (2013; 2018), future studies should further investigate the phenomenon of student migration in individuals from different backgrounds. In addition, considering the unique characteristics of student migrants, further studies should explore their particular challenges, lived experiences, and migration outcomes.

Implications for Counsellors

Based on the framework for multicultural counselling introduced by Collins and Arthur (2010), counsellors working with international students should continuously seek to enhance their awareness, knowledge, and skills in ways that are relevant to the needs and challenges of

this population. For example, the results of this study suggest that counsellors should reflect on and increase their awareness about potential stereotypes concerning international students, whether their view of this population honours its heterogeneity, and whether their personal view of international students unknowingly pathologizes them. Counsellors would also benefit from being knowledgeable about sociocultural factors and current political events that may contribute to the challenges faced by international students, in order to better understand their experiences. Lastly, counsellors should provide a space that allows for authentic conversations with their international student clients about their possible existential concerns, if their clients were open to sharing about their existential experiences. By doing so counsellors would be offering their clients a new possible perspective on their acculturation challenges that is more self-compassionate and growth promoting.

Madison (2005) suggested that in order to promote the mental well-being of migrants, counsellors need to address their existential concerns. Suggestions of studies carried out by Maglio et al. (2005) and Lau (2015) further support the importance of addressing existential concerns when providing career counselling to skilled immigrants. Maglio et al. (2005) suggested career counsellors ask existentially informed questions, such as how does my client make sense of the loneliness and uncertainty of being unemployed? How does my client manage their freedom and responsibility in life? These suggestions also challenge the problem-solving approach within the broader field of psychology and offers insight into exploring and understanding problems rather than eliminating the distress. Moreover, counsellors should listen for potential existential crisis masking as suicidal ideation (Yalom, 1980). In such cases, crisis intervention and hospitalization might not be necessary. Rather, counsellors should provide a space where clients can reflect on and feel comfortable acknowledging their existential inquiries.

Strengths

Overall, the present study expanded the literature by illuminating potentially profound and mostly under-acknowledged aspects of the cross-cultural experience. One of the strengths of this study is its contribution to the existing literature by linking the two fields of acculturation and existential psychology. Using participants' own dialogues, it offers deeper insight into our understanding of common adjustment experiences such as not-feeling-at-home, loneliness, and meaninglessness. This study also highlights the positive aspects of facing existential concerns, and the process of human growth and development that lies within confrontation of existential concerns. Moreover, it challenges pathological models of adjustment by investigating emotional challenges from a non-pathological perspective using the rich tradition of existentialism. Furthermore, it responded to the call by two review research articles in 2004 by Yoon and Portman, and Popadiuk and Arthur to consider international students as a heterogenous population. In particular, this study revealed that the political factors that motivated participants' international study had different impacts on their experience as an international student. For Iranian students, cross-cultural transition is more akin to that of a diaspora, making their experiences different from other ethnic groups.

I decided to use IPA for its idiographic emphasis and attention to the unique contextual elements of participants' stories, which allowed me to highlight the detailed and subjective experiences of participants. Choosing to interview each participant twice, inviting them to bring artifacts, and the use of cards, which had existential concepts written on them, significantly impacted the richness of data in this study. In addition, conducting interviews in the participants' native language allowed them to better express themselves using Persian metaphors and

figurative expressions. According to Lau (2015), interviewing participants in their first language can provide richer narratives by removing language barriers.

Limitation

Despite its strengths, this study has its own imitations. First, all six participants have been residing in Canada for less than three years. Therefore, my results are representative of the existential concerns that emerged at the beginning of their acculturation. These results may have been different if they had been residing in Canada for a longer period of time. Future studies could explore the experiences of this population at later stages of their acculturation. Second, considering the unique circumstances associated with migration of Iranian international students, the results of this study may not be applicable to other international students. Third, participants' accounts in Persian were translated into English. It was at times challenging for me to find a translation that accurately articulated their experience. In these cases, I tried to find alternative translations for concepts that were less meaningful in English, and this may have failed to fully capture the genuine meaning of their accounts. Fourth, this is a small-scale study for my master's thesis; therefore, I did not further examine additional contextual factors, such as intersectionality, that may have impacted participants' experiences. Lastly, the present study is confined to the field of counselling psychology. Although the results of this study demonstrated a link with other disciplines such as diaspora and immigration, I did not adopt an interdisciplinary lens to examine those findings. By doing so, this study could have been much richer in its findings, however, such a comprehensive approach goes beyond the scope of a master's thesis.

Postscript

As I was conducting this study, multiple tragic incidents were unfolding in Iran and globally. Economic sanctions placed by the American government and a significant drop in

Iran's national currency in 2018 impacted the quality of Iranians' lives and devalued their assets overnight, leaving them feeling unsafe and hopeless. The consequences of this drastic currency drop also affected Iranian international students financially and emotionally—specifically the possibility of their having to return to Iran due to financial strain. Moreover, the gas price tripled overnight in November 2019, which led to large-scale protests in different cities of Iran, mainly by disadvantaged and citizens with lower socioeconomic status. The government in turn imposed a week-long internet blackout across the country to quell the protests. As a result, the Iranian community abroad and many international students were unable to make contact with their loved ones back home despite their concerns for their families' safety. Shortly after that incident, one of the government's supreme leaders, Qasem Soleimani, was killed in a U.S. airstrike ordered by Trump's, to which Iran responded with missiles attacking Iraqi bases hosting U.S. troops. This incident triggered many fears among Iranians because it felt like a spark that may lead to war between the two countries. However, this fear did not last long as the night after, public attention shifted to the airplane accident of flight PS752, which was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran by mistake. The airplane shooting particularly impacted the Iranian community in Canada because most of the passengers were either international students in Canada or previously skilled immigrants who were citizens of Canada. On top of those incidents, the world encountered the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in late 2019, which led to the mandatory practice of self-isolation and social distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

These incidents, most of which occurred while I was analysing data further deepened my thoughts about the experiences of Iranian international students and existential issues that I discussed among this population. The impacts of these tragic events on the experiences of

Iranian international students in Canada could require further attention of researchers. These events might even lead to another wave of migration and brain drain, which could be another area for future research in Iranian studies.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Experiences of Iranian International Students Study

E-mail Subject Line: University of Calgary Study: The Experience of Iranian International students in Canada

Hello!
My name is Mina Didehvar and I am a second-year Counselling Psychology Master's student at the University of Calgary, working under the supervision of Dr. Kaori Wada. I am recruiting participants for my Master's thesis project.

I am looking for Iranian international students who are willing to discuss about their living experiences in Canada. The aim of this study is to go beyond what we already know about international students' challenges (i.e., language barriers, adjustment to a different educational system, homesickness, and social isolation) and ask about how these challenges may have been impacting them as a person and what they mean to them.The objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of Iranian international students' experiences.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to reflect on your living experiences in Canada at an existential level. You don't have to be a philosopher to talk about existential issues. Aware or not we all experience existential concerns such as who I am as a person and what the purpose of my life is. Your participation would involve 2 confidential audio-taped interviews in Farsi, each one approximately 60 minutes.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $10 gift card for the first interview and a $30 gift card for the second interview.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:
Mina Didehvar, Werklund School of Education, Department of Educational Psychology at **(403) 700-8790** or by email: **Mina.didehvar@ucalgary.ca**

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Calgary Research Ethics Committee.

Appendix B: Online Advertisement Recruitment Letter

Experiences of Iranian International Students Study

Hello,

My name is Mina Didehvar and I am currently recruiting participants for my Master's thesis project.

I am looking for Iranian international students who are willing to discuss about their living experiences in Canada. The aim of this study is to go beyond what we already know about international students' challenges (i.e., language barriers, adjustment to a different educational system, homesickness, and social isolation) and ask about how these challenges may have been impacting them as a person and what they mean to them.The objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of Iranian international students' experiences.

Participation will involve two confidential audio-taped interviews in Farsi, each one approximately 60 minutes.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive a **$10 gift card** for the first interview and a **$30 gift card** for the second interview.

If you are interested or have any questions/concerns, please contact me directly. Also, if you know anyone who might be interesting in participating, privately forward them this information

I look forward to hearing from you!

This study has received ethics approval by the University of Calgary's Research Ethics Board (CFREB).

Appendix C: Recruitment Poster

Appendix D: Informed Consent for Participants

Experiences of Iranian International Students Informed Consent

Principle Researcher: Mina Didehvar, BA (Honours), Counselling Psychology, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Mina.didehvar@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Kaori Wada, PhD, Assistant Professor, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Kaori.wada@ucalgary.ca

Contact info: Please contact Mina Didehvar regarding any question about the research.

Dear Participants,

Thank you for your interest in this study. Please take the time to read this document carefully, which provides more information about the study.
The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

This study is exploring the challenges of Iranian International students and their underlying existential experiences during their adjustment in Canada. The aim of this study is to go beyond what we already know about international students' challenges (i.e., language barriers, adjustment to a different educational system, homesickness, and social isolation) and explore how these challenges may have been impacting Iranian international students as a person and what they mean to them.

What is Involved?

Your voluntary participation would involve consenting to two 60 minute semi-structured one-on-one interviews to explore your experiences as an international student. The interviews will be audio-recorded to enable the research team to transcribe and analyze what you have said. As a participant in this study, you would be asked to reflect on your living experiences in Canada at an existential level. You don't have to be a philosopher to talk about existential issues. Aware or not we all experience existential concerns such as who I am as a person and what the purpose of my life is. It would be great if you can describe your experience as an international student, and allow me to explore with you possible existential themes that may be exist in your experiences.

Potential Risks and Benefits

You will be invited to a deep conversation about your challenges as an international student as well as your understanding of their impacts on you. There is a risk that engaging in interviews will trigger uncomfortable feelings; however, it is anticipated that the potential risk will be minimal meaning that it will not go beyond what you normally experience in your daily life. If you feel distressed, you can take a break from the interview, reschedule another appointment, or even withdraw from the study altogether. The researcher will provide you with a list of free or low-cost counselling services if you needed to seek up professional help.
Your participation may help to enhance you understanding of your existential experiences as an international student and achieve feelings of relief in being able to share your experience.

Participants' rights:

Participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate, answer to interview questions that you do not wish to answer, or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of compensation should you choose to withdraw from the study altogether. You will receive a $10 gift card before the start of first interview and a $30 gift card just before the second interview.

Confidentiality:

Any identifiable information that is obtained in the study will remain confidential. Your name will replaced with a pseudonym of your preference to protect your identity on transcripts and on any reports. We will keep your personal information and audio recordings in locked filing cabinets and password protected laptop. Only the researcher (Mina Didehvar) and her supervisor (Dr. Kaori Wada) will have access to the information. Your audio recordings will be destroyed after the end of data analysis. Transcriptions and paper copies of your information will be stored securely for 7 years. All data from participants who choose to withdraw will be destroyed. If you chose to withdraw from the study at any time, your data will be destroyed.
.
Your audio recordings may be transcribed by a research assistant who will not have access to your identifiable information. The recordings and transcripts of the interviews will only be marked with your participant number and pseudonym. I will provide you with a summary of the most important topics that arose during the interview. I will send you the summary by email and invite you to send any feedback within two weeks after receiving the email. If I do not hear from you within this time frame, I assume that you agree and approve of my summary.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, your rights, confidentiality, and have had your questions about the study answered to your satisfaction.
Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that your responses may be put in anonymous form and kept for further use after the completion of this study.

Participant's Name (please print): _________________________

Participant's Signature: _____________________ Date: __________________

Interviewer's Name (please print): ________________________

Interviewer's Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________________

Questions or Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Mina Didehvar
Werklund School of Education, Department of Educational Psychology
(403) 700-8790, Mina.didehvar@ucalgary.ca
and Dr. Kaori Wada
(403) 220-6454, Kaori.wada@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-6289/220-4283; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix E: Participant Demographic From

Date: ______________
Participant ID: ________________
What is your pseudonyms name for this study? _____________________

General Information:

1. What is your age? ________

2. Gender: Please select one that you *most* identify with.
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Transgender & Gender Nonconforming
   d. Decline to answer

Education:

3. What program are you currently enrolled in a Canadian university?
   ____

4. What degree are you currently pursuing at the university?
   a. Undergraduate. Please specify year of study:________
   b. Master's. Please specify year of study:________
   c. Doctoral. Please specify year of study:________
   d. Other. Please specify year of study:________

5. What was your highest degree obtained in Iran?
   a. High school Diploma
   b. Bachelor's degree
   c. Master's degree
   d. Doctoral degree
   e. Other: ____________

6. In what discipline and which university did you receive the above degree? (e.g., social sciences, engineering, medicine)

   Discipline: ______________________ University: ______________________

Duration of studying abroad:

7. When did you arrive in Canada?

   Year: ________ Month: ________

Relationship:

8. What is your relationship status?
   a. Single
   b. Married. Please specify where does your spouse/partner live? ____________
   c. In a relationship. Please specify where does your spouse/partner live? ___________
   d. Other: ________________________

9. Did you come to Canada with your family?
   a. Yes. Please list who you come with (i.e. spouse, children):____________
   b. No.

10. Do you have relatives and/or close family friends in Canada?
    a. Yes. Please specify your relationship:_________
    b. No

Funding:

11. What is/are your main source(s) of funding for living and studying in Canada?
    a. Family
    b. University
    c. Employment
    d. Other. Please specify:__________

12. Are you currently registered in a funded degree program?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Appendix F: Counselling Services

Experiences of Iranian International Students in Canada
Mina Didehvar

Counselling Services Information Sheet

University of Calgary Student Wellness Centre Counselling Services
(403) 210-9355
Offers personal counselling among other psychological services.
https://ucalgary.ca/wellnesscentre/services/mental-health-services

Catholic Family Services
Behnam Kohandel, Clinical Counsellor
(403) 233-2360
Affordable counselling – no one is turned away, you determine what you can afford to pay.
https://www.cfs-ab.org/what-we-do/mental-health-wellbeing/affordable-counselling/

Immigrant Services Calgary- Mosaic Multicultural Counselling Program
Atoosa Daniali
(403) 444-1508
Free or low-cost counselling services to immigrants, refugees, and students holding study permit
https://immigrantservicescalgary.ca/mosaic-multicultural-counselling-program-mmcp
Distress Centre Calgary
(403) 266-4357
24-hour crisis support, online mental health chat, professional counselling, and suicide hotline.
http://www.distresscentre.com/

Eastside Family Centre – Wood's Homes
(403) 299-9696
No-charge, walk-in, single-session counselling to individuals, couples and families.
http://www.woodshomes.ca/site/PageNavigator/programs/crisis/programs_eastside.html

Appendix G: Interview Guide

Experiences of Iranian International Students Study

Participant ID: ________________ Date: _________________

Pseudonym name: _____________________

Introductory Comment:

Thank you for your interest in this study. Before we begin, I would like to go over informed consent form with you and answer any question or concern about it.

As mentioned in the recruitment letter and consent form, we are going to have a deep conversation about your sojourn challenges as well as your existential experiences as an international student. You do not need to know about existentialism to answer my questions. Aware or not, we all face existential concerns (i.e., what is the meaning of my life?) throughout our life. I just want to encourage you to take the time you need to describe your experience as an international student and allow me to explore with you possible existential themes that may be exist in your experiences.

Interview Questions:

1) **Tell me about what made you interested to participate in this study?**
2) **Tell me briefly how come you chose to go abroad for continuing education?**
3) **How do you perceive your life in Canada so far?** (Query: How was it similar or different from what you expected before coming to Canada?)

4) **What did you find difficult about your living experience in Canada?** (Query: Thoughts? Reaction in moments of difficulty? Particular moment of hardship? What do you do in those moments? Internal experience?)

5) **What do you enjoys about living in Canada?** (Query: Particular moment of excitement? What does it mean to you? Feeling?)

6) **Do you think your experience of studying abroad changed you personally?** If so, how? (Query: Thoughts about the impact of this change on you?)

Debriefing Comment:

This concludes our first interview. I want to reflect back and debrief on your experience by asking a few more questions:

7) **What else would you like to say that I didn't ask that would help me understand your experience?**
8) **How was the interview like for you?**

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Some people also use visual arts, music, or poems as a language to better describe their internal experiences. Have you ever experienced that? If so, I want to ask you to bring any piece of art (e.g., painting, picture) or even music or poem which represent your experience to our next interview session.

*Reminder: bringing a piece of art to our next session is completely optional.

In this interview session, I learned about your journey as an international student and its impacts on you. In the second interview we will explore your existential experiences. Again, you do not need to prepare for it or know what existentialism is. I will ask more questions to deepen your experiences.

Second Interview Guide

Experiences of Iranian International Students Study

Date: _______________

Participant ID: ________________

Pseudonym name: _____________________

Thank you for your participation in the second interview. Before we get into the main interview questions, I wanted to acknowledge that I will be asking personal questions about your experiences. If you felt uncomfortable or emotionally distressed at any point during our interview, please let me know and we can take a break. You are also free to not answer any question that you feel unprepared or uneasy to talk about.

To begin with, I was wondering how our last meeting was.

1) **Did you have any after thoughts?**
2) **What did you learn about yourself reflecting on your experience?**
3) **Did you bring any piece of art with you?** (Query: What does it say about your experience? Feeling? Thoughts?)

Possible Interview Procedure:

I am going to give you a couple of cards that have existential experiences written on them, (putting the cards on the table), I want you to select the one(s) that you think you have experienced and leave the one(s) that you believe you did not experience on the table. If you were unsure about any card(s), you can place it on the other side of the table.

Possible follow up Questions:

Looking back to the times that you felt (name of a particular existential concern):

4) **Tell me about a day that you experienced (Name of a particular existential concern) the most?** (Query: What did you do? Internal experience? Wishes?)

5) **Did you experience (Name of a particular existential concern) before as well? How was those experiences different?**
6) **How do you think about the cards that you did not experience?**

Debriefing Questions:

7) **How was it like participating in this study?**
8) **How have you come to understand your experience of studying abroad through our interview?**
9) **What English words can best describe your existential experiences?**
10) **What would have been like if we did this interview in English?**

Thank you again for your participation in this study. I am really grateful for your time and contribution to this research. What will happen next in the study is that I will be contacting you once the analysis of the interviews is complete. This is for me to receive feedback from you about my interpretation of your experience to ensure accuracy. Your participation in this part of the process is entirely voluntary.

Appendix H: Contract for Transcriber

Contract for Transcribing Data

This is an agreement between ______________________and Principle Researcher Mina Didehvar with regard to transcribing audio-tapes for her research.

The Parameters of the Agreement are as follows:

1. _______________ (to be referred as the transcriber) has agreed to transcribe audiotapes.

2. Roles and Responsibilities:
    a) Transcriber understands that data can be extremely sensitive and will treat it with the utmost of care and confidentiality consistent with Ethical Requirements of the Tri-Council Policy.
    b) The owners of the data are Principle Researcher (Mina Didehvar) and her supervisor (Dr. Kaori Wada) and transcriber understands that she/he is not to keep any data on her/his computer or is she/he to use it for purposes other than transcription. She/he will not make any copies of the data or of use it for her/his own purpose.
    c) Transcriber understands that all data will be stored exclusively on the medium provided by Mina Didehvar.
    d) Transcriber understands that the only individuals who are to have access to the data or its transcription are Mina Didehvar and Dr. Kaori Wada.
    e) No other individual should hear the tapes, read the transcript, or have any interaction with the data without the written permission of Mina Didehvar or her supervisor (Dr. Kaori Wada). No discussion about the data should occur with anyone other than those mentioned above.
    f) Transcriber understands that transcription is not an activity that warrants publication. If she/he is to do work that warrants publication that will be negotiated prior to that work beginning.

I have read the agreement and understand the conditions therein and agree of my own free will without coercion to all of the above conditions.

______________________________	______________________________
Transcriber	Principle Researcher

Date: _________________________

Appendix I: Sample Translation

English Translation	Persian Translation
I could never grow roots here [referring to Canada]. Like many other migrants, I am like a plant that is pulled out of its soil and placed in water. I would grow small roots but never roots like the plants that are placed in soil.	تو اینجا ریشه پیدا نمیکنی هیچوقت... مثل هموون . گلایی که حتی از خاک جداشون میکنی میذاری تو آب یه ریشه مسخره ای میزنن ولی میبینی خیلی هم برزگش زرد میشه سبز میشه تا اون قوت بگیره
Social rights and freedom stand side by side with responsibility and keeping them together is a very balanced dance and you have to walk carefully, on the edge of it, otherwise falling to one side is dangerous.	این قضیه right و freedom در مقابل این responsibility یک dance خیلی balance هست که باید روی این لبه ی چیزش خوب درست راه بری وگرنه هر دو طرفش خطرناکن
If something bad happens to me here and I die in my apartment, my body would stink for a few days and nobody would realize. Then who would tell my family, what would they do? This scares me.	اینجا یه نقاطی هست که به این فکر میکنم من اگه اینجا بلایی سرم بیاد تو آپارتمانم بمیرم 4 روز جسدم بو گند بگیره هیچکس نفهمه چی مثلا... بعد مثلا کی میخواد به خانودام.. بعد خانوادم چیکار میخوان بکنن.. این چیزا واسم ترسناک میشه
If you imagine a world map [and everyone I know as small lights], I was feeling that a lot of lights were shining together in Iran. Far away from them and on the other side of the world map in Canada, I was a little light that nobody could see and was shining by myself in my small place.	مثل این بود که آخرش من قراره تنها باشم و هیچ اتفاق دیگه ای قرار نیست بیفته و خیلی دور و برم قرار خالی بمونه و مثلا اینا هم این شکلی بود مثلا اون موقع تصوری که از خودم داشتم به محض اینکه به زندگی فکر میکردم کل کانادا رو میدیدم با اون عظمت و خودم یک نفر رو انگار که مثلا تو مپ بزرگ کانادا من تو یه نقطه تنها وایسادم وسط انگار که مثلا هیچ کسه دیگه هیچ چیز دیگه وجود نداره
It [migration] has a deep sadness that you can't change, and I may never be able to cope with it completely. Like an old wound, it doesn't bleed at all, but it never heals. This wound always remind you that you don't belong here. That you lost something, but you traded for it	یه غم عمیق از اینکه چیزیه که نمیتونی تغییرش بدی ولی ممکنه هیچوقتم نتونی 100 درصد باش کنار بیای مثل یه زخمی که کهنه میشه یه موقع هایی خونریزی هم نداره ولی هیچوقت هم جاش نمیره. مثل یه همچین چیزی همیشه یادت میندازه که تو متعلق به اینجا نیستی یعنی یه چیزایی رو از دس دادی ولی در ازاش معامله کردی و همه اینا میتونن احساس های مختلفی رو در من بربیانگیزد
When I would come home at night, it was pure silence, it was pure loneliness, and there was nothing else. It was the hardest [part of migration], I mean all of the academic	شب که میومدم خونه سکوت محض بود تنهایی محض بود و هیچ چیز دیگه ای نبود حس میکردم که ... یه چیزی عظیمی نیست یه چیز عظیمی گم شده یه چیز

struggles that I was experiencing at the university was still manageable. I could overcome them by putting more effort into my studies, but there's nothing you can do about isolation, it's like there's no solution for it. There were moments when I felt that if it was no Netflix for example, or no music playing, I would go crazy. I couldn't stand it, like if I tried tolerating it for one more second, I would die (laughter). It was a strange feeling.	عظیمی.. یه خلا دقیقا یع خلا خیلی بزرگی داخل خودم حس کردم... اون سخت ترین ..یعنی میگم با همه ی سختی هایی که تو دانشگاه و اینا احساس میکردم که برا اونا میشه یه کاری کرد یعنی اونا رو میشه یه جوری برش غلبه کرد یعنی ادم تلاشش رو 10 برابر میکنه و بالاخره به نتیجه میرسه هر چی سختی که باشه ولی اینو نمیشه هیچ کاریش کرد یعنی اینو انگار هیچ راه حلی براش نیست هیچ راه چاره ای براش نیست. و وقتی میام من تو خونم تنهای تنهام.. یعنی یه لحظه هایی بود که احساس میکردم که اگه نتفیلیکس نباشه و گوشیم آهنگ پخش نکنه ً اینکه هیچ آدمی نیست هیچ ارتباطی نیست احساس میکردم این دیوونم میکنه. یعنی نمیتونم تحملش کنم حس میکنم یه ثانیه بیشتر تحملش کنم مثلا میمیرم (خنده).. چیز عجیبی بود