Who is the stranger really? A Reluctant Autoethnography of the Strange Situation Procedure

Tara Yazdani
tarayazm@gmail.com

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Who is the stranger really?

A Reluctant Autoethnography of the Strange Situation Procedure

by

Tara Yazdani

Graduate degree, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2021

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Abstract

This paper aims to review the cross-cultural application of attachment theory as a western model of thought and practice. That is, this research aimed to recognize and question how embedded attachment theory has become in programming and education within North American academic and practical arenas. In applying the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) to a limited sample of Eritrean dyads, important considerations and questions arose regarding the cross-cultural application of this protocol. The aims of this research shifted toward further exploring these considerations and questions, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the new research aim emphasized how to inform future cross-cultural research on attachment theory about the trespasses and intersections of complex truths – for both the researcher and the researched. Using an autoethnographic methodology, I articulate the strange journey in completing this specific research study, and generated themes and areas applicable to attachment research, and more broadly, to research involving cross-cultural groups. I explore my lived experiences in research as a child immigrant, a student, a researcher, a clinician, a citizen, an outsider, a stranger, a volunteer, and a social worker. My findings suggest that the stranger identity, as part of the SSP protocol, shifts vastly when applied cross-culturally, and that this identity expands beyond the protocol to the relationship of researcher-researched. In recognizing this shift, this paper demands a heightened ethical responsibility for the attachment researcher and practitioner in engaging with culturally diverse groups. Without such reflexivity in navigating the complexities of attachment, risk of misinterpretation and misuse in policy and practice is unavoidable.
Acknowledgements

This Project would not have been possible without the support of many of my attachment figures. Thank you to my family for prioritizing knowledge and learning above all else and for instilling meaning and value in my pursuing a giving path. Thank you to my dear friend, Ildiko de Boer, who supported every micro-step of this project and directed me when requiring re-centring. Thank you to Armit and her incredible community for supporting and guiding this project and introducing me to E and the Eritrean Mothers. Monica Hinrichs, throughout the development of my attachment lens and exploration, has been a particularly treasured friend, mentor and colleague in supporting my interests and opportunities to grow and wonder in this field. Jean-François Bureau, thank you for engaging with me on this topic 4 years prior, which led to my pursuit of this project. Ryan Brydges, thank you for helping revive my passion for writing and academic pursuit. Lastly, to my academic advisor, Bree Akesson, thank you for your guidance, patience and support in overcoming my reluctance in this journey and continuing to see the possibilities in face of ongoing challenges. This research project is a co-construction with you all.
# Table of Contents

List of Legend........................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures ........................................................................................................ vii

List of Appendices ................................................................................................ vii

General Introduction .............................................................................................. 1

Where I began ........................................................................................................... 2

Background & Literature Review .......................................................................... 4

Attachment & Culture ............................................................................................. 4

The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) ................................................................. 6

Classification Systems ........................................................................................... 8

Secure Attachment ................................................................................................. 8

Insecure Avoidant Attachment ............................................................................... 9

Insecure Ambivalent/ Resistant Attachment .......................................................... 9

Insecure Disorganized Attachment ....................................................................... 10

Purpose .................................................................................................................. 10

Methods ................................................................................................................. 12

Research Setting ................................................................................................. 12

Participants & Consent ......................................................................................... 12

Ethical Approval ................................................................................................. 13

SSP procedure and Data Collection .................................................................. 14

COVID 19 and a Methodological Shift ................................................................. 15

Danger of a Single Story ...................................................................................... 16

Findings and Discussion ...................................................................................... 19
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Place in the Research: Initial Reflections</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronting my Stranger Identity</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronting my Individualistic Identity</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Strangers in a Power Imbalance</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mothers and a Stranger</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ A Sudden Shift~</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting a Foreign Stranger</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trapped in the Strange New World</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stranger</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Children</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mothers</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A1</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A2</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A3</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A4</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1: Strange Situation Procedure Episodes for Preschool Aged Children .................... 14
List of Figures

Figure A ................................................................. 47
Figure B ................................................................. 47
Figure C ................................................................. 47
Figure D ................................................................. 47
Figure E ................................................................. 47
List of Appendices

Appendix A1: Invitation Letter ................................................................. 64
Appendix A2: Informed Consent ............................................................... 66
Appendix A3: Verbal Assent ................................................................. 71
Appendix A4: Confidentiality Agreement ............................................. 73
**General Introduction**

Attachment is the fundamental human need for relationship. An infant’s survival depends on the bond formed with the caregiver, which protects and nurtures them (Rogoff, 2003). Initially an infant is reliant on the caregiver for the entirety of their physical and emotional needs. As the child develops, the relational bond towards the caregiver becomes primarily focused on ensuring physical and emotional access to the caregiver to meet the survival, emotional and developmental needs of the child. “The primal nature of attachment is described as a motivational system that is embedded in the infant’s need to maintain physical proximity to the caregiver” when distressed and to explore their environment when feeling safe (Lee, 2019, p.2). This signifies the inherent nature of attachment and its evolutionary and survival mechanism. John Bowlby, the father of attachment theory, identified this relationship as a biologically-based need, developed through human evolution, to improve probabilities of survival (Bowlby, 1988). The intrinsic nature of attachment results in select patterns of behavior that make the caregiver central to the child’s safety-seeking and exploratory patterns of behavior. The development of attachment theory has permitted an investigative lens on these patterns of behavior with particular focus to the child’s sophisticated yet singular purpose of maintaining proximal connection to the caregiver for safety needs and ability to trust the availability of the caregiving system in order to explore the world when feeling secure.

In pursuing this area for my master’s thesis, I felt driven by my heavily rooted knowledge base in clinical attachment theory and practice. As I applied my trainings in attachment-based interventions, such as circle of security parenting group and connect parenting group, I became curious about how this material translated across cultures. My own experiences of splitting off from one culture to two in the process of resettlement at age 10 became the grounds for
observing and questioning how relationships fostered development and the behavioural trajectory that looked so different to me in my two identities. My further trainings became new platforms for engaging in this questioning: the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (designed by Mary Ainsworth in the 1950s), the Pre-school aged procedure (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992), and the protocols and coding scales for classifying caregiver-child attachment (Moss et al., 2015). My early experiences as an Iranian-Canadian settler navigating two identities and worlds became a precursor for my curiosities in the cultural differences that presented before me in ways I found difficult to ignore.

As will be described in the coming sections, the SSP is used widely in western practice to categorize attachment classification based on areas of security, avoidance, ambivalence, and insecurity. These classifications identify the child’s pattern of relationship with a primary caregiver and are deemed as significant in predicting possible patterns of behavioural and relational experiences in later stages of life (Lee, 2019).

Where I Began

This research became an area of interest for me based on my clinical experiences working as an attachment coder and therapist, as well as my personal experiences as a newcomer adolescent with lived experiences of the frictions between culture and relationships in readjusting to a new environment. It was initially significant for me, to identify whether the claim that secure attachment prepared individuals for positive and rewarding social and adaptive experiences held validity, when the context of an individual’s environment could shift so vastly across the cultural stage. My own experiences of growing up in a collectivist cultural environment with a shift to an individualistic culture as part of my identity, I often questioned how the two interacted and impacted one another and the relationships that I formed and depended on to grow and develop. I
recalled the weight of finding my social footing in my adolescence and teens based on the significance of relationships as part of my identity and how this at times took precedence over my individualistic needs in my social narrative. I wondered about how this was not reciprocated and or received the way I had experienced in my close and early relationships. I wondered about the impact that this had on my sense of safety, security and exploratory behaviours. It was clear to me that this research was rooted in personal narratives of attachment and culture that had shaped my life’s experiences beyond what I was examining and observing as a mental health clinician today. Given my experience, knowledge and training, it was essential to pay attention to what had brought me to my interest in this field.

Based on the current literature and my personal training and knowledge in this area, I had hypothesized that secure attachment patterns would continue to be represented as a protective measure in experiences of adaptive functioning for newcomer preschool aged children. I believed that this study would be significant for the field of social work due to the application of attachment theory in practice today. This theoretical perspective is currently broadly used in providing caregiver intervention programing and supports within the arena of children’s mental health, child welfare and mental health support within schools. In working with vulnerable populations, it seemed essential to continue further exploration of the applicability of this theoretical lens with regards to culturally different groups and service provision.

*Ubuntu* is a Nguni (South African) term that translates to *I am because we are* (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). This ethical concept has “a tremendous contribution to make to a new understanding of human being as originally a being in relations” (Murove, 2014, p. 37). This highlights that the concepts of attachment and relationality clearly date back to precolonial times. Outside of western culture, many cultures of the world adopt the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as
foundational in their societal norms and social contexts of relationships and community. On this journey of learning and exploration, I consistently experienced the centrality of relationships in many processes described below. As part of this journey, two foundational attachments that provided me with the opportunity to explore this area were Artim and E (the names of these individuals have been changed to protect their identity). Artim was a connection through my Iranian-Canadian community, who was present from the beginning of my experiences in Canada. She represented community and support and also embodied these qualities as a Family Support and Diversity Program Coordinator, at a local community centre. E was a matriarchal figure to the Eritrean community that accessed the centre. She was a support to the newcomer mothers and families that frequented the programs at the centre. As will be described in the coming sections, these relationships and those they fostered are the threads to the fabric of this paper, and I believe exemplified the Ubuntu philosophy explicitly.

**Background and Literature Review**

**Attachment and Culture**

Although culture and attachment has been heavily criticized due to its western foundation, many continue to claim that attachment theory applies when working with culturally diverse populations (Rothbaum et al., 2000). However, it has been identified that attachment vastly shifts when viewed across cultures (Rothbaum et al., 2002). As Otto (2015) describes “parents raise children differently in different cultural environments in order to equip them with the necessary competencies to become successful in a specific environment” (p. 136). Many mother-child dyads that fall under insecure classifications of attachment in western culture are representative of the norm within their cultural context of origin (Rothbaum et al., 2002). This begs the question: are the favourable traits and behaviours coded in the attachment classification
system consistently rooted in specific cultures and environments? (Chen, 2015). Sunwoo Lee (2019) probed this question through examining the difference between behaviours favoured in the western individualistic cultures versus East Asian collectivist cultures. For instance, she highlights that aspects of secure attachment classification associated with independence and competence are viewed as unfavourable in Japanese culture, which values maintaining collective harmony and less expressive of individual desires. As Heidi Keller and Hiltrud Otto (2014) highlight, it may be essential to shift away from the perspective that attachment looks and presents the same cross-culturally, and to understand it as a “universal human need that looks differently and has different developmental trajectories across contexts” (p. 3).

If culture results in prioritization of one attachment classification over another, there must be a shift in understanding attachment as a spectrum that is strongly influenced by the context in which it is formed. Further, if particular subsets of classifications are deemed as more favourable, then there must be questioning of a hierarchal attachment classification system when applied cross-culturally. These proposed shifts imply a need for a review of the use of SSP and attachment theory with culturally diverse populations.

The SSP, as a western framework, has been deemed a universal tool to examine attachment patterns of behaviour between caregiver and child dyads. However, when using the SSP in culturally distinct groups, such as East Asian or collectivist cultures, this specific application of attachment appears to fall short (Lee, 2019). The cross-cultural variances in patterns of child-caregiver attachment and the implications of these differences on development and functioning is currently understudied (Bettmann et al, 2016). As a clinical service provider within a multicultural community, this is especially important to me as the current field of practice utilizes attachment theory as a basis for practical intervention with families. The
implications of applying this theory and practice without the appropriate acknowledgements and insight, as per the cross-cultural context, can present the risk of cultural appropriation and must be further examined.

**The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP)**

Attachment theory was put to test through Mary Ainsworth’s Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), which has become the foundational protocol in examining attachment in caregiver-child dyads. The strange situation was developed by Ainsworth between 1958-1969 as she examined caregiver-child attachment bonds in Uganda and Baltimore samples (Ainsworth et al, 1978). Ainsworth advanced the understanding of the child-caregiver bond beyond the Safe Haven (safety seeking survival behaviour) concept founded by Bowlby and introduced the “secure base” (Bowlby, 1988). The secure base became a new concept to understand attachment behavior as shifting beyond utilization of the dyadic relationship, between caregiver and child, for safety seeking to a platform of support in exploration of one’s environment (Ainsworth et al, 1978). This development fostered an understanding that “attachment behaviors include seeking, monitoring, and attempting to maintain proximity to a protective attachment figure, using the attachment figure as a “secure base,” and fleeing to an attachment figure as a “safe haven” in situations of danger and moments of alarm” (Lee, 2019). The concept of “safe haven” would be observable in a child seeking and accepting the caregiver for support following a challenging event that ensues negative emotional experiences (i.e. a fall or rejection), while the “secure base” can be best described as the child utilizing a caregiver in orienting to new and stimulating exploratory experiences (exploring new toys or activities).

The SSP assesses the above-mentioned behaviours on a measurable scale that could identify and assess the child’s success or difficulty in utilizing the caregiver relationship in
meeting their holistic developmental needs. This is an eight-part protocol that consists of the caregiver and child entering an unfamiliar arena (room) resembling that of a medical waiting room. The dyad experiences two timed separations (caregiver leaving the room) and reunions (caregiver returning to the room), with the availability of a stranger (a trained assistant) during separation one and standing outside of the room for the second separation. This is in effort to comfort the child just enough to be able to endure the distress in waiting for the caregivers’ return. The room provides some exploratory opportunities for child using age and stage appropriate toys and activities. The three components of the SSP (strange environment, separation from primary caregiver, and stranger) make it stressful for the child and prompt attachment behavior (Rosmalen, Veer, & Horst, 2015; Lee, 2019). This procedure is then used to assess the child’s attachment behavior towards the caregiver in meeting their Secure Base and Safe Haven needs, in order to shift back to play based exploration or developmentally appropriate interaction with caregiver, following the distress experienced. As designed by Ainsworth, this protocol was specific to infants up to two-years-old as per specific developmental markers in behavior established in the field (Ainsworth et al, 1978).

Jude Cassidy and Robert S. Marvin (1992), provide the Preschool and Early School-age Attachment Rating Scales (PARS), an adaptation to the SSP, for use with early school aged children. Similarly, attachment classifications are identified based on the child’s response to the caregiver within a set of separation and reunion episodes with attention paid to more subtle signs of attachment behavior due to older children presenting as more complex in their ability to communicate within relationships.
Classification Systems

Through Mary Ainsworth’s SSP, a classification system was developed in identifying patterns of attachment behavior in the child-caregiver relationship. The classifications are assigned to the child and identify the child’s pattern in accessing the caregiving system (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Based on this pattern, specific assumptions regarding the child’s behavioural and relational configuration are made. Several of such inferences are described below.

Secure Attachment:

The secure group represents children that engage in exploratory behaviour in absence of stress (Lee, 2019). The quality and duration of play-based exploration is generally higher and the child is able to utilize the caregiver as a secure base to explore their environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This group is able to openly express and communicate and hence more cooperative in their behaviour towards the caregiver; they are able to seek and accept connection and support when feeling distressed (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This group is also identified through increased contact seeking behaviour towards the caregiver during reunion episodes and are also able to sooth more quickly than other groups and return to play. “The flexibility and resilience exhibited in securely attached infants are a result of their interactions with a sensitive mother who is responsive to her baby’s signals and communication” (Lee, 2019, p.9). Hence there is a predictability and confidence in the pattern between these dyads. The children in this group are deemed as having “secure attachments to their [caregivers], and thereby enjoy an advantage in various aspects of social and cognitive development” (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. 307). As described here, these children engage in high quality of exploration and play and are able to seek and accept support when faced with challenges.
Insecure Avoidant Attachment:

Insecure avoidant children are often described as indifferent to the strange situation environment or procedure (Lee, 2019). They are most likely to avoid the caregiver in episodes that triggered intense attachment behaviour in other groups (i.e. contact seeking or resistance towards the caregiver). This group often present as detached in order to maintain neutrality and hence access to the caregiver, where, potentially, intense attachment behaviour would result in further rejection and isolation in the relationship. Mothers in this group have been identified in patterns of “reticence of emotional expression, aversion to physical contact, and brusqueness when it occurred” (Lee, 2019, p.10).

Insecure Ambivalent/Resistant Attachment:

The insecure ambivalent group is best characterized through the child’s preoccupation and anxiety in being away from the caregiver, resulting in a poor quality of exploratory behaviour through the SSP protocol, but especially following separation episodes (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This classification is best described through the child’s anger-like behaviour towards the caregiver or their pendulation “between active overtures for connection to [caregiver] and expressions of rejection ranging from leaning away from [the caregiver’s] embrace to full blown tantrums” (Lee, 2019, p.11). The attachment figures in this category are described to be inconsistent in availability and out of tune with the child’s attachment cues and behaviour (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This group often presents as overwhelmed by the attachment system and unable to shift focus away from the relationship in order to attain other experiences deemed essential in developing age-appropriate skills. This pattern of relationship is rooted in a nervousness about the caregiving system that prevents the child from shifting focus to exploration and skill development.
Insecure Disorganized Attachment:

Following Ainsworth’s findings, further contributions were made to attachment theory and the classification coding system. One of these key contributions were made by Mary Main and Judith Solomon (1986), who were the founders of the disorganized attachment classification in the infant group. They identified a subset of behaviours that fell outside of Ainsworth’s three categories of attachment. These behaviours were marked distinctly outside of the three aforementioned categories and were specific to the neurobiological system of the child taking over in face of adverse experiences within the attachment system. Children in this group failed to establish a consistent approach in accessing the caregiving system (Moss, Lecompte & Bureau, 2015). The child’s behaviour in this category may stem from a caregiving system that is perceived by the child as frightening, or as a result of the caregiver being frightened or dissociated (Lee, 2019). “Evident in the reunion of these infants were "dazed behavior, disordering of expected temporal sequence, incomplete movements, simultaneous display of contradictory behavior patterns, undirected affective expression, and termination of movements in postures suggesting depression, confusion, or fear” (Moss, Lecompte & Bureau, 2015, p. 7).

As described here, this classification represents the collapse of any organized pattern as described in the three previously mentioned attachment patterns. The behaviours often occur during reunion episodes and at times in subtle and short time frames. Children in this category are unsuccessful at drawing in or utilizing the caregiving system to meet their safe haven or secure base needs.

Purpose

The original purpose of this study was to provide a critical review of attachment theory through a cross-cultural study. Attachment vastly shifts when viewed across cultures (Rothbaum
et al., 2002). As Otto (2015) describes “parents raise children differently in different cultural environments in order to equip them with the necessary competencies to become successful in a specific environment” (p. 136). Many mother-child dyads that are classified as insecure in western culture, are representative of the norm within their cultural context of origin (Rothbaum et al., 2002). As a western paradigm used in practice by social services agencies in Canada today, the goal of this study was to analyze attachment theory in application to a sample of 15 Eritrean newcomer immigrant caregiver-child dyads. In utilizing the SSP, as originally developed by Mary Ainsworth (1978), and adapted by Cassidy & Marvin (1992) for preschool aged children, through coding for the attachment classification of caregiver-child dyads, themes of connection and discrepancy were to be examined. In looking at secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized attachment distributions, I aimed to complete a comparative analysis between this sample and Western samples as previously conducted and available through Van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg (1988); Van IJzendoorn et al. (1999). There is little research that has examined and explored the validity of attachment theory as a universally applicable framework in cross-cultural sample. Through this analysis, I planned to review themes and patterns specific to this cultural group that could provide grounds for further exploration and examination of attachment theory and implications of use on newcomer groups. As a recent study by Ghadir Zreik et al. (2017) examined the validity of attachment theory through a similar framework, this study looks to further contribute to a cultural understanding of a Western paradigm and model of practice in use cross-culturally and within Canadian society today.

Due to the complications brought on by the COVID 19 pandemic and restrictions placed on human studies, data collection ended following 5 tapings and a methodological shift followed. In the subsequent pages, this research paper aims to provide an analysis of my experiences
conducting research and the use of SSP with a culturally diverse group. Through critical analysis and review of my experiences and reflections on the step-by-step research procedures, I will examine the insider-outsider phenomena of the researcher as the researched. In the following sections, I will bring to light key concepts in the inevitable trespasses in cross-cultural research and the multifaceted impact of such trespasses at each phase of research development and implementations.

**Methods**

**Research Setting**

Interactions with my social network, and through my work and personal connections in the community, I became aware of the different organizations and programming that supported the newcomer groups within our community. My familiarity with the community centre, and my familial and cultural ties with Artim, led to the centre becoming a collaborator for this project. The centre’s programming predominantly focused on families with young children. Many of the caregivers in attendance were mothers and children that had recent experiences of migration to Canada. Though my eventual collaboration was with the Eritrean mothers and children accessing the centre (reasoning described below), the centre was frequented by families from all over the globe.

**Participants & Consent**

Following five months of volunteering, ongoing dialogue with Artim, and efforts toward becoming familiar with the cohorts accessing the programming, it became evident that I would be working with the Eritrean population, the largest group accessing the centre. This group was identified by the centre as the group that consistently accessed the centre and often consisted of
families with young children. In essence, they represented a convenience sample. Furthermore, there was a representative from this community that was available to support the project as a translator with the mothers that often spoke little to no English. The translator was essential for receiving ethical approval for the project, given the need to have a pathway of communication for clearly communicating risks and aims of the study with the families. With the availability of a translator that was approved and part of the centre’s support team, I was permitted access and communication with the Eritrean families that would have otherwise been challenging to coordinate.

**Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval for this research was sought from the Wilfred Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB). While the REB eventually approved the project, the experience became intertwined with my journey and key aspects are discussed below in the Results section. I recruited participants by attending a weekly mother and baby group at the centre. With E providing translation support, I introduced myself and the project to the different Eritrean families accessing the program. This was often based on awareness that there was an age-appropriate child for the project as well as having immigrated to Canada in the past 5 years. I provided an overview of the research aims, risks and benefits at this time. I answered parents’ questions and concerns as they arose with E’s help as a translator. This interaction followed information outlined on invitation letter (Appendix A1). Once caregivers agreed to participate, I then obtained their informed consent by going over the informed consent form with E once again translating the content as we reviewed (Appendix A2). Caregivers were offered the option of having access to the report and findings as well as informed of the right to withdraw from the project at any time.
Once families had consented and arrived for the study, a verbal assent form was reviewed with the children prior to inviting parent and child into the room for videotaping (Appendix A3). Assistants and translator were asked to sign confidentiality agreements to protect the privacy and identity of participants in this study (Appendix A4).

**SSP Procedure and Data Collection**

To initiate the SSP, the caregiver child dyads recruited for this study were invited into an observation room that resembled a waiting room at the Community Centre, with seating and toys appropriate for preschool aged children (toys were chosen to ensure language was not a barrier in play). The procedures were video recorded from the time the dyad entered the room to the end of the procedure as caregiver and child left together. The caregiver was aware of the video recording of this procedure; however, children were not informed. Instructions were provided to mothers, with support of a translator, in absence of the child. As per the preschool and early school-age attachment protocol (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992), there were a total of 6 episodes for this procedure (Moss et al., 2015: See table 1).

**Table 1:** Strange situation procedure episodes for preschool aged children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Episode 1</td>
<td>Caregiver and child will be introduced to room and invited to engage naturally with space and toys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 2</td>
<td>After 3 minutes of caregiver and child in the room together, the caregiver will be cued to leave the room. The caregiver is not coerced in how to prepare the child for leaving, however, will have awareness of the steps of this procedure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 3</td>
<td>The child will be in the room alone for 3 minutes (an assistant will remain outside of room for any necessary support and redirection).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 4</td>
<td>Caregiver returns to room for first reunion and will spend 3 minutes in room with child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 5</td>
<td>Caregiver will be queued to leave room again and child will remain in room alone for 3 minutes (an assistant will remain outside of room for any necessary support and redirection).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 6</td>
<td>The caregiver returns to room for the second reunion and will spend 3 minutes in the room, which will lead to the end of the procedure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In all samples, I acted as the stranger in the protocol and provided the needed engagement when child was observed to require support. Though this choice was in adapting to challenges with videotaping and at times access to assistant support, it also presented an additional avenue for data collection in that my becoming and experiencing the stranger became a core aspect of this study.

Within the room, in the event that the child became increasingly distressed the caregiver was invited to return as the purpose of this procedure was not to cause undue distress for caregiver or child. The caregiver was also free to make decisions with regards to returning to the observation room or ending taping, and involvement at any time if they chose to do so. In fact, one mother withdrew from the study when she realized that she could not take her infant (the child’s sibling) into the room with her.

**COVID 19 and a Methodological Shift**

In the face of the COVID-19 shut down, and the restrictions that followed as per University policy and government mandate, my data collection process came to an abrupt halt. Following the collection of only five sample SSP videos, no further human studies were permitted and the next few months brought a new reality with regards to human study research. It was clear that there would be no predictable return to data collection. As I continued to meet with a team of graduate level researchers as well as my advisor, I found myself sharing my research journey and experience through a narrative lens that brought forward a stance of reflexivity on my experiences thus far as a researcher. I found myself diving into concepts of power and privilege as well as discomforts of engaging with a population, group and community that I was not a part of. I recognized themes of positionality and internal conflict in initiating
collaboration with the community centre and leaning into an identity of an outsider and stranger. It was a powerful shift in recognizing that my story and experience, though connected to the research did not privy me to the experiences of those I engaged with in this process. This reflexivity led to a recognition of my position as the researcher constantly weaving in and out as *insider*: an immigrant with her own experiences of resettlement, a past identity merging with a new one, which to some extent remained alien to the new world, and *outsider*: an assimilated Canadian citizen with an identity predominantly defined through Eurocentric culture, people, places and things. Awareness of this dual positionality became foundational to understanding my engagement and progress in the research process that I experienced. This quickly became a rich and meaningful place to dig deeper and hence a shift in methodology took place.

**Danger of a Single Story**

Prior to undertaking the data analysis, it became clear that the goal of comparing collected data to the pool of knowledge, already existing in this area of research, would no longer suffice in capturing the complexity of my experiences. I realized that the process by which I had engaged in this journey and the knowledge gained along the way was far more complex and layered than the singular lens that I was attempting to filter it through. In my many conversations with my academic supervisor following the COVID-19 shut down, she would advise me in my options on how I could proceed with my research. We explored options of completing a qualitative analysis of the video recordings through searching for themes and patterns that could then be compared to Western samples. We discussed postponing the research, until data collection would be possible again, and even discussed doing case studies of each dyad which was far from what had been explained to participants at the time of engagement.
A graduate student research team meeting breathed new life and meaning into me and this work. As I shared short snippets of my experiences and discomforts in my place of power and journey as a researcher in this project, my supervisor in remarking her support and recognition of my inward dive as researcher paused and said “I have a few ideas, let’s talk after”. I was both nervous about the possibility of shifting further away from what I hoped to achieve in this project, and also intrigued in her confidence in having reached a new place to explore my experiences. The next conversation we had was one that broadened my lens in qualitative research as a new platform for understanding my and the participants’ experiences leading up to that moment and beyond. This was the first time I had heard and discussed autoethnography as a methodology used in research.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographer’s gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis, 2016, p. 673).

Suddenly, everything from my personal narrative—the search for an advisor that could grasp the complexity of what I had hoped to pursue, the challenges and difficulties with receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board, and the journey thereafter in engaging with the community—all had meaning and a place in this project. My exploration in understanding cross-cultural research had landed me at The Danger of a Single Story as explained by Chimamanda Adichie (2009) through her TED talk. I remembered watching Adichie’s talk in 2013 as I began my Social Work degree as an undergraduate student and the weight and impact
that this concept carried for me. I recalled feeling a deep level of validation in my experiences as an outsider and an insider to multiple, at times opposing, places in my identity and how I didn’t entirely belong or feel I could be explained through any singular part. I recalled knowing, within my experiences, that I would never reach a place where I would be entirely understood and that I’d always be in search of that understanding within myself. This was the point at which reality, knowledge and validity became clear as constructs that continue to shift through the lens that they are shared or received by. As Carolyn Ellis (2016) explains,

…it depends on your definition of validity. I start from the position that language is not transparent, and there’s no single standard of truth. To me, validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible (p. 674).

This powerful shift to a place of reflexivity away from research as a place of knowledge production, provided a new stance that allowed me to observe the data as beyond the handful of videos and stories collected, toward the everchanging experiences between multiple individuals in multiple learning relationships.

Through an autoethnographic review of the strange journey in this research, I dive into my lived experiences in research as a child immigrant, a student, a researcher, a clinician, a citizen, an outsider, a stranger, a volunteer, and a social worker. My aim is to inform future cross-cultural research of the trespasses and intersections of complex truths. As explained by Ellis (2016) “since we always create our personal narrative from a situated location, trying to make our present, imagined future, and remembered past cohere, there’s no such thing as orthodox reliability in autoethnographic research” (p. 674). Hence, I will take a reflexive stance
in reviewing my experiences as researcher through the multiple positions and relationships
encountered, formed and fostered in this process.

Based on this approach, the following sections will reveal my interpretations and analysis
of the process of conducting this research. The findings are divided into the following seven
themes: (1) My Place in the Research, (2) Confronting My Stranger Identity, (3) Confronting my
Individualistic Identity, (4) Two Strangers in a Power Imbalance, (5) The Mothers and a
Stranger, (6) Trusting a Foreign Stranger, and (7) Trapped in a Strange New World.

**Findings & Discussion**

**My Place in the Research: Initial Reflections**

I approached this topic as an area of interest in my academic and practical development
for the past decade. Attachment theory was the area of clinical practice that first drew me to the
field of social work. My initial encounters in child protection became the framework in exploring
relationships and relational ruptures, which led to further exploration of early human
relationships. In furthering my scope, my own experiences immigrating to Canada and early
experiences in a collectivist culture with a shift to a western individualistic way of life began to
open up new areas of questioning. Exploring attachment theory through a western model of
practice and its application to the predominantly white dominant culture, initiated a sense of
curiosity in application of this framework across cultures. As mentioned earlier, my exploration
in this field of research led me to find limited knowledge in this area. Further, I had difficulty
finding information pertaining to attachment theory and immigrant populations and new-comer
experiences. This connected with my narrative of an uprooted life and culture to settle into a
world and reality that had reshaped my identity. The significance of my experiences in this new
world were captured through the forever balancing act between the past ways of knowing and being and the current and continuously evolving ways of the new world. The lack of alignment in principal ways of being in relationship at times created frictions in assimilating to this new way of life and culture, and at times merged into an entirely new way that fit somewhere in between.

In reviewing material and practice models that I found myself saturated in, I began to question how culture presented a layer of complexity to this knowledge. In recognizing my own early experiences in an environment that was heavily impacted by political unrest, a threat to safety and unavailability of caregivers, it was clear that these were experiences that would have shaped the first 3 years of life and development of an attachment pattern. This paired with a collectivist culture that emphasized the wellbeing and benefit of the group versus the individual would have resulted in a shaping of an internal working model that would be designed in alignment with these factors to ensure survival and access to adults as part of an inherent evolutionary goal and process. This pattern or attachment would have been specific, not to my needs as an individual, but those of the network of safety and support that my family and I would have been dependent on; rooted in a culture that would have shaped this group for generations before it. Furthermore, this pattern would have been further influenced by the active environment that fostered the availability, sensitivity and immediate accessibility (physical and emotional) of the caregiver figure based on elements of risk of harm and safety. My experiences during this period may have been profoundly influential in developing a sense of the predictability and safety in relationships and experience of self and other; however, this would in effect have provided me with the necessary information in navigating the world and community in which I strived to survive in.
Following the Iran-Iraq war at the age of three with an infant sibling and a caregiver with adult experiences of PTSD, my next stage of life would have been a period of rebuilding of stability and safety through securing shelter and access to basic physiological needs. Though outside of the window of reflection as a three-year-old, these experiences would have once more impacted the pattern of relationships formed and fostered.

In shifting to a new culture and way of life at the age of 10, into an environment much different than the one I originated from, I recall experiencing a splitting of identities. In conflict with a culture I once knew, I experienced myself shifting from a relational identity to one that celebrated and emphasized unique and individualistic attributes. I remember the experiences of my childhood always celebrating the other and remaining outward in how needs were met and identified. There was little emphasis on individual needs and often a self-sacrifice that was celebrated in relationships. Though needs within the family were negotiated and prioritized based on significance, there was an outward orientation when it came to emotional awareness and communication and an emphasis to be vigilant of others needs and cues. There was an emphasis on respect toward elders and a communal stance in relating. This was perhaps most vibrant through gatherings and celebrations. I recall my parents hosting guests and ensuring that there was an attunement to their needs and desires above all else. At dinner, there was a process of ensuring elders and guests were served before children. The concept of *Taarof*, a courtesy and etiquette of respect and ritual politeness that often entails the rejection of offerings multiple times before accepting, was one that had no presence in this new place. There was a process of learning how to be in relationship again and a rawness that often left me emotionally bruised. Whether in process of putting others’ needs and wants ahead of what may have been best for me or the giving in places where there was no reciprocity, I often found myself feeling depleted and
misunderstood in relationships. What was familiar and comforting was now threatening and strange. The culture at home was not going to change and hence the task was to become masterful at adopting ways of oscillating between these very different and contradictory ways of being. This was a critical experience and insight in my drive for this research.

Further exploring the gaps in how relationships are experienced and understood across cultures became a personal task I had embarked on long before I began my journey as a social worker. As I reflected on my years of practice and training in attachment, I could not help but wonder about my own experiences as a child. I pondered on the patterns that would have been present if my parents completed the SSP with me as a child. Would there have been noticeable markers of insecurity based on those developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth? Would there be misunderstandings as I had experienced in my transition to this world? How would the favoured tendencies and behaviours of attachment theory be met by the cultural norms and expectations of my birth culture?

**Confronting my Stranger Identity**

Given her role, I reached out to Artim, as I completed revisions for the ethics application that provided me with the clearance to engage with the community for research. I presented a synopsis for the purpose and goals of my study and convincingly laid out the benefits of this research for the field of study and practice as well as mentioning the seal of approval that would be received from the University’s Research Ethics Board. I confidently asked for her help and collaboration while feeling strongly situated in a place of righteousness in what I aimed to achieve:

I'm hoping you can assist me in the experimentation phase of my project. My research is about… I hope to critically review the theory's applicability cross culturally. I hope to
meet with you to share further details about the project and ways in which we could hopefully collaborate. Please let me know when would be a good time for a meeting.

(personal email)

Artim is part of my North American journey and identity. She was one of the only familiar faces when this world was entirely new and unfamiliar to me. She was as familiar as people could be at the time that we settled in Canada and also a complete stranger. Through ties at the university, where my dad begun his PhD only a month after our landing, we were sought out by Artim to be made aware of the Iranian Canadian Community. In creating a somewhat soft landing in our transition to our new western life, my family cautiously engaged with the very small Iranian-Canadian Community. I can still recall Artim’s smiling face and smoke tinted glasses as she started to come into focus as part of our new world. Though I could not recognize then, I came to know the significance that Artim held during that time as much more than just a representation of home and the comforts of a friendly and familiar way of relating.

At the time, Artim had two young children. When we met, her daughter was seven years old when and her son was just four years old. She had been living in Canada for about eight or nine years at the time. Artim’s husband had passed away in a car accident when she was pregnant with her son. Her life in Iran carried parallels to my world as she had also been a political activist and experienced similar cruelties as my father, which were a direct consequence of her beliefs and values. Artim had fled Iran and spent a period in Turkey before migrating to Canada as an asylum seeker.

I recall my first memories of Artim as a 12-year-old at a Persian New Year event in Canada. She had asked me about my experiences at a new school and our move to a new apartment (second home after landing). She carried an air of confidence and independence in her
presence that left me feeling secure in answering her questions. Artim was a familiar stranger, a representation of the inside and out, the balance of west and east. She represented the future in having experienced resettlement and re-establishing community, and thus opened a portal to the world that I relentlessly wished to develop connections to. A world that did not understand me and that I could barely understand or communicate with. A dilemma that meant, due to that lack of attunement and reciprocity, a secure attachment would not be achievable as per the description in the previous sections.

Though I had not seen or spoken to Artim in a number of years, she responded to my email a short few days later. Her email was short, yet in just a few sentences she had captured the same sense of familiarity and connection that I had experienced in her as a pre-teen. Her email read:

*Tara-joon* [a Persian term of endearment], I am very proud of you and what you are doing [a collectivist experience of my success as her own]. This is an excellent focus but we need to talk about it. [the same air of confidence and strength that I associated with Artim since childhood].

She went on to suggest a few dates when she would be available to meet. Her words were few, but full of meaning and connection. Her statement “I’m very proud of you” represented the sense of closeness and connectedness that represents a culture where one person’s success is celebrated and held in high accord by all. A sense of collectivism that, even though I had not seen or spoken to Artim for several years, left us feeling attached as we did in our first encounter as another matriarchal figure added to my life and her pride carried a depth and meaning beyond a stranger. Artim agreeing to meet with me gave me a sense of confidence and belonging in this work.
I met with Artim and explained the project. I first identified that I wanted to recruit from the Afghan community to remain culturally close. I reported the number of participants I was interested in and found myself explaining to Artim the lack of research in this field to challenge the western models of thought and practice. In my position and stance, I experienced a degree of arrogance in being a contributor to this area of knowledge. That my lived and learned experiences had prepared me for this work and that it would be adding to a body of knowledge. I remember Artim patiently letting me finish as she mirrored my excitement and enthusiasm. Once I went over my requests of the centre, Artim paused a moment and said, “This sounds like an interesting research, but tell me, what will it do for the people you’d be engaging? How would they be gaining from engaging in your research?” She shared some thoughts as to the participant population and the realities of who is accessing the centre. She shared that the most ideal population for my study would be the Eritrean group given members that accessed the programing at the centre consistently and in sizeable numbers. She then shared that she thought it would be important that I engage with the centre in a way that allows for developing trust and relationship. She offered to put my name forward as a volunteer to engage with programing that involved the age group I was interested in. She also shared that this is how I could get to know some of the families and groups accessing the centre. She shared a story of supporting mothers that were often unwilling to engage with services and agencies due to the cultural clash and lacking a sense of safety. She shared her experience helping a parent feed her toddler. She shared that a simple act of a parent accepting her involvement in that intimate experience was a moment she had been working to build with this parent over an extended period. She shared the importance of this relationship. She shared her ongoing experiences sitting in boardrooms with experts and decision makers and questioning why the service users and those being impacted by
the decisions made, were not at the table. She felt puzzled by often asking the question, “Well, has anyone asked them what they would like to see happen?”

I left the meeting feeling dazed. There was a sense of failure in having overlooked my place of power, although I had been grappling with this as part of my Research Ethics Board application and the process of planning for engagement with the community, I had somehow presented in this moment feeling validated by the ethical clearance acquired through the University. Yet, I had still claimed a sense of righteousness in what I was aiming to achieve. I was suddenly recognizing my outsider identity and the separation from that identity that I withheld as an 11-year-old entering a new fishbowl. This was a strangely challenging place of contemplation, where I had to come face to face with my identity as an outsider, and the falsehood in my perceived harmless stance as a researcher. I sent Artim the requested documents the next day and started to volunteer with the children’s program.

**Confronting my Individualistic Identity**

As I started to reformulate my plans, I could see the need to deconstruct my own preconceived notion of the “problem” in order to foster engagement and collaboration as the most central pieces in pursuing this work. I began to question my motives and opinions of researcher as helper. In reviewing Rossiter (2001, 2007), I started to further explore the falsehood of my beliefs in my role as a researcher. Further, the understanding of trespassing (Rossiter, 2001) and the violation that I engage in on a day-to-day basis as a social worker/researcher within the community was a significant place of pondering about what constitutes “collaborative” work. I began to question my methods and how I had aimed to engage participants and once more understood the inevitably flawed vision that I had carried and continued to struggle with throughout this experience. It is unavoidable that I would fail to
foresee many of the violations that I engaged in along this journey as a student. I acknowledge my flawed and skewed stance as settler, oppressor and part of a system and structure that is founded on bureaucracy and charity as its model of birth (Davies & Shragge, 1990). However, I concluded that if I can continue questioning my personal and professional identities, I can bring to light these oversteppings and at the least ensure that I acknowledge their presence in my work and learnings as an outsider.

**Two Strangers in a Power Imbalance**

In beginning to connect with the Eritrean mothers at the weekly mothers and baby program, it became clear to me that I was in unfamiliar territory as I had limited knowledge of this population, their cultural roots and background, and resettlement themes and stories. This intersection triggered complexities in navigating through the layers of developing a new learning relationship (Regan, 2014). By the time I was prepared to engage with the centre in data collection, Artim had left on a medical leave. My connection to the centre shifted to one of the community links working with the centre to support and connect with the Eritrean women accessing programing, E, who was asked to support and engage with my research as a translator and community link. E was copied on an email by a program coordinator at the centre who was helping me with engagement and data collection. My working relationship with E stood in large contrast to how I’d been working with Artim.

Suddenly in a methodical and practical process, I was linked to an individual that I had no previous connection or relationship with. Others, in decision-making roles, made the call regarding E collaborating with me and supporting my work as a translator. This was a provoking shift from a place of reflexivity and emphasis on the importance of relationship as well as the conspicuous and singular responsibility as researcher. There was a discomfort in the way E and I
were thrown into our respective roles in this newly prescribed relationship that had formed. Once again, I grappled with my place of power as an outsider that had been provided with a channel to exert my agenda in accumulating data and conducting research on a group that I had no direct connection to. I found myself thinking about attachment and relationship from a new platform, recalling the concept of attachment needs and the dynamics that shift when the caregiver (as the source of knowledge/wisdom) exerts control or interferes with the child’s process (voyager/dependent) of exploration of their surrounding (Ainsworth et al., 1978). I wondered about my positionality and where I was entering this relationship from, what it meant and how I would need to navigate this in order to foster meaningful collaboration. In many ways E represented the caregiver/secure base to this group. She was the mother. In our early days together, when I would join her as an observer and knowledge seeker in the women’s group program, I would witness her comforting the infants of the Eritrean mothers, sitting with them and listening to their stories of experience, appearing to delight in their joy and success, and providing them with resources when requiring support to face challenges and struggles. E was on the circle with the women and their young. She was secure base and safe haven that the women relied on in integrating into a new world (safe haven/secure base phenomenon). This made me wonder about my position further. Who was I in this process? To this community? To the women? To E?

It was not long before I could recognize my kaleidoscopic role as a stranger to this process from within and without. Just as witnessed in the SSP, I was the one entering into this arena as the stranger, where I did not belong and had no meaning or roots. In the initial phases, before E and I had started to form a deeper understanding of one another, our relationship resembled that of the stranger that enters the room during the pre-separation episode. We made
small talk about the weather and what was being served for breakfast as to present in safe relationship and connection to one another. I would then follow E around as she made contact with some of the mothers and, when she would indicate to me that they had the appropriate aged children, I would speak to them through her, providing an overview of my research and research goals. I found myself trying to emphasize that I aimed to critically review how culture was a factor in understanding relationships. How this was not fully acknowledged or recognized within our systems and services and why this was important. I often would have the women politely smile at me and nod as to agree with this idea, however, when asked whether they would engage in the project they often responded with needing some time to think about it. I wondered how this would motivate other researchers and began to turn inward to understand what it meant to me.

I was not the only stranger that frequented the centre. There were others that I would witness trespass into this community space for their individualistic purposes. Sometimes researchers would come into this space with incentives for engagement that motivated some parents to participate. At times, the community centre would emphasize and encourage involvement from the families accessing the centre as the projects supported some aspect of programing. There were many creative methods that were being used in tapping into this pool of knowledge and experience. In considering ethical implications of conducting human research and in discussion with E, I had also built in a 30-dollar stipend for involvement in my research. E was able to identify how this fund would have the most meaning for the community and so the collaborative decision was for it to be presented in grocery cards to the parents. However, as I walked alongside E and spoke with the mothers, I could not find ease in informing them of the
monetary incentive for engaging in the study. Reflecting back, I recall this discomfort as a mirage of my own experiences in early re-settlement days with my family.

From this arrival, I weaved to a period of childhood, when we were living in affordable housing as my family tried to find a footing to build from in this new world. I remembered a bread program that provided the residents of the building we resided in with bread that was expiring. We had indulged in this resource on a weekly basis. Though we never experienced severe poverty that resulted in relying on a food bank or other base funding for our livelihood, as my dad was a student at the university, I recalled the importance of food and what it meant for us in our integration. I danced into the corners of my memory that recalled food being one of the only aspects of life that allowed for some of the familiar to persist. I recalled my experiences of taking my mom’s home cooked Iranian food to school at 10-years-old and experiencing rejection by my peers and an incredible sense of strangeness and shame that filled me in this new place I worked so hard to understand and be a part of. I remembered the splitting of my worlds and beginning to adopt the thought that there would be parts of me that would never be understood again, beyond my close and small circle of Iranian family and friends. But more importantly, that there would be parts of me I would have to let go of in certain settings, in order to develop and maintain social attachment. I sat in this space that carried with it pain, loss and fear. The thought of “dangling” grocery cards to the mothers I spoke with, in order to have them participate in my study, felt an invasive act. It became evident to me that these complexities are often entirely lost upon the world of research that so acutely focuses on expansion and production. Even though this research maintained low risk to participants, I wondered what it meant to incentivize such a sensitive experience at such a sensitive time in the lives of those that would become the participants in this research.
In entering the community, while honouring this internal narrative, I began to look for opportunities to connect with the women in a learning relationship. As Regan (2014) captures, this meant a shift to a “more uneasy, unsettled relationship, based on learning (about difference) from the Other, rather than learning about the Other” (p. 27). I had to strip myself of the identity of researcher and data collector, in order to adopt a receptive learning stance, where I was at the mercy of those I aimed to authentically understand. I attended the mother and infant groups and participated in the activities within the group. I interacted with the mothers, took on tasks in serving breakfast and cleaning up, sat with the women (even though spoken language was not shared between us), engaged non-verbally wherever possible. Once my presence had become a familiar one at the centre, I found that my relationship with E was shifting toward a partnership in the activities and responsibilities that were shared by the staff and volunteers. We began to exchange more dialogue in routine tasks of setting up the space before the mothers arrived, serving breakfast to the group or feeding and playing with the babies.

E slowly began to share stories of her journey of migration with me. She shared stories of hardship and pain leaving her family and home with no clear end in sight, giving up a sense of citizenship and agency in hope of a new life and a better future for her children. Sharing the steps of her journey from place to place until finally ending up in Canada in hopes of asylum. This act of sharing was a new unfolding in my relationship with E. This was when she disclosed her experiences of living in the shelter with her two young children due to domestic violence with her ex-partner. She seemed to hold no resentment in her experience and shared with me her views on how many young Eritrean men were plagued with alcohol use as a form of coping with the difficulties that they had to face in Eritrea, as well as the loss and lack of culturally familiar supports in a new and unfamiliar place. Her empathy and understanding of the intergenerational
effects of systemic trauma experienced by the young men and women of Eritrea was the next place of reflection in our relationship. She shared her own experiences of conscription and national service and a lack of agency amongst the young men and women that are often stripped from their families and forced to serve the country indefinitely. She shared that this is often the prompting factor for both individuals and families in accepting the asylum seeker identity. We talked about how such experiences present an individual with significant challenges that often are not understood in their complexity or need for intervention.

I found profound meaning in hearing E’s experiences and inner knowledge of her community. This brought me to think about the importance of exploring history as part of the learning relationship that is necessary as part of the “key considerations for researchers, including the importance of being attuned to the sociohistorical, political and economic context of research” (Aiello & Nero, 2019). As Aiello and Nero (2019) highlight, this attuning is critical in fostering the learning relationship in the inside-outsider identity that is possessed by the investigator. The parallel in this identity to the attachment and relational qualities that are favoured in fostering exploration and growth drew me closer to recognizing the significance of this concept. How does the researcher foster a secure base in a new developing relationship and, as representative of dominant culture, maintain a balance of meeting the community’s needs in a reciprocal relationship? As the dominant cultural representation, what is the responsibility of the researcher in adopting the concept of the secure base phenomena in engaging in act of research. What would constitute a disorganized pattern of engagement and attachment in this relationship?

Recognizing that this was an individual’s experience and perspective and that this individual represented the matriarchal figure of an entire community of Eritrean women and children made her words even more significant in my involvement and tasks ahead. I sensed that
I had graduated to a new place in our relationship and a layer of trust, that was missing till this moment, had brought us to a new place of co-construction. In ending our conversation E warned me that her story is like many others I was meeting and that many of the women would be hesitant in collaborating with me due to fear of exposure and the repercussions of a system that does not fully grasp their complexities. I recognized that we had arrived at a new place, where I was witnessing the core concepts that I would be questioning in this research. I was facing the concept of attachment as evolutionary and the significance of culture in this process as foundational. It was clear that relationships were a construct of cultural experiences for the families I continued to connect with and that the lack of awareness of these complexities was creating an imbalance in our worlds colliding as I attempted integration and exchange.

**The Mothers and a Stranger**

I continued to attend the centre in connecting with the women and shared my research and benefits in involvement in what was starting to feel like a sales pitch. Sitting at the craft tables, drawing and colouring on art days, and listening to presentations from community partners slowly I was beginning to feel like another one of the centre staff. The mothers often listened intently to me speak through E as my vessel of communication into the community. They would nod and express that they would think about engagement. They would ask questions here and there and often seemed to be concerned with regards to privacy of who would see the videos and if they would be posted anywhere online. There seemed to be a fear of exposure that was unison amongst most of the mothers I spoke with. In talking further about this with E, she helped me understand that many of the women that frequented the centre had similar stories to her and at times experiencing difficulties in their home life that they felt they had to conceal and protect due to the threat of how the new world may respond. E shared with me a culture of
perceptions and “face keeping”, though the experiences of home life were at times adverse with many challenges. She shared that even amongst the women there was a “pretend mode” of how families wanted to be perceived on the outside versus what was happening behind the scenes. There was a deepening of understanding that the cultural differences were once again front and centre in the perceptions and understandings of this group and how relationships were formed and fostered.

Reflecting on this was important in recognizing that the concept of expected nurturer would differ greatly in face of these challenges as well as culturally rooted ideals of fostering attachment bonds. As Otto and Keller (2014) explain:

…the conception of maternal sensitivity, as well as later embodiments of “optimal parenting” (e.g., mind-mindedness), rests on an assumption of Western, middle-class psychology that does not apply to much of the world. Main-stream psychology in general has recently been described as WEIRD (white, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) psychology because of its apparent cultural bias for Western, middle-class samples and contexts (p. 4).

Hence the perception of universality of attachment theory as a model of western thought and practice requires further examination and questioning when in application cross-culturally.

As I watched the mothers attend the centre week after week and place their infants down in the play area and return to their tables where they engaged with one another and the programing, I could see that the ideal of monotropic caregiving (one primary caregiver) was not an adopted concept by this community. There was a sense of togetherness where others would tend to a distressed child, pick up a child needing attention, or provide for basic needs such as feeding or changing interchangeably. There before me, in the gymnasium, there was an active
village raising children to have the tools they required to navigate within both an internal culture, as well as an unfamiliar world. I wondered about the need for the families and children to become more adaptive through less dependence on one primary caregiver, as this new way of life and re-settlement required, however, also as the children would be experiencing an outside world that would be represented by figures that not only looked and communicated differently, but also did not resemble their cultural patterns of connection and exploration. I reflected on my early days volunteering with the afterschool program and in recognizing a difference in how the children from ethnically differing groups expressed their needs and utilized the program facilitators than those from the western groups. I observed the Eritrean children to present as more reserved and be referred to as “shy”, they seemed to have a higher tolerance for distress as observed with their peers in situations where other children would present as dysregulated (i.e., toys being taken away, transitions, boundary setting or conflict with peers), however, often avoidant or ambivalent to support from program facilitators when beyond their regulatory threshold. These children were observed to be immediately receptive and contact seeking of caregivers at pick up time and would often not engage in goodbye rituals with the program facilitators.

These reflections were a place of recognizing the importance of the process I had undertaken in volunteering with the centre and engaging with the community in a mutually beneficial relationship. Often in the academic world we adopt an egocentric lens of contributing to the larger pool of knowledge and expertise with lost perspective for how our immediate subject or field is experiencing us as outsiders. We can be consumed by the world of production that brings with it an acute focus on our lens, which can act as a barrier to the dualistic nature of learning, which requires commitment to co-construction. As representative of the dominant
culture, there must be effort to bridge the gap in the perception of being the founders or co-constructors of knowledge, but primarily learners that must first establish mutually accepted and beneficial relationships, in order to authentically engage in community research (Aiello & Nero, 2019). Outsider identity and culture adds a new layer of complexity to this process that must be recognized and treated with care in order to lessen the blow of the oppressor-oppressed narrative that is often underlying the intersection of western knowledge and other cultural ways of knowing and practice.

The realization that the mothers were not yet, trusting of the process that I was inviting them to ponder on was one that stimulated further reflection for me as an outsider to the community. Though they were not engaged in dialogue with me, they were almost always accepting of interaction with their infants. Similarly, other Eritrean mothers would often intervene or engage with the child if there was a need communicated. There presented to be a collective caregiving circle. Other mothers would pick the children up and comfort them, they would feed them or even engage in play with them. This seemed to be predominantly common within this cultural group, even though other groups were present for the programing as well, the Eritrean mothers seemed to maintain proximity, sit together in one side of the gymnasium and remain in dialogue entirely on their own. This was closely connected to the concept of hamula as described by Akesson (2015), as a caregiving network that compensates for a parent that may be strained in their caregiving capacity due to complex challenges faced within their environment. As Akesson (2015) writes, “Hamula may take on the maternal role of monitoring-surveillance, which serves as a coping strategy for an overwrought mother who is struggling to respond to the multiple needs of her children” (p. 50). As described through this phenomenon, the mothers I was engaging with were situated in this pattern in adjusting to their new environment. It was not
difficult to see this as a systemic effort in adaptation that resembled those observed in the most natural of habitats, such as with the honeybee. In the beehive, as winter sets in, the colony reduces in size and forms a cluster where the bees move inward and outward of the cluster in order to create warmth and protect the queen as they face less than optimal conditions with the drop in temperatures. In reflecting on this wonder, it was once again clear to see that the collective nature of this culture was part of its mechanism of survival and adaptation.

Further, I wondered if through the spaces created in the primary caregiving networks, that were observed through the child accepting interference by other women in the group, whether the child was developing skills in adapting to an environment that they would experience as strange. I questioned if, in an intuitive way, caregivers encouraged more independence and distance from the caregiver, as the environment to which the child had to adapt to (i.e., daycare, school, centre programming) were all so vastly different and unfamiliar, that in order to adapt and adjust in an optimal way, the mothers were increasing the child’s capacity to navigate on their own and become familiar with the strangeness of this new world and way of life. Was what may have been perceived by my attachment lens as mis-attuned dyadic pairs, in fact a protective adaptation? Were these attachment patterns needed in order to equip the child with the relational tools that would support their integration into this new world? Were my observations of the few Eritrean children in the after-school program a direct by-product of this relational dance between the mothers and their young?

Though many factors would have to be considered with regards to the motivation in this way of childrearing, such as the traumatic underpinnings of newcomer and refugee experiences, through my observations I wondered about the overarching process of adaptation and survival as the driving force in these patterns. As Otto and Keller (2014) emphasize “most of the world’s
children do not grow up just with their mothers. Rather, this represents even an adverse condition in many cultural environments, since it is often associated with economic problems, poverty and low social rank” (p. 308). As highlighted here, the societal mapping of relational patterns that best serve the collective goals within social systems can shift cross-culturally. It is therefore imperative to expand beyond the unilateral understanding of attachment to an arena that incorporates the comprehension of relationships as constructed through the multitude of influences such as the social, political and environmental contexts within groups.

~A Sudden Shift~

As I slowly began to understand the complexity that I was observing before me and the distance that separated me from the Eritrean mothers, things took a sudden turn in a new direction. Early Spring, I accompanied the centre in attending a community picnic event. This was a yearly picnic held by the larger community and provides a space where many attend with their children for activities and to become familiar with other service providers and resources in the community. One of the program coordinators had invited me to contribute to the picnic by providing honey through a family business. I was able to supply the mothers with jars of honey as a token of gratitude and a sharing of resource as a product I harvested from the area. This was a symbolic moment of harmony in my journey with the women that I had spent the previous 6 months getting to know. The juxtaposition of my memories of early experiences with food and its significance in my family’s early life as settlers to now providing a native supply of it to newcomer mothers, left me perplexed by the journey that was behind me and that which I was witnessing before me. What was further perplexing was that the honey seemed to have special representation for the Eritrean women. For the first time in our relationship the women were asking me questions and wanting to know more. It was later that in my research I realized the
significance of honey as a resource in the Eritrean culture. This was the initial point in my relationship with the Eritrean mothers that indicated a sense of mutuality in how we were engaging with one another. There was a sense of openness and invitation in how I was received in the coming weeks. The women were taking a stance of readiness to engage as I approached them, often captured in their inquiry as to whether I wanted them to partake in when we talked about the project. This was indicative of entering a new phase of trust in our relationship.

In pondering on this experience, it was significant to better understand this pivotal point in developing a relationship with the community as it seemed to carry significant cultural implications. Upon further exploration of the significance of honey as a commodity in the north-east African region, it became clear that there was deeper meaning and importance to this product for the women with whom I had become acquainted. Belay Daba and Oljirra Wolde (2016) explore this concept in the region and identify honey as a commodity that not only increases agricultural independence and growth for farming communities, but also has cultural implications on gender inclusive farming roles. They share: “…honey production is increasingly a gender inclusive activity; also because low-technology bee keeping can be done near the homestead… women commonly use the products of beekeeping in making secondary products” (p.51). As they go on to expand, production of tej, a local honey wine/mead (which dates back centuries in the region) is commonly run by women; furthermore, the product carries significant recognition in its healing properties and used widely in traditional medicine practices as well as emphasized as a nutritional part of the regional diet (Belay Daba and Oljirra Wolde 2016). Finally, honey plays a significant cultural role in this region within many ceremonies and life events such as “birth, marriages, funerals, Christmas and other religious celebrations” (Belay Daba & Oljirra Wolde, 2016, p.51).
These findings were important in recognizing the shift I had experienced with the women following this offering. This process seemed to hold value beyond any other “benefits to the study” that I had shared with the community previously. In what followed, it seemed that I represented a different value to the community of Eritrean women following this event. It seemed to me, that the idea of what value research brings to the community at hand, and the mutuality of the relationship, is a concept that is often misinterpreted by the research community and the exchange that takes place. I further wondered about the community’s sense of agency in advocating for their desired benefits/outcomes in engagement with research as well as the complexities when this occurs cross-culturally.

**Trusting a Foreign Stranger**

This section was meant to review the bulk of my findings and it troubles me that it will not speak to the cultural themes observed in the use of SSP as originally intended. However, due to the limited data collected, I will review important considerations and ethical implications in developing and conducting community research, with special considerations for the use of SSP with culturally differing groups.

As I entered the video recording phase of data collection, a new zone of challenges surfaced. The experiences of navigating the limited resources available through a publicly funded centre, where space was often limited and in high demand, was a point of stagger. It was important to recognize my position and place in collaborating with the centre once more. There were days when I would attend the centre, spend an extensive amount of time setting up a room for video recording, only to have other services from the community (i.e. immigrant services or housing services) require the space in order to meet with and support families. In these moments confronting my researcher identity in parallel to the needs of the community I was engaging with
was a significant point of analysis. I recalled my early experiences as a newcomer and the significance of such meetings for my family. I dove through memory clips of my father preparing for meetings with housing services, employment services and immigrant services and immediately encountered the discomfort associated with the experience of how and what he would be advocating for. I remembered the process by which my family would gather information and knowledge on how to navigate the system and access resources in our community and how labour intensive a task this seemed, even through the eyes of an adolescent. Often, as outsiders, the significance of such experiences are lost upon us as researchers and the singular goal of contributing to acquisition and production of data and knowledge takes precedence over the lives that are intertwined in the space-time continuum that we occupy. Though the centre supported my study and had assigned me space in conducting this research, it was crucial to recognize my position of power and privilege once more as I came face to face with the dual identity I carried in this process. As Aiello and Nero (2019) highlight, “identities are sociocultural phenomena that emerge and shift in interaction as social actors claim, contest, and negotiate power and authority” (p. 252). They go on to emphasize that this variance in identities can result in significant “factors such as class, gender, or race” that can vastly shift the insider/outsider positionality and hence require “researchers [to] (re)negotiate positions with participants” (p. 252). This was evident in the place I had arrived to with the centre. On multiple occasions I would retreat from my position, quickly take down the set-up of carefully positioned cameras, furniture and toys and make way for what I knew and felt to be more essential to the community that I was collaborating with.

As I entered this phase of reflexivity in my work with the centre and community, I recognized a shift in my position in developing a deeper sense of accountability to those I was
engaging with. In further exploration of this attunement that was taking place, I began to recognize that I was organically positioning myself as a secure base to the community and along the way weaving in and out of supporting and protecting the collective needs before me. There was no longer a position of accumulating or gathering, but a circular relationship where, in our mutual engagement, I was also adopting a sense of responsibility towards the community as an agent of power and privilege. However, what was further noteworthy was the recognition that I was becoming a base that the community and centre was beginning to use in getting its various needs met. This presented to be the initiation of our attachment bond.

As Sroufe and Siegel (2011) highlight “attunement, or sensitivity, requires that the caregiver perceive, make sense of, and respond in a timely and effective manner to the actual moment-to-moment signals sent by the child” (p. 2). As I began to respond to the community and their needs from this place of reflection, I was able to recognize this attunement building between us on a macro level. I had shifted from developing a bond and connection with the smaller community of Eritrean mothers, to now identifying as an ally and support to the centre and those that relied on the services and supports provided. It was only as I had established this position with the community and the centre that there was receptivity for me to become the stranger to the children. As the mothers began to permit me to place a literal lens on their most intimate relationship, I began my journey as a stranger to the children in the SSP.

**Trapped in the Strange New World**

**The Stranger**

The stranger in the SSP procedure is to represent a source of support and comfort to the child that may suffice in providing the child with the essence of security to await the caregivers’
return. However, when is the stranger too strange? How would the protocol account for the child’s experience of the new world? What must be understood as each time a child leaves their home environment and relationships? For example, what if a child enters the different arenas of life with an already higher stress level based on the discrepancies between who and how they are in the world? How would the strange situation procedure measure for these effects?

I once again found myself diving back to experiences of the amalgamation of my worlds. I recall my sense of hypervigilance as a 10-year-old in a classroom full of students and a teacher that I could not understand and that did not understand me. I remember my experiences with worry that seeped into all hours of my days and my fears as to how I should present and navigate the new world in hopes of feeling acceptance and community, and hence safety.

I visited my adolescence, which seemed a battle in maintaining some aspects of my unique and individualistic self, while ensuring this is not too pronounced to limit my chances at flying under the radar. I remember writing letters to my grandmother expressing the extent to which I missed the familiar, and still I visit her written responses and experience a visceral reaction to reminiscing the challenges of that time. I recollect my father telling me that I was trying to speak English in my sleep again, and him proudly sharing this with my teacher. These experiences continued until I was 14-years-old with multiple changes and transitions that were experienced in this new world. I recall attending four different schools in the first four years of moving to Canada and living in four different homes. I visited with memories of undergoing a heightened sense of fear, that was experienced covertly due to the alienation as well as pressures to find social stability and acceptance as an adolescent. I recall my parents encouraging resilience and celebrating the hurdles that were crossed with little room for sitting with the vulnerabilities as these were too ominous and we could not afford the emotional collapse that
would follow. For this time, every experience away from the confines of the walls that held the contents of our 8 suitcases was strange, every new connection made was strange, every classroom and teacher was strange… the strange was the new normal. As I sit with these reflections today, I still experience a vibration at my core that points to the permanence of the stress that carried through me then.

In this perplexed position, where now I was the stranger, I experienced the children from a new place. My experiences of entering the room with the Eritrean children in times of distress (due to the caregiver’s leave-taking), presented a sense of unfamiliarity experienced by them. This is common in most children following caregiver’s leave-taking and the child becoming acquainted with the stranger. However, upon review of the videos, I could recognize a hesitation and strangeness in the children’s approach and utilization of my presence in the room, which was unlike my experiences and observations with the use of the procedure in western groups.

**The Children**

Out of the five children, four required the stranger intervention and involvement. Three of the five children required the separation episode to be cut short. The children were not expressive of their desire to have the mother back in the room and instead engaged in non-verbal independent behaviour in indicating this (cleaning up or leave taking behaviour). When providing support to the children that were in protest of the mother leaving the room through crying behaviour, the children were observed to return to play as long as I maintained proximity and engagement. This aligned with previous observations in the larger group where children were accepting of the care and support provided by non-caregivers. Once shift to independent play was facilitated the children were observed to stop play or engage in leave taking behaviour. There appeared to be an expectation of doing with and staying close as captured in Figure A and
B. This was most evident in experiences of the children engaging in proximity seeking behaviour with me as the stranger that consisted of physical contact and touch. The children did not engage in verbal communication during play and when I transitioned away from them by stopping verbal communication and distant interaction (in preparation for reunion), they presented to engage in leave taking behaviour such as putting on shoes, putting away toys on the shelf or heading to the door (Figures C, D and E). I could observe a capricious shift in affect that lingered in a dualistic unpredictability as to how I would respond to the child, as well as how the child thought about (mentalized) themselves in the situation. There presented a cultural readjusting that took place. One that seemed to act as a regulating agent, however, masking a distressed child.

   Sitting in a room with a stranger, that could potentially fail to understand the child and respond according to the child’s needs, appeared to influence their threshold for regulation. I wondered about the unfamiliarity of the strange situation experience and how it impacted the child’s communication of their authentic state. In my previous experiences, where culture and language aligned, the child provides some overt indications of distress or expression of dis-contempt. Instead, I wondered if what I was observing presented to be a mirror experience of the same internalization of stress that I had experienced as an adolescent navigating this new world with endless uncertainty. Or were the children simply comfortable enough with their association to the centre and stranger presence that they were confident in leave taking as associated with finding mom again? A larger sample size would provide opportunity to further explore these concepts.

   The four children that required stranger intervention classified within the insecure/disorganized groups. As Cassidy and Marvin (1992) write, “If the child is very distressed, there is often some clear sign of insecurity on reunion. If the child continues active
play, or shows constructive coping behavior (e.g., by asking to go get mother; by trying to engage the stranger) the child's reunion behavior is often secure” (p. 11). This point emphasized the role that culture and language played in the self and co-regulatory processes that attachment and attunement are founded upon. I wondered about the level of distress experienced by the children due to not only my presence as an outsider, but also as someone they did not relate to or could trust to understand and respond to their needs. I sat face to face with the realization that, though I was gauging the separation and distress experienced by the child as well as the reunion based upon the guidelines of the protocol I had trained in, there presented to be a layer I was not privy to or attuned with in this process. That layer possibly accounted for higher distress during separation than I was accounting for, and which was likely influencing the child's responses towards the mother at reunion. I paused to reflect that this in turn may have been the factor that led to my categorizing the children into insecure classifications based on their responses in the reunion episodes.

These reflections left me full of questions: Was I too strange a stranger to seek in managing the distress caused by mom leaving the room? Was my cultural dissonance a factor that contributed to how available and comforting or inviting my presence was to the child? As Keller, and Otto (2014) highlight “the evolutionary/ethological foundation does not justify the assumption that attachment has the same shape, emerges the same way, and has the same consequences across cultures” (p. 3). How must these factors be considered if research aims to review attachment in regards to cross-cultural variances that need to be taken into account?
The Mothers

Another important consideration at this phase of the study became the maternal state of mind and experience. As I worked to prepare the mothers for videotaping with E’s help, I encountered another noteworthy pattern. All mothers listened to my description of the study and protocol intently. E would translate one sentence at a time, and I ensured that the steps, risks and aims of the study were conveyed slowly and clearly. Though the mothers agreed and signed consent willingly, there was an interesting experience once in the SSP. There presented to be a
strangeness to this procedure beyond its intended purpose for the mothers. Three of the mothers were confused by the signal for separation and presented as uncertain at leave taking. Four out of the five mothers did not communicate with the child at departure and four of the mothers presented to be confused by the second cue to leave the room and required a non-verbal indication to depart again. This air of uncertainty carried through in the room as at times the mothers seemed unsure of next steps. I pondered on how their inability to communicate this confusion or to ask for clarification would have influenced the strangeness of this protocol for the dyad and how the child experienced the caregiver in the room.

As I considered the mothers’ responses within the scaffolding of my newcomer experience, it reminded me of an emotional chapter of witnessing and experiencing the effort to adapt, adopt and blend in. Just as I understand this phenomena takes effect in the natural world as insects, plants and animals seek refuge amongst their species or mimic the traits and presentation of others for protection and survival, this is an all too familiar mechanism utilized by our species for me. In reflecting on these thoughts, I was once again nine-years-old at the Heathrow International Airport as we awaited in transit to our new world. Due to some complications we had to stay in London for a night and were transported to a hotel. Another Persian family was in our group and as we arrived at the hotel, I witnessed their late teen daughter speak to the front desk in sorting through their accommodations. I watched in amazement as the young woman advocated for her family. I was unsure of what was ahead, however, the confidence that exuded from her was intoxicating and had us all captured. My dad turned to me and said, “One day soon you’ll speak for us”, which left me filled with excitement and anticipation for the new world. This clashed quite quickly with the reality that awaited.
The first years of living in our community were a period of my family’s collective effort in merging and blending. I recall my parents attending language classes and looking for employment to integrate as quickly as possible. Early on, I recall witnessing their confidence in situations where they had to carry themselves in the cross-cultural intersections that we experienced daily, only to walk away from the situation and begin to experience the authentic emotional experiences and expressions of what had taken place a short time prior. I recall the confusion that clouded and blurred lines everywhere we went, from fully understanding limits and parameters in different situations, to questioning of the social cues and the content of interactions. I recalled becoming more and more familiar with the new culture through my saturated school and social environments that were certainly more malleable than the adult world of my parents. I recognized myself becoming more and more familiar with my parents’ cues in their interactions with the English world and trying to pick up on as much as possible, because I knew that we would likely walk away with different versions and experiences of these events. Even when the integration of spoken language had progressed to a reasonable place for my sister and I to convey our messages in a more clear and culturally fluid way, our parents continued to experience pieces and parts disappearing and becoming lost. There was a disconnect that was not only happening for them in this experience, but also for us as we tried to amalgamate our new and old worlds.

My parents’ and my experiences were all coming alive for me as I witnessed the confusion experienced by some of the dyads. It was coming alive in the child’s actions of taking matters into their own hands and choosing to leave the room or clean up when things were simply too strange. It was alive as the mothers looked around the room for some clue as to what they were expected to do next. It was alive as the children wanted to leave the room as mom
returned. How can any researcher who does not adopt the role of stranger ever truly recognize, reconcile and report on these subtleties in such work?

Conclusions

Throughout this project, my trained lens for attachment continued to clash with the felt experiences of many sources of strangeness. As I reflected on these experiences and my findings, I found myself questioning my original research intents. Shifting from my original methods toward the autoethnographic lens allowed me to make explicit and make strange many of the assumptions I, and researchers who came before me, made about the SSP across cultural groups. As Stacey Johnson (2011) explains, autoethnography takes a rebellious approach in viewing society and culture through a dynamic and fluid lens that allows for subjectivity through story telling. Through this approach, I came to agree that “the extent to which attachment patterns are shaped by culture, and the mechanisms through which this occurs, are not yet well understood” (Turner, 2017, p.18). As explained by Turner, the complexity brought on by culture in attachment cannot be captured as a one size fits all. There is a requirement for ongoing questioning and reflexivity in this area.

My challenges with COVID-19 and the consequent shift in methodology provided a valuable opportunity for exploration. In this process, not only could I reflect on the insider-outsider experiences as researcher, I was also permitted the interesting opportunity to explore the stranger identity and experience in the SSP. Through my presence in the room with the children (as the stranger), I gathered rich data about the dance between child and the stranger. This is a new area of exploration as a methodology and method for studying the cross-cultural use of the SSP, full of opportunities for expanding understanding and reflexivity.
Further, my experiences with the network, community and centre, left me reflecting on the responsibility of researchers in approaching these multiple relationships based on the tenets of attachment. In my ongoing journey with the centre and women, I made connections to the secure base phenomena. As described earlier, the process of attunement was one that developed between myself and the women and the centre through my ongoing involvement and presence as a participant in the different areas of need. What was further remarkable, as my involvement ended with the centre, was the community reaching out to me months later. As the neighbourhood surrounding the centre was facing a challenge with a proposed supportive housing project, I was contacted by a group of residents that had formed in advocating for the community with regards to this project. Their request was for allies, advocates and supports in engaging with the larger community. This was a notable moment for me, given my data collection had ended eight months prior. In a natural and wholistic manner, I was experiencing the safe haven principle on a community level. This experience further solidified my wonderings about the applicability of attachment theory to the researcher role and identity and how this can inform field work in human studies. In recognizing this connection now, I would have explored it further in my engagement with the community and the Eritrean mothers. In my dualistic identity as the stranger and the strange, there was an emphasis on relationships of power and privilege. From the interweave between these identities, I became aware of the responsibility and position of power associated with becoming the secure base/ safe haven to the other, including the sensitive nature of this bond and process.

The in-depth nature of my approach and my findings with the Eritrean community conflicts with many other studies which focused on comparing patterns between different cultural groups (Aronoff, 2012; Bettmann, 2016; Van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988; Van
Similar to my approach, which appeared to show how the SSP protocol and the classification coding system can apply uniquely to culturally distinct groups, Thomas S. Weisner (2014) captured ideas of relational fragility and overdependence in a study of northern Ugandan farmers. Through Weisner (2014), we can query the generalizability of the attachment classification system. If attachment is contingent on the complex human survival mechanism, how can distinct cultural factors be taken into account when studying and applying attachment theory cross-culturally. Indeed, I identified many unique factors that could give rise to relational patterns, which in turn, arise from the complex layers impacting the lives and livelihoods of human beings within their environment. As Weisner (2014) indicates, “If attachment emotional responses have been selected to enhance survival, then so have many other human (child and caregiver) adaptations that do the same” (266). With this, I question how the strange and integrative experiences of the newcomer Eritrean families influenced the strangeness of the SSP. Furthermore, I wonder how my inherently oppressive position as researcher influenced the attachment process and classifications. I suggest that my awareness and acknowledgement of this imbalance helped expand my findings beyond the perils of a single story.

Researchers and practitioners have produced ample evidence of the benefits and opportunities offered through attachment theory for policy, welfare and relationships from cradle to grave (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Aronoff, 2012; Bowlby, 1973, 1988; Granqvist et al., 2017; Sherman et al., 2015; Lyons-Ruth, 2009; O’Neill, 2021; Zreik et al., 2017). However, my findings demonstrate how essential it is to remain curious in examining and understanding the multi-tiered complexities of attachment. For instance, Pehr Granqvist et al.
(2017) outline the complexities of attachment and the implications of misinterpretation and misuse in practice:

…misapplications can result from erroneous assumptions that (1) attachment measures can be used as definitive assessments of the individual in forensic/child protection settings and that (2) disorganized attachment reliably indicates child maltreatment (3) is a strong predictor of pathology and (4) cannot be changed through interventions in the child’s original home (p. 551).

In addition to these incredibly important factors to account for when using attachment guided models in practice, my findings imply that practitioners must also be aware of and informed about added layers from a cultural perspective. Indeed, I found often that the cultural layers of attachment can leave many gaps in understandings within cross-cultural relationships and experiences. As highlighted by Kelly Oakes (2021) in a recent BBC article titled Is the Western Way of Raising Kids Weird?, there is a subjectivity in how human beings understand relationships that must be taken into account in cross-cultural attachment research. This perspective aligns with my findings that attachment behaviours can present differently across cultures based on behaviours rooted in a multitude of influences. Missteps in how practitioners apply and interpret attachment knowledge can have significant costs for those who experience underprivilege, oppressive systems, and other socioeconomic risk factors (Granqvist et al., 2017). These intricacies may implement or reinforce systems that can allow for missteps and trespasses due to positions of power and privilege. As Aiello and Nero (2019) summarize:

researchers’ conclusions are inevitably partial and situated, and reflexivity must be exercised to create research narratives that are more sensitive …researchers must account both for how they and their participants are positioned by structures and practices, and
how these positions are negotiated. Thirdly, the ways in which economic, political, and sociohistorical contexts impact human action and processes, such as language learning and research, must be considered (p. 253).

The findings of this thesis suggest a need for deeper reflexivity in human research across cultures with an enhanced curiosity that is rooted in learning relationships.

Ultimately, this thesis provided me with the opportunity to examine my stance as a social worker with the dual identity of practitioner and researcher. In considering implications, I was drawn to the principles highlighted under the Social work Code of Ethics, which call for: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, Pursuit of Social Justice Service to Humanity, Integrity in Professional Practice, Confidentiality in Professional Practice and Competence in Professional Practice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). Social work is an inherently sensitive profession, where these principles and guidelines confront practitioners often, and typically are culturally and systemically rooted. To truly abide by the commitments as per the standards of practice, my work highlights that social workers operating as practitioners, researchers, and as the face of many hierarchal systems, must be accountable to consistently examine their trespasses in cross-cultural relationships with those they encounter and serve.

Because of the limitations associated with selecting a convenience sample of participants, and the pandemic-shortened data collection period, this research did not provide a deeper dive into the themes and concepts highlighted when applying attachment to a culturally distinct group. Future studies can directly and distinctly probe these topics and questions by further examining how each theme impacts the ethical application of the western model of attachment theory cross-culturally. Without purposeful reflexivity on the part of the practitioner, there is potential to amplify the potential harms of misuse and misinterpretation.
**Appendix A1**  
**Invitation Letter**

My name is Tara Yazdani. I am a Masters Student at Wilfrid Laurier University, school of social work under supervision of Dr. Bree Akesson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work Laurier University (519.756.8228 x5345 or bakesson@wlu.ca). I am also a registered Social Worker working as a mental health professional in the Guelph community. I would like to tell you about a project that I am currently working on. You may know someone who would want to be involved. Specifically, I am inviting Parents with children aged 3-5 years old that have moved to Canada in the last 5 years from Eritrea to participate in this project.

**Title of Project:** Culture and Attachment: A Review of Attachment Theory Through a Cultural Lens

**If you are Eritrean with children aged 3 to 5 years old and moved to Canada in the last 5 years please consider taking part in this research study.**

**Purpose of the Study:**  
This study looks at the role that culture plays in the development of early attachment patterns with caregivers.

Currently, there is a lot of information on the role that parents play in the early years of a child’s life and how the parent-child bond impacts the child’s emotional and social development. However, there is a lack of information on the role that culture plays, in the development of a parent-child attachment and the applicability of attachment theory as a universal framework in practice cross- culturally.

The aim of this study is to review the applicability of attachment theory cross culturally in practice today.

**Procedures**  
For this study, you and your child will be asked to participate in a study session.

You and your child will complete a Strange Situation separation-reunion procedure. For this, you and your child will be invited to an observation room at the Shelldale Community Centre 20 Shelldale Crescent, Guelph, ON N1H 1C8 or the Canadian Mental Health Association Waterloo Wellington at 485 Silvercreek Parkway, N. Guelph, ON N1H 7K5. This procedure will take approximately 25 minutes to complete. For this separation-reunion procedure you and your child will spend a couple of minutes together and a couple more minutes apart. While the child is in the room by him or herself, you and the Research Assistants (RAs) will be able to observe him/her from the room next door. If you or the RAs believe that your child is experiencing too much discomfort with this procedure, you will reunite with your child immediately.

**Potential Benefits to Participants and Community:**  
You and your child may not directly benefit from this research. However, it is hoped that this study will help researchers and parents better understand the role that culture plays in developing
attachment patterns with caregivers and to review the application of attachment theory and practice cross-culturally.

**Compensation for Participation**
If you chose to participate in this study, you will be given a $30 gift card to Funmazing (children’s play center). If you do not complete or withdraw from this study you will still receive a $30 gift card to Funmazing. This gift card should cover the cost of attending a play session with your child and expenses that you may have while at the facilities.

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information that is obtained in connection with this study.

The study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB). If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board Chair, Dr. Robert Basso at rbasso@wlu or +1 519 884 0710 x4994.

If you would like to ask further questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at tarayazm@gmail.com.

If you would like to recommend anyone who would be interested in this pilot study, please forward the information above and my contact information (tarayazm@gmail.com) to the person.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tara Yazdani
BSW, RSW
You and your child are invited to take part in a research study.

This study looks at the role that culture plays in the development of early attachment patterns with caregivers.

Currently, there is a lot of information on the role that parents play in the early years of a child’s life and how the parent-child bond impacts the child’s emotional and social development. However, there is a lack of information on the role that culture plays, in the development of a parent-child attachment and the applicability of attachment theory as a universal framework in practice cross-culturally.

The aim of this study is to review the applicability of attachment theory cross culturally in practice today.

You are free to choose to participate or not participate in this study.

Information

For this study, you and your child will be asked to participate in a study session.

You and your child will complete a Strange Situation separation-reunion procedure. For this, you and your child will be invited to a play room at the Shelldale Community Centre (20 Shelldale Crescent, Guelph, ON N1H 1C8) where you will be video recorded from the time you enter the room. This procedure will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. For this separation-reunion procedure you and your child will spend 5 minutes together in the room and 5 minutes apart followed by 5 more minutes together and 5 more minutes apart. While the child is in the
room by him or herself, you and the Research Assistants (RAs) will be able to observe him/her from the room next door. If you or the RAs believe that your child is experiencing too much discomfort with this procedure, you will reunite with your child immediately. Approximately 15 preschool-aged children and their parents will participate in this study.

You and your child will be filmed during this procedure which will include both audio and video recording. A digital video camera will be set up on a tripod in the play. It will be positioned to capture child’s responses and reactions to parent as they leave and enter room as well as during time together in the room. The camera will continue to record through each episode (separations and reunions) without breaks or interruptions. As possible, the focus of the camera will be the child’s interaction and response to the caregiver. This recording will be used for research purposes only to understand the relationship between caregivers’ and their children and will be viewed only by the research team (principal investigator, Advisor and Research Assistant(s)). All recordings will be stored digitally on a password protected computer. All digital recordings will be deleted and destroyed after 10 years. All notes and written data will be deleted at the end of the study. If you would like a copy of the recording, you can request this at any time during this period. If you withdraw from this study at any time, the digital recording will be destroyed at that time. The video recordings will be used to code the attachment relationship between the caregiver and child as per the School Aged Preschool and early school-age attachment rating scales (PARS). The films will not be used for any additional purposes without your additional permission.

I give permission to be video and audio recorded as part of this research study:  Yes [ ] No [ ]

Children will not be informed of filming in order to limit distraction from the caregiver-child relationship. The tapes/films/photos will not be used for any additional purposes without your additional permission.

I would like a written summary of the results at the conclusion of the study:  Yes [ ] No [ ]

Risks

You may feel uncomfortable in front of a video camera or meeting the RAs as part of this procedure. Also, the separation-reunion procedure could make you and/or your child emotionally uncomfortable. You may also feel uncomfortable answering some questions in the one-on-one interview with the primary investigator. All of the discomforts that are a part of this study are likely to be small and are likely to last no more than a few minutes. If you are too uncomfortable with any of the procedures that are a part of this study, you may choose not to complete the procedure(s) or withdraw from the study at any time.

To minimize risk, if concerns regarding you or your child’s mental health come to light in this experiment, or if you would like further knowledge or understanding about the procedures or outcomes of your involvement in this study, information about access to your local mental health service provider will be made available by the research team.
Benefits

You and your child may not directly benefit from this research. However, it is hoped that this study will help researchers and parents better understand the role that culture plays in developing attachment patterns with caregivers and to review the application of attachment theory and practice cross-culturally.

Confidentiality

You and your child’s personal information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required or permitted by law. If the Research Assistant believe your child is being abused or neglected, they will notify the on call researcher and the Children’s Aid Society will be contacted, as required by law. You and your child will be assigned a number. You and your child’s interactions and interview results will be recorded under this number and not under you or your child’s name.

Direct quotations may be used in the final summary report and publishing, however, no identifying information that may link quotation to you or your child will be incorporated. You may still participate in this study if you do not wish for quotations to be used.

I give permission for the researcher to use quotations in final reports of this study  Yes ☐  No ☐

I give permission for the researcher to use quotations in publications/ presentations  Yes ☐  No ☐

Though I have been a volunteer with the Shelldale Community Centre, I am not currently affiliated with any programs. Therefore, your involvement or non-involvement in the study will not affect any services that you access or receive through the Shelldale Community Centre.

Your personal information and the data for this study will be kept for 10 years. After 10 years this information and data will be destroyed. All information and data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and password protected computer in the School of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The findings of this study will be housed in Scholars Commons and Journal of social work research. Findings of this research may also be presented at Psychology and Conference Research Forum at Wilfrid Laurier University and Society for Social Work Research

Compensation

If you chose to participate in this study, you will be provided with a $30 gift card to Funmazing (children’s play center) as a token of our gratitude. If you do not complete or withdraw from this study you will still receive a $30 gift card to Funmazing. This gift card should cover the cost of attending a play session with your child and expenses that you may have while at the facilities. Also, for participating in this study, your child will receive a toy from our treasure chest.
Any compensation received related to the participation in this research study is taxable. It is the participant’s responsibility to report the amount received for income tax purposes and Wilfrid Laurier University will not issue a tax receipt for the amount received."

**Contact**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,*) you may contact the researcher, Tara Yazdani, at yazd4930@mylaurier.ca, and 226.500.3300 or Thesis Advisor Dr. Bree Akesson, at bakesson@wlu.ca, and 519.756.8228 x5345. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB #5929)(which receives funding from the Research Support Fund). If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-0710 x4994 or rbasso@wlu.ca

**Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose.

**Feedback and Publication**

The findings of this study will be summarized in a thesis research paper and may also be published and housed in Scholars Commons and Journal of social work research. Findings of this research may also be presented at Psychology and Conference Research Forum at Wilfrid Laurier University and Society for Social Work Research

The results from this study may be used for research purposes. You and your child’s names will not be identified in any publishing or reports. If you wish, you can receive a summary of the study’s results. You will be provided with this summary at the conclusion of the study.

I would like to receive a summary of the study’s results: Yes □ No □

**Consent**

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Parent/Participant's signature_____________________________ Date _______________

Investigator's signature_____________________________ Date _______________
I have read and understand that my taking part in this study is my choice, and I voluntarily agree to be in the study described above.

☐ Adult/Parent #1 agrees to participate

☐ Adult/Parent #2 agrees to participate

☐ I have read and understand the above information. I do not want to participate in this study.

I was present when the study was explained to my child. My child is willing to take part. My child can withdraw from the study or any part of the study at any time. In my opinion, my child(ren) is/are willing to participate.

☐ The Adult/Parent agrees for his/her child(ren) to participate

I give permission for the use of quotes and personal statements in the written report of this research project.

I understand that my words may be used in future publications:

☐ Yes  ☐ No
Appendix A3
Verbal Assent

Verbal Assent: Session 2
For Preschool Children 3-5

Hi (insert child’s name),

Our names are (insert RAs’ names) and we are research assistants.

Your mom/dad has brought you here today to take part in a project that will help us find out more about moms, dads and kids and how they play together. I would like to ask you to help us out with this project. I am going to explain what you will have to do today and make sure that it is okay with you.

Today, if it is okay with you, we would like you to play and do an activity in this room. First, you will play with your mom/dad in this room.

If you do not want to play, that’s okay. You can tell your mom/dad or us that you do not want to do it. No one will be upset with you. If you say yes, but change your mind later on, that will be okay too. No one will be upset with you.

Do you have any questions? You can ask questions at any time. You can ask now or you can ask later.

Would you like to help us out with this project?

__________________________________________  __________________________
Child’s Name                                    Date
I confirm that I have explained the study to the participant to the extent compatible with the participants understanding, and that the participant has agreed to be in the study.

Printed name of Person obtaining assent
Signature of Person obtaining assent

Date
Appendix A4
Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality Agreement
Project Title: A Review of Attachment Theory and Practice Through a Cultural Lens

I, ___________________________________ the,______________________________________
(Name) (Specific job description, e.g., interpreter)
have been invited to (interpret consent information, project details and describe tasks and steps to the strange situation procedure).

I agree to:

☐ Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format with anyone other than the Researcher(s).

☐ Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., audio/ video files, transcripts) secure while I am working with it.

☐ Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., audio files, transcripts) to the Researcher(s) when having completed the assigned tasks.

☐ After consulting with the Researcher(s), erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the Researcher(s) (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

☐ Other (specify):

________________________________________  ______________________________________  __________
(Print Name) (Signature) (Date)

Researcher(s):

________________________________________  ______________________________________  __________
(Print Name) (Signature) (Date)
References

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