

within the relationship in the absence of a social support system. An awareness takes place of a need for new and different resources to cope with the strange situation.

5.4 Hotel stage - a temporary "home".

The first part of the sojourn in another country generally corresponds with a period spent in a hotel. On average this stay lasts about five to six months. The length of this period normally depends on the availability of houses. During this period one is confronted with difference, but the reality of living in a new country cannot take shape yet. It is also a period marked by a sense of transience, of being neither here nor there.

Jo:

"You're here but you're also not quite here. You are not properly living in that you are staying in a 5* hotel. The people you see are not the population as such".

Jo's statement implies that one cannot begin to adjust to life in the host country whilst in a hotel as it is not representative of life in the country.

Nongile:

"You know the hotel itself, it was refraining us from seeing all these things. Because we'll keep to ourselves. We are not going to go to the market. We are not going to do a thing. The minute the children come back from school, they don't want to go anywhere, they just want to stay in the



hotel. But I had to go and get food, I had to go and do what”.

Here we get an inkling that the spouse is the one who seems to be the most exposed to the reality of daily life in a foreign city.

Any hotel stay that lasts longer than a month, is generally regarded as the worst part of the posting. While the hotel provides a sanctuary that protects a person from the reality of life on the streets of this new country, it remains an impersonal environment. Soon one longs for home with personal possessions and the freedom to pursue a more familiar lifestyle.

Nongile:

“It was exciting... Travelling.... The first month it was exciting staying in a hotel. The treatment. You get all these things free. Because, you know, all that attention. But, a month after that, hm, hm. Aikona”.

It took **Songo** and **Nongile** seven months to find a house and their two opposite sex teenagers had to share a bedroom.

Susan says their stay in the hotel was comfortable to start with, but then it became restricting and frustrating. When you start finding fault with everything, it becomes a priority to find your own place.

Amanda found the five month period in a hotel the most difficult and exasperating period. She was stuck in a room with a tiny baby and experienced utter isolation. No-one from the mission reached out to help her in any way and she was scared to trust foreigners



with her baby. Out on the streets everyone wanted to touch her baby and she lived in fear of her baby being infected or stolen. She found the lack of support from fellow South Africans incomprehensible and became depressed, thinking bleak thoughts of jumping out of the window. In retrospect she says, based on her experiences, she has learnt not to rely on South Africans. When she finally moved into a home and could employ a helper, her house helper had to show her around and teach her how to shop.

Their hotel stay was further marred by chronic stomach problems, and few alternative eating places. It was a very confined existence in a physically small space too. They had no access to their own things and did not know that they should have taken personal things like CD's with them.

Amanda's day started at 3.30 am when the muezzin across the road called the faithful to prayers. She says her biggest problem was getting through the day. Having a bath became a way of killing time. Walking a baby on the streets was not enjoyable due to the noise.

Johan, a non-working spouse, describes his experience of life in a hotel as difficult because it lasted so long. He was room-bound day in and day out without transport and not yet acclimatized to the extreme heat and humidity of a city like M----. He became bored and had little to do apart from visiting the gym.

This period can be used to find one's way about in a new city. This is generally done by taxi as acquiring a car also requires some

time, especially in the third world where all cars are fully imported. Waiting for one's personal effects can be frustrating as it seems to postpone the start of the settling down process.

As usual **Jaco** looks at the bright side of the period in a hotel spent without personal belongings: He welcomes the absence of an intrusive television set which takes the place of "chatting, laughing and interacting through its seductive power to entertain".

Joan recalls her stay in a hotel in T----- with a small baby many years ago:

"It is the job of Embassy people to call on you and invite you. And you know they are feeling very sorry for you, because it isn't easy. But after a visit, a tea or a coffee, you cannot say: 'When can I visit you again?' You've left. This is it. It's a visit and then you're left high and dry. And you're reluctant to phone the next day and say: pop over and see me, because you want it to appear that you can cope, which.....you.....are not. I wondered how I was going to cope."

The newcomer feels her well-being depends on the kindness of strangers and she dare not impose or tell anyone how scared she is of not coping.

Eddy describes the family upheavals that preceded their move:

"We lived in a hotel for a whole month and we had come out of an environment in South Africa, where we had our own



home. It was our house. We lived in it for six years. We had settled in the house. The house was sound, the physical structure had settled. It had its creaks and cracks patched up and I had to leave that and go to Pretoria. And in Pretoria we were unsettled because we were staying in temporary accommodation. We bought a house that we never stayed in. So this was a continuation of being unsettled and not having a house. And I also learnt how unsettling that in itself can be, if you've got no place that you can call home. You can drive through the streets and then you say, I'm going back to sleep but that is not home, it is a hotel".

And of the discomforts of hotel life, Eddy says:

"It's different in C---- to what I like and you don't have your own stuff".

Eddy's family moved to a guest house after a month and went through the ups and downs of house hunting. When they eventually found a suitable house, it was in the process of being renovated and this took much longer than expected. Thus it was to be five long months before the family could settle down. As Eddy says, this upheaval started when the family left their home in South Africa, to stay in Pretoria on a temporary basis and finally to settle down after two years.

5.4.1 Hotel and children

"You can't run around in the halls of a 5* hotel. It is just not done", says **Anne**, aged 13.

Anna: (14)

“The two months we spent in the hotel were the worst because I had nothing that was my *own*. Everything was so different”.

Boet (12) remembers the day the family left the hotel:

“One night my dad said we are going to our *new* home. We had our stuff packed in five seconds. He put the keys onto the counter and said: ‘We are checking out’. Then we left. It was like a miracle. It was the first nice thing to happen...”

The move into a home is associated with settling down, getting into a normal routine and getting on with one’s life. This is an important happening for the family but especially for the spouse who has to run the household as part of his or her daily routine. This is a task that requires learning the ropes of shopping and often using public transport.

“And then you move into your house and you get adjusted to buying your regular groceries, keeping house. The furniture was a big thing, it did not arrive.....until a year later”.

5.4.2 Discussion of hotel stage - a temporary “home”.

Thus it seems that the initial adjustment can generally be linked to a period of some months in a hotel. This period is generally enjoyed during the first month but then everyone wants “the holiday” to end so that they can go home. However on average it

takes six months to find a suitable home and for personal effects to arrive from South Africa. After a while everyone looks forward to the move into a home and complains about hotel life, even if it is the best of hotels.

Spouses are often isolated in hotel rooms with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Days drag by and lives are on hold as a house is sought and nothing much can be started until a home is found. This period exacerbates a sense of temporariness and gives rise to questions of whether anything will seem normal again. Depressive reactions may begin here and typically by the room bound spouse.

It would seem that culture shock only really registers after moving into a home. Fortunately other positive factors come into play at the same time, such as being able to exert more control over your lifestyle and having familiar objects around you.

Whilst disliking the hotel stay, it also serves the purpose of habituating the family to their new environment in a safe and limited way. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of culture shock at this stage due to the cushioning effect in western style hotels. In fact the hotel stay is often referred to as the 'soft landing'.

Everyone spoke of this initial period in a hotel and the frustrations of house hunting in a foreign environment. Each family member happily anticipates moving into a house and regarded the move as signifying the actual beginning of adjustment.

Thus the hotel stay is seen as a gradual introduction to what will

be a new lifestyle incorporating elements of a previous life.

In summary, the hotel stage is

- enjoyed by everyone initially, and regarded as a safe haven and a soft landing
- but seen as an obstacle to adjustment after a month, due to:
- the unfamiliar routine, restricting lifestyle, inability to start socializing, an experience of temporariness, lack of activities, and
- an inhibiting effect on children's behaviour.

5.5 The substantive stage

The choice of a home is complicated by distances from the international school, departmental limitations and often the small number of suitable houses. Being provided with a home implies submitting to regulations that one does not experience as a home owner. It seems to be a mixed blessing. As a home owner you can have repairs done yourself when needed, but you pay yourself too. Now repairs are done according to set procedures and schedules. It is something to get used to.

Once a home is found and the family has moved in, the substantive stage of the family's adjustment takes place. Psychologically, everyone is ready to adjust to their new country. The many aspects to this experience are presented in this section.

5.5.1 House hunting and moving in

John had no problem finding a house, but it seemed that housing regulations could change as they were negotiating.

John describes house hunting as a process that he experienced as being hampered by an administrative officer's attitude and, what he calls, "wilful withholding of information". The first house he found he had to let go as it did not quite conform to regulations. The next house was too big in terms of the size he was allowed to have, even though the rental was within his allowance. He does not understand such logic and became so mad that he threatened to leave immediately if the house was not approved.

Then it was approved. He experienced this as being treated with a lack of respect for his and his family's needs.

Amanda:

"We started adjusting when we moved into our house and got a car and a cell phone. At least I could call my mother then. There was a waiting list of a year for a land line. Everything changed when we moved into our home, even though we had a further three month waiting period for our furniture. We could start making friends, invite someone over, even if it was to sit on a packing case".

Angelique:

"Because of the (hardship) problems, I think, I spent five months of my posting trying to do this house upstairs and downstairs".

It is difficult, if not impossible, to get the arrival of personal effects and the finding of a house to coincide. This results in further delays that add to frustration.

House hunting was a period of emotional ups and downs for **Jan's** family. The first house they were shown was utterly inappropriate, and the family thought all houses would be equally unacceptable. It looked dreadful, a black building with mold on the walls, says **Magda**. To soften the blow, **Jan** gave each child permission to call a friend at home in South Africa that night. Everyone loved the next house, but it was not ready for occupation. Eventually an appropriate home was found, and the family settled down happily.

Johan had to have furniture made in a foreign country and says that after two and a half years in their posting, everything is not finished yet.

Nongile:

“Sometimes there's water shortage. You're forever sitting on the telephone, complaining at the embassy. Please, this is broken again, please, that. It's not easy”.

Eventually this house becomes home for the family. Once the family settles down and their immediate needs are met, the reality of living in a foreign environment begins to be felt.

Chris and Lettie had an almost similar experience to John and Amanda. It took them six months to find a home and the time spent



first in a hotel and then in a rented flat, was rendered difficult for various reasons, such as being cramped, not having their own possessions, experiencing transience for an extended period and having difficulty in accepting the situation.

The fact that the specific housing regulations were not spelled out led to many false starts and wasted time and energy.

Chris and Lettie mentioned the difficulties experienced when house hunting without your own transport in a strange city.

Joan recalls unpleasant house hunting excursions:

“Very, very hot weather. Hot and dry. No air conditioning in the cars. Most of the homes had eastern toilets. There was a hole in the floor and that was it. So I wondered how one could make a hole in the ground appear attractive. After we found a house, it took a long time before we were given approval to move in”.

Stella, an ambassador’s wife living in an official residence, describes the impact of having houses furnished from Pretoria:

“If you move from a smaller to a bigger house, you do not have enough furniture. When more furniture is ordered, approval has to be sought from Head Office before anything can be sent. This is a lengthy process”.

Deon had to open up a new mission and battled to find a home in the absence of any kind of infrastructure or official support system. It took him five months to find a house, a compromise as it had many shortcomings. The mission was based in the Middle East in



what seems like a prosperous state. The unexpected aspect of the poor infrastructure in this modern state, made his adjustment harder.

“Having to adapt to living within a third world city on the wrong side of the track.....”

5.5.1.1 Discussion of the factors that contribute to house hunting

The house hunting process is difficult because of several factors:

- 1) The family is very keen to move out of a hotel after a month as they long for a normal family routine and home life.
- 2) In hardship posts there is often a shortage of suitable houses for diplomats, resulting in a prolonged hotel stay.
- 3) Bureaucratic rules and regulations are seen to impede rather than facilitate the process. For instance, a family gets excited about a house just to be told it is too big, too expensive or too far away.
- 4) Transport problems and not knowing one's way about a new city contribute to the frustration of house hunting.
- 5) Hotel life delays the eventual adjustment as a normal routine cannot be followed until the family has a home. This is in keeping with research quoted in the literature (Jones, 1973) which found that reestablishing a normal routine helps adjustment.

5.5.2 Preparation

It is often after arrival at a mission that a family realizes what particular information would have helped them before their

departure from South Africa. This section represents these retrospective insights. Conceptually it might have fitted better under the pre-transfer stage but since these insights are based on later experiences I decided to place the section here.

John received no training before his transfer. He believes he would have found an inspection trip helpful as well as a preparatory course to prepare him for the mission and life in the foreign culture. He would have liked specific information about his role in the mission, as eventual role ambiguity caused him a great deal of stress.

John also commented on having had too little time to prepare themselves for the move. He believes that there is little departmental respect for organizing a transfer. He would have liked to have been provided with a list of things that his family was entitled to instead of having to find these things out through a process of trial and error.

Examples of the kind of information that would be appreciated in advance are: the resettlement allowance; size and rental ceilings for officials; and a list of the furniture that would be provided.

Johan realizes in retrospect that he and his wife looked forward to their experience with more eagerness than good sense. Unlike John he found plenty of books on their posting and books on culture shock, but the theoretical information could not tell him what it would be like, in reality, to live in the country. He says he would never go out again without a prior visit to a country. Yet,

Songo, who did pay a short visit in advance, said it was a tourist experience that did not prepare him for life in the country. **Barney** went on a prior visit and came to the same conclusion as Songo.

Jan prepared himself rather thoroughly by insisting on an information gathering visit as little was known in South Africa about “conditions on the ground”. He returned home with a video he had made for his family and a positive attitude about the family’s ability to live in D----- . He arranged for places in the international school for his children before the family departed.

Most people complained of not having enough time to prepare for their posting. A few weeks sound like a short period in which to cover the basics. These experiences resonate with the findings of Fisher and Shaw (1994) who emphasize the need for prior information whilst stating that a short visit is not comparable to living in a country.

For instance, judging by reactions it seems that no spouse registered fully that he/she would not be allowed to be gainfully employed. And yet that is exactly what happens when on posting, except that it is the foreign government that determines whether it is possible to work or not, and not the South African government.

Stella discovered that she had been given the wrong information about clothing regulations and was quite upset that she had brought the wrong clothes. It is not easy to replace what you do not have in a hardship posting.

Mandla was in for a surprise upon arrival in D-----due to a lack of schooling information prior to his departure:

“There is one international school which has English. And the terms are not the same as in South Africa so when we arrived in January, it was mid-year. So it meant the children would have to stay and start school in September. So that’s where I thought, no, all these kids will be bored, if they can stay here for a long, long period like that”.

As there was no place at this school for at least nine months, **Mandla** sent his two older children back to South Africa.

“We thought things would work out like in South Africa. In South Africa children belonging to all diplomats, they are admitted in all schools irrespective of when they arrive”.

“So that was the *first* difficult part - to part with the two of them, so they had to stay with relatives”.

“It was quite devastating for them. The children were crying and goingbut we had *no other* alternative than to send them there. Well, they were not happy, as such”.

“We tried to motivate them. Tried to keep in touch.

Telephone. At that time I spent around \$US 300 a month just for communication, because it is so expensive. So it was quite hectic. But we got used to it”.

Then it became clear to **Mandla** and his wife **Sara**, that their third daughter, at age seven, needed placement in a special school that was not available. When their youngest daughter started suffering

from repeated malaria attacks, the parents decided that Sara would return to South Africa to stay with all four children, leaving Mandla behind to do his job. Sara spends short periods visiting Mandla in or as he puts it:

“She runs between the two places”.

Needless to say, this turn of events was totally unexpected for the family. But Mandla simply could not subject his four year old daughter to recurrent attacks of malaria as the risk of dying from the disease is so high at that age.

Mandla's ended by saying:

“Well, I have nothing to add other than saying, *really*, people need to investigate a lot before they go out. They need to investigate so that you prepare yourself thoroughly. Even ourselves, if we knew that there would be no schools and all these problems, it would have affected our decision to come”.

Barney felt unprepared for the work experience. In spite of his training, he felt as though he had been “thrown into the deep end” and had to cope without support, either from within the mission or from Head Office. He experienced considerable anxiety due to the nature of his work.

Sometimes he had cause to go against the Head of Mission (HOM), but felt he lacked the authority to do so. When he tried to assert his authority, conflict resulted that caused stress. He took



his problems home at night and spent many a sleepless night. There was no mechanism in place for addressing interpersonal problems in the mission, nor for work related problems. After much soul searching Barney eventually requested an intermission transfer. This time he visited the next (hardship) posting he was offered and at his own expense, in an effort to avoid another mistake.

As we have seen, Barney left Pretoria with feelings of ambivalence about his posting. It was not what he wanted, and he did not know whether he or his family would cope. It would be too easy to say that his failure was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

He did try hard to do what he thought was expected of him, and more though he found his role in the mission fraught with ambiguity. Notably, his area of authority was not clearly demarcated and open to be overridden by the HOM.

I cannot imagine that he would be prepared to go out on another mission after two hardship postings, both of which he qualified to himself as failures.

5.5.2.1 Discussion of experiences of being unprepared

With few exceptions the need to be better prepared for a posting seems to be a lesson learnt in retrospect by everyone. Mistakes are made, due to a lack of information or even misinformation, and contribute to the initial adjustment problems and in some cases enduring problems. So it seems necessary if not imperative to address this issue.



The foregoing comments reflect the need for specific information from the mission, before and after arrival as well as from Head Office before departure.

It seems that several factors contribute to the perception of inadequate preparation:

- a lack of time before departure
- a focus on relocation logistics
- individual differences in terms of what constitutes necessary information
- an impossibility to “know” in advance what it is like to live in a place other than by living in it.

5.5.3 Difficult choices

We have seen that it is difficult to form realistic perceptions of life in a foreign country in advance. In the same way it is difficult to know in advance what the emotional impact will be of the decisions that are made in order to undertake the posting abroad.

This corresponds partly with the findings of Benjamin and Eagles (1991) - chapter 2.5.4 - who described the actual move as one that occupies the family logistically at the expense of emotional needs.

Stephen and Jenny realized that it was difficult to be supportive parents for a student daughter at a university in South Africa with an immense ocean between them. It was a wrench leaving her behind and the parents felt that they had left her in the lurch,

especially when she developed health problems.

Chris and Lettie also left two sons behind when they were transferred on a first posting. The younger one was about to write his school leaving exams. It was an emotionally taxing experience for the parents to leave two boys aged 18 and 20 with the sudden responsibilities of running their smallholding.

Oliver's decision to take up a posting by himself so that **Joan** could remain with her sons, almost cost them their marriage as it became too difficult to fulfil each other's needs at such a great distance.

Oliver says:

“To take him out of matric would have been a *disaster*. He would have lost two years and psychologically it would have scarred him for life. So we had to make a *terrible* decision”.
“Do you take **John** with you, let him suffer for two years but he is with you? Or you let him live alone at home, but at least he will get his matric. So we hadterrible decisions to take and it made us sick. It made us ill. Blood pressure, the lot”.

Clearly the first son's "failure" has made the parents hyper-vigilant, in trying to prevent the same fate for their second son.

Apart from this consideration, it would not have been feasible for a western woman to survive in a fundamentalist society.

Because of the decision that Joan would stay behind, Oliver experienced great loneliness and coped by burying himself in his

work. Apart from work, there was nothing for him to do in this extreme hardship posting.

He arranged frequent family visits and then finally convinced the department reduce his contract from four to two years. At the time of the interview, the couple was together again. Both felt they had to endure loneliness and hardship and this stood between them.

Deon went ahead of his family so that his children could finish their school year before they joined him. In retrospect the family says this five month period had quite an effect on their eventual adjustment. It also meant that **Sanette**, had the responsibilities of a single parent while working full time and preparing for their departure.

“It definitely had an effect on relationships. Deon came here and experienced things for the first time on his own. And then, when we came along we experienced different things as a group. It changed, I don’t know, I still find it made a difference to our perspectives”.

But **Jack** (17) their elder son says it actually helped them that their father had some familiarity with the country when they arrived as he paved the way for them. He also knew where places were. In this very individualistic family, Deon did seem to have a peripheral place. However, his demanding job at a one man mission contributed to this situation.



5.5.3.1 Discussion of experiences of difficult choices

It would seem inevitable that difficult choices will have to be made when families relocate abroad especially when

- children grow older and their needs become more relevant
- children have specific needs like special schools
- a wife has a career
- a hardship posting does not meet with the family's needs

Families who have to separate because of these circumstances expend emotional energy and other resources to maintain the family's integrity with varying degrees of success. Some parents battle to come to terms with the guilt feelings they have towards their children who were exposed to difficult situations because of

5.5.4 Mission culture

I became very aware of inter-mission differences as I visited a number of missions in different countries within a limited time frame. The way in which experiences of adjustment were linked to behaviour of officials and their families within the mission, prompted me to start thinking of a specific mission culture.

John says:

“There is a feeling that each administrative officer has an individual interpretation of the rules and regulations and each officer is at the mercy of that individual”.

Stella commented on the differences in how rules are interpreted by various members of the administrative personnel. What is



denied by one administrative official, is suddenly allowed by the next person. She says the former's attitude can make one's life miserable, while the latter makes life easier.

If there is only one person in a mission representing a specific department, it can happen easily that such a person does not know how to fit in with the rest of the mission. And the mission *per se* is not aware that it has to create a "space" for an outsider. Such a person may experience a lack of Head Office support and understanding quite acutely. This point was raised by a few people who were the sole representatives from their respective departments.

Missions often acquire bad names. Ubiquitous infighting and internal politics seem to be par for the course according to **Jaco's** perceptions.

Even so a mission can play a highly supportive role in facilitating the adjustment of newcomers and especially for persons on a first posting. **Lettie** said she thought the mission could have been more supportive, yet she realizes that the mission cannot replace the intimate relationships of home and a church community that was left behind.

Bonnie advises against falling into a groove of cultivating friendships exclusively with fellow South Africans.

5.5.4.1 Pervasive negativity as a deterrent to adjustment.

Jaco advises that it is easy to fall into the trap of joining in when South Africans get together and start griping about life in the foreign culture. **Amanda** says you need positive inputs when you are battling to adjust yourself. She felt contaminated by the negativity of others.

Barney:

“But you must also understand this environment that we are in. We have this old moaning and groaning environment. Some time or the other somebody is down and then they are always holding onto you and pulling you down too. And then it’s your turn and then it is someone else’s turn.....and it goes on. Life at a mission is an up and down thing. It is very very unstable. Today you feel like the world is the best and you are going on a boat trip. Tomorrow you come back to earth and you feel like you want to die and you want to go home. It’s just the way it is. You have to accept it. I have never felt this way in South Africa”.

“It’s for *you* to make the posting. We have a negative outlook on the city. And it’s been created because everyone else is negative about it. The bottom line is that it is not easy. You want to do something, but there is limited stuff that you can do”.

“This place is a good old moan, because it’s a terrible place.

Vesna, speaking of a supportive mission:

“Although, we visit quite often, and you always end up complaining. Not that it’s always good, but after that you’re



happy. You've said what you wanted to and it's out".

Let us listen to **Sharon**;

" I do find that some people are extremely negative and I think that is a lot of people's downfall. A lot of it influences you especially in the beginning, if you are going to take people's advice and not see for yourself what's there. You are going to fall into that trap as well, which almost happened to me. It started where people will say, you know, *this* and *this*, is bad. And one morning, I just woke up and said to myself, listen, you are either going to listen to them or you are going to decide on your own. And I said, *this is it*. I'll do what I think is best and do the best with being away from home".

5.5.4.2 Discussion of experience of mission culture and negativity

A mission culture is shaped by the individuals who live and work there. Certain characteristics of such a culture emerge, namely:

- The quality of leeway that administrative officials accord themselves in their interpretation of rules, can cause feelings of resentment or satisfaction. These feelings arise in response to whether a person's needs are met or otherwise. Not being able to predict how one's needs will be met contributes to a loss of control and/or personal agency.
- A mission culture that does not accommodate a single representative from a state department other than Foreign Affairs, is seen as non-supportive.
- Some missions are characterised by a high level of internal

strife.

- There is an expressed need for support for families and an appreciation of such support within supportive missions.
- There is an awareness that over-dependence on the mission families, to the exclusion of other relationships, can destabilise the family.

On the constructive side, people have the capacity to turn their negative feelings into a more productive attitude which can strengthen their ability to cope in extreme situations.

In these passages we see that a hardship environment can lend itself to complaints simply because it offers so little, or according to Kaplan's framework because of a poor person-environment fit. Thus everyone is initially aware of the poor fit and needs to complain about it but there is a risk of remaining stuck in this negative perception, as some people do. It is interesting to note that one person could recognise the negative perception as being constructed by the people in the mission but he justifies it as realistic and unavoidable. Another person, does not like the effect of the negativity and opts to distance herself from such conversations.

Part of adjustment represents a process of moving one's focus away from the negative aspects of the environment and to take responsibility for one's attitude, that is, a more positive attitude. Sharon's decision "to do the best with being away from home" indicates an important shift in her attitude but also reveals that adjustment is at best a compromise and that the non-fulfilling



environment remains a given.

Barney realizes that it is up to him to enjoy his posting but he finds the environmental limitations overwhelming and describes elsewhere how easy it is to simply stop venturing outside the safe cocoon of your home and remain indoors all weekend.

Barney reveals just as much when he says his life has an “up and down” quality that he never experienced in South Africa. This indicates a level of engagement in life that is erratic due to the sporadic nature of activities or social engagement with others. What he hints at, is that life at home has a more even quality due to a more continuous involvement with others and the ability to engage in ordinary yet usual activities.

In short those who adjust best manage to distance themselves from negative talk as they begin to understand that a negative attitude impedes their own adjustment. A certain amount of realistic resignation is at work here too.

5.5.4.3 A supportive mission:

Some missions manage to offer effective support.

Sharon:

“There wasn’t a day when, in the first month that we arrived, that there wasn’t someone who called to find out if I was OK. And they’d pick me up, I’d spend the day with them. Even now, if there is a problem, everyone gets together and sorts

it out. It really makes you feel that you are part of a family. It's become home. Hopefully I won't miss it too much when I go back!"

Jaco remembers that he was brought "a starting kit of cleaning materials, a bag of goodies and a bunch of flowers" on the day they moved into their home. He says it made a tremendous impact on him.

Vesna describes a supportive mission:

"I think we are a more close-knit family than any other mission, where there is always bickering..... So it's good to have that extended family, the office people, out there".

Good relationships with the mission, which Jaco and Bonnie originally experience, help adjustment. Assistance as required are given by a mission which makes the official's attitudes more positive (Angelique).

5.5.4.4 A non-supportive mission

Jaco and Bonnie spent two nights in a hotel after which the family moved into a house in Amman. There he found himself cut off without transport and did not know where to find a taxi rank. He had to find out for himself where the shops were and how to get about. He remembers an embassy driver who was helpful at the beginning, but no-one else.

His experience echoes that of **Amanda's** in the same mission.

Amanda ascribes her initial depression to the contact she lacked

with “a normal person, a non-foreigner and someone like herself”.

Both Jaco and Bonnie worked hard at maintaining good relationships within the mission in their first two postings. In their third post, they found the mission culture disappointingly non-supportive and they took a conscious decision not to form friendships within the mission.

The size of mission seems to play a role. Jaco believes a mission can be too small for healthy relationships. He says it leaves too much room for gossip as “everyone knows everyone else’s business”.

Elizabeth learnt a hard lesson in an earlier mission where her confidence was betrayed. She has since kept her distance from the mission staff, thus unwittingly contributing to a non-supportive environment.

Angelique, expressed disappointment at the lack of help she received when she arrived at the mission in F---. She had to set up the residence and had never done such a thing before. She thought the spouses who had prior experience would come forward and offer their help as she did not want to make mistakes. Eventually she learnt that everyone was happy to help and contribute when *asked*.

She is proud of the degree of participation and cooperation that exists currently within the mission. But if she had not changed her approach she may have concluded that the mission was inherently

non-supportive.

Amanda and John seemed to experience a complete lack of support in a mission that had started off with a few independent-minded employees, according to **Fred**. These individuals were followed by people who were on consecutive postings and who interpreted the mission as a non-cooperative one and consequently decided to keep to themselves. They had the necessary skills to do so.

Fred:

“Once a habit is established after two years or so, it’s established. So new people came into the embassy and it’s like, well, we managed OK, so carry on”.

For these newcomers this complete lack of support had disastrous consequences. As we saw, **Amanda** suffered from depression and **John** is angry with the way in which his family had to suffer unnecessarily. He attributes a lot of their hardship to bad management, and unhelpful administrative personnel. Amanda says if they had been completely detached from the mission, their adjustment would have been easier as they would have known not to expect anything.

5.5.4.5 Discussion of supportive versus non-supportive missions

It seems clear that some missions tend to be non-supportive and that this failure to reach out has far reaching effects on personnel. I heard descriptions of people “getting burnt” and withdrawing from

all contact. On a first mission this could have negative consequences as no-one is more dependent on others than newcomers in hardship missions. No-one is perhaps more impressionable, or even vulnerable, to the quality of their reception, than families on first postings who are acutely aware of what happens around them during the initial state of acute arousal.

Spouses are more dependent on supportive missions as their lives lack the kind of structure provided by employment within a mission. This is evident in the gratitude expressed about a bag of cleaning materials. It is probably difficult to understand this sentiment in a South African context where it is so easy to get into a car, drive to the nearest shop and buy what you need. In a new and foreign country none of the above is as self-evident. Firstly you do not arrive with a car, do not know your way around and may not have your foreign currency sorted out for a long time. Getting hold of cleaning materials becomes a very real need at the beginning.

Emotional support makes a tremendous difference to initial and ongoing adjustment, as a mission temporarily takes the place of family back home.

It seems easy for people to learn from their own experiences and act towards others as they had been treated, thus perpetuating non-caring missions where many are miserable. Perhaps guidelines could be set up for welcoming newcomers to neutralise these intense reactions.

5.5.4.6 Mission as a family?

I asked **Bonnie and Jaco** to describe their mission as a family. Without hesitation this couple offered words such as weird, divided and dysfunctional.

Jo also reacted negatively. **Jaco** said he would run away from such a family. **Bonnie** ventured that the ambassador “does not stand up for his children and his wife treats one and all like stepchildren”.

I would like to include some impressions of the embassies I visited: I looked at missions as interdependent systems and comment on the functioning.

The HOM in country F — was a man with a vision both for the Embassy and for South Africa’s role in F---. His positive and enthusiastic attitude contributed towards a well functioning mission. His example was mentioned by officials as being inspiring.

In Country C-----I found a supportive HOM and the small South African mission had very close and supportive relationships.

Country E----- had a supportive mission but there seemed to be a lack of open communication within the mission.

Eddy:

“It’s the first time for me where my colleagues are also my friends. And that’s out of necessity. We are so busy and so I spend more time with them and develop strong bonds and

strong relationships. That is the major focus of our social life.

From a family's perspective, you find, that the South African kids play together a lot. The little one is always at someone else's house. The older is at the stage where she has formed her own social set".

Country A----, seemed to have a highly divided and poorly functioning mission. The HOM seemed well liked but ineffective at improving the poor atmosphere. It was a case of "each man for himself".

Country X----- has a long established mission that ran relatively smoothly, with some exceptions. Though, internal communications seemed to be ineffective.

In Country Z-----, the mission seemed to be marked by internal division largely, it seemed, due to the HOM's interpersonal style of interaction. Good support existed amongst members of staff outside the mission, in spite of constant friction at work.

"The people have a small group that they started and they sort of leaned on each other. The wives were closely knit. They were together."

"We had social gatherings at the mission maybe twice a year and that was *forced* for other people in the mission. Otherwise we would never have come together".

This behaviour is indicative of a split within the mission.

5.5.4.7 Mission as a source of information

Many of the interviewees complained about a lack of information from the embassy personnel in advance - information that would have smoothed their way enormously and prevented many initial adjustment hurdles.

As **Jaco** says: “there is simply so much to learn!”

Chris and Lettie would have liked information about the British school before arrival as it would have helped them in placing their children more quickly. They believe that a lack of information about country specific practices result in an initial period of making unnecessary mistakes. The school holiday period coincided with their pre-departure period and contributed to the difficulties in getting needed information.

Elizabeth had too much information:

“The Embassy was really nice and put together a whole lot of literature which I sat and read on my first day. In that was an article on the harassment of women. It needn't have been in that package of literature as far as I am concerned. I think it does more harm than good. It came from a point of view that was negative.

You *have* to adapt here. OK, don't give up your standards but respect all people, whether it's from a religious or cultural viewpoint. Maybe you have to dress more modestly”.



5.5.4.8 Further discussion of mission experiences

Elizabeth alerts us to the need to be sensitive in preparing a person for life in a different culture. Too literal a focus on negative aspects can inhibit a person and make her fearful instead of simply realistic.

Thus, like all families, missions are either functional or dysfunctional and members are either loyal or break away to form alliances or to function independently.

This section has highlighted the role of the mission as either a buffer between the person and his foreign environment or as an impediment. Of course a supportive mission in a difficult environment can result in a closed system where no-one ventures outside the cocoon and does not experience much of the foreign culture which remains a foreign entity as they depart four years later.

5.5.5 An international social support system

Apart from a mission support system, the international community provides a ready-made, albeit transient, support base.

In a small country the international community tends to be small tedium can set in. **Stella** says if you attend three functions a night and you see the same people at each function, it can become quite tiresome. This is more often the plight of the more senior personnel who are expected to socialize extensively.