

#### 5.5.4.8 Further discussion of mission experiences

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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.

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One HOM complained of a lack of privacy in a city with a population of 12-15 million people! However the circle within which he moved was just small.

**Elwin** (17) describes the international community as a “sort of in between community” that provides one with a ready-made community and acts as a buffer against the host country.

“It’s isolated from the local people a bit”.

“It helps because I don’t really feel comfortable among the local people. It means that all the new people who come here, just stick together. They don’t blend into the local society”.

Establishing one’s own circle of friends, is a great help in settling down. **Jaco** was lucky to meet a fellow house husband after a month and the two became good friends. He stresses the importance of starting to entertain new friends as soon as possible as adjustment follows suit.

He and **Bonnie** have worked out a system for socializing. She meets people through her work and he invites them for dinner parties. He also does the catering.

After several postings, Bonnie and Jaco concluded that the basis of friendship for them has become that of befriending people who are in the same boat as themselves, in other words expatriates and other diplomats.

Thus forging a place for oneself in a community can help the adjustment process along.

**Bonnie** says she experiences “a sense of floundering” at the beginning of a posting when “you miss everything you do not have”. According to her, the human need to fit in and to get on with life impels a person to make friends, but you can make mistakes by inadvertently befriending the wrong people. This is true regardless of age and place.

**Johan** and his wife have made good friends among the international community. However they were already taking leave of their best friends who were due to return to their home country.

Starting a new circle of friends is not equally easy for everyone, as **Mandla**, a natural introvert has found:

“Well, social life has changed quite a lot, because making new friends is not quite an easy task. Because with friends we have started....for instance if you are used to a certain type of friends ..then it means if you go to another place, you have to more or less try and associate yourself with that type of friends. People who have got the same taste, and the same living style. It becomes much more difficult for introverts.....like myself. My wife is an extrovert, she can talk to anybody”.

#### 5.5.5.1 Church affiliation



Church affiliation can provide an instant support group with like-minded people. It also provides a stabilizing influence for families whose lives are in flux. It helps adjustment if a person can slot into a church community from the start.

**Don** (15) knows that he will find his church in most foreign countries.

“For me the thing is, I’ve got a support group in South Africa and I’ve got one here. And even if I move to a foreign country, there would probably be a church there and I’ll find friends here. So as far as moving for me, I generally have a support group wherever I go”.

**Jo:**

“You’ve got a basis from which to evaluate things and to evaluate yourself. You are not always wondering who am I in this big world with all these strange inputs”.

But in country X-----it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a Christian community. **Chris and Lettie** have had to resort to starting a home church to address this lack.

**Songo’s** family was happy to find a Methodist church, which though not the same, was close enough to their own church. They enjoy attending services and have made friends there.

#### 5.5.5.2 Discussion of experiences of friendship

For Mandla adjustment means having to become a different person, by changing his preferred way of being. Merely making friends implies changing and results in eventual loss when friends leave.

Diplomats can choose their friends from within the mission, if they can find like-minded South Africans, or turn to the international community for friendship. Being in a similar situation and context is often the basis for a supportive friendship and the international community is seen as having more in common with the transferred diplomat and his family than the host country.

A church affiliation, can have a highly adaptive function as it provides a ready made community of people who honour similar values and beliefs. This would lessen feelings of foreignness.

#### 5.5.6 Down days as part of initial adjustment

An experience of difficult days and even depression is not uncommon.

**Sharon:**

“You do get the odd one or two days where you feel: listen, I’ve just had enough. All I want to do is just pack up and I want to go home.

You get those days because there is nobody for you to.....there’s no real family for you to fall back on, besides your immediate family”.

And later:

“But, hm, I just make it happen. I go out and do things. I’ve made a lot of friends, some very good friends. I find that if I’m having a problem at all, I can talk to somebody, like a mother type of thing, somebody who will just listen. I find that helps a lot. You have a good cry and maybe a little wine (whine?) or something. And then you come back home again and you are fine again. But you just got to realize that you need it before you get yourself worked up into a real state”.

**Bonnie** explains that the low hits you once the initial excitement has subsided after about two months. This is when reality sets in and you have to “start living this new thing”. She says that part is definitely less exciting.

**Amanda** says she often found herself on the verge of returning home during the beginning stage. There was nothing to stay for. She bought herself a one way ticket home, thinking that having the possibility to return home in her hand, would make it possible for her to stay - however many problems going home may have caused in turn. In a sense this ticket became a coping mechanism for her.

**John** eventually realized that things would work out for them and decided “to hang in there”. He asked **Amanda** to stay on with him. In this painful way the two arrived at the point where they were staying on by choice.

#### 5.5.6.1 Discussion of experience of adjustment as a low point.

There are days when an accumulation of things cannot but get you down. These things can relate to the reality of the new lifestyle; missing old and effective coping mechanisms; people close to you; or can simply be due to a sense of being surrounded by strangers on a continual basis. It seems as if these experiences are inevitable but that they probably become less intense or frequent as adjustment deepens.

One wonders if it would it not have been better for Amanda and John if they could have made an informed choice before leaving for their posting. Would it not have saved them much unhappiness. This couple believe they have had to make their posting work for themselves without any support and they bear a grudge against their fellow South Africans at the mission. Amanda says the rejection that she experienced gave her an inkling of what the discrimination under apartheid must have been like for people of colour.

In spite of these extremely negative perceptions, Amanda managed to devise a creative way to make it possible for her to stay and to cope with the negative aspect of her adjustment.

#### 5.5.7 Home leave as a punctuation

Hardship posts are ranked according to degree of hardship. Generally the worse the ranking, the more often the official and his family can go on home leave. In some postings home leave of a



few days is granted every two months. In a regular posting in the First World, home leave would be granted once every two years.

Many people report a perception that they cannot tolerate anything in their new country in the period immediately before their leave is due, whether this is two monthly or two yearly. Suddenly all the carefully acquired tolerance falls away.

Home leave, if it occurs after a long period, is another marker of feeling settled or not. It is only upon returning to your new home, that you can feel that you are “going home”.

**Vesna:**

“And when we come back, although we moan and groan, it’s still.....this is home. You made it your home. So coming back is nice. Then you are all revitalised”.

Frequent trips home can have the opposite effect too when they turn out to add to a feeling of being unsettled. Returning from home requires readjustment each time, especially after two or six monthly trips. Home leaves that are a year or two years apart are easier in terms of this adjustment.

But **Barney** describes their two monthly trips to South Africa as a blessing. It was an opportunity for him to escape an untenable office situation and to buy basic goods. He believes that knowing they only had to last two months helped them cope with the newness of their situation.

**Songo** decided it is better to stay in one place than to travel too often:

"Now we are settled. You can say we are settled. But the more you go holiday again and then come back, the more you go back to square one. Because to adjust.....it's better that....we've realised that, maybe you mustn't go away from F--- . Maybe I mustn't go home ...after six months. Maybe I must just stay here, so that we can be more settled".

**Oliver**, whose marriage was stretched to its limits during a first hardship posting, has the following to say:

"Your home leave is the big dangerous time.....where the divorce can take place. You know she's back with her parents and with her sisters. She says why the hell should I go back? It's lovely in Cape Town. You spend a month there and suddenly you have to go back to some joint!"

#### 5.5.7.1 Discussion of effect of home leave on adjustment

A visit home denotes a punctuation of being relatively settled for most people who return with renewed strength and hope to last their stay. Others find it adds to their experience of being unsettled when they return as the effect of getting used to one's surroundings wears off when you leave, resulting in a new adjustment process.

### 5.5.8 Thoughts on adjustment

The best part of a year will have passed before the family can feel settled again. Eventually everyone gets used to the local conditions. They might not accept it, but at least they get used to “difference” and overcome initial shocked reactions.

It is difficult to pinpoint this stage chronologically as it is different for everyone. Some experience a gradual process with ups and downs and others wake up one day and decide that they are OK. Some keep on expanding their comfort zones while others recreate a safe and small comfort zone for themselves, not moving outside a supportive mission or their homes.

I asked interviewees whether they thought there were stages to the adjustment process. This is what was said.

In **Oliver’s** words:

“Your middle stage is where you should start to understand the language, know your way around.....and it stabilises. By the time you get to home leave, you should be OK.”

**Eddy:**

“And the next stage is addressing the demands of the different culture and the various differences encountered. And then the following stage is maybe addressing it wrongly by trying to bring about change. And then finally, a compromise and conforming stage where you realize that

you are not gonna win or get anywhere by trying to change the place or change the people. Where you then accept that in certain instances you have to make certain compromises or conform in some way. And, unfortunately, being South African, being human.....you try and conform as little as possible”.

Many people continue to find certain things unacceptable even when they are used to them.

**Johan** started to adjust when he decided “to deal with the situation and experiences” he was exposed to.

**Sharon** thinks back to her arrival and remembers a period of three months to adjust.

“Now I am strong, I am enjoying it. I look past the dirt. I look past the animal abuse which is something that was very traumatic at first. I think I have come a long way. I get up and do things. I’ve settled down”.

**Jaco** received many visitors in their new posting and acting like a tourist guide helped him to get to know his new surroundings.

The middle stage of a posting is then generally a time when a new lifestyle, a circle of friends, and new routines are established. Provided there are no ongoing and unresolved issues, a period of relative enjoyment of a life abroad follows. Most people are now used to the conditions, have lost their initial anxiety about the various threats and can open up slowly to what is on offer in their

host country.

There is much individual variation in how this way of life is experienced. At one end of a continuum, some families will restrict their lifestyle, protecting themselves from the foreign context and count the days until they can go home. At the other end, you may find a few people who identify so fully with their foreign environment that they unwittingly give up their South African identity.

**Johan**, describes the last phase as one during which he had become blunted to the reality outside. He has not learnt to accept it, but rather to ignore the things he dislikes. He has eventually learnt to live with a system but without getting used to it. He says “knowing what is coming” helps him not to give in to emotional outbursts of anger. He calls this the “dealing with difference” stage.

**Jaco** says it is not possible to get used to certain hardship issues, like high levels of dirt and noise pollution.

**Stephen** does not believe that there can be an end stage to adjustment as it goes on indefinitely. But for **Oliver** the last year is the happiest, “because you’ve saved a bit of money. You can go back with a new car.....and it’s time to go home”. **Johan** says the last stage is when your return is in the foreseeable future and you pray for time to pass.

**Susan**, believes that adjustment is synonymous with finding a balance between change and stability. She had to differentiate

between preconceived ideas and behaviours that were functional in her new environment and those that were not. Then she had to learn new behaviours that were more effective, whilst retaining what is valid from her past learning.

It is very important to Susan to cope in all aspects of her life. She needed to prove to herself how well she could manage. Moreover she felt she had to earn the right to have a baby as a working woman and worked twice as hard before the baby's birth so that she would not have to feel guilty for taking long leave afterwards.

Susan is an example of an independently functioning woman who determines her own criteria for success and likes to retain control over her own destiny.

**Bonnie** believes you have adjusted when you no longer consider local brands of consumer goods as inferior to what is found in South Africa.

.....when you no longer feel impelled to import sugar from South Africa because it is cheaper or whiter than local sugar.

.....when you stop speaking of "these ..... foreigners".

.....when you remember that you are a visitor in their country and start respecting their rules and ways of doing things, even if you disagree with them.

.....when you stop trying to change them.

#### 5.5.8.1 Summary of experience of adjustment

It is difficult to present a generalised idea of adjustment as the ideas presented in this section are rather diverging. The idea of change and stability seems to be central however and certainly it is the individual who changes and not his environment. A crucial aspect of change seems to be the amount that can be tolerated by each individual and conversely how much should remain stable so that a person is not destabilised.

It seems too that certain aspects of the foreign environment remain objectionable but that one can opt not to pay attention to those aspects.

The time scale is a constant factor as each posting is time limited. When the contract nears its end, it is perhaps easier to be “adjusted” and tolerant.

#### 5.5.9 A different relationship with Head Office

When people relocate, especially if relocation is part of a job description, it means that the employee’s relationship with the employer shifts or changes. Bureaucratic procedures are seen to impact on a person’s life when abroad due to being subject to specific rules and regulations and not completely independent as when living in South Africa. Bureaucracy is often seen as being synonymous with administration.

**Bernhard** describes dealing with bureaucracy as

“wrestling with a wall of mud. It’s tough, impenetrable and

non transparent at all”.

There is a perception among personnel abroad that anyone visiting a mission from Head Office will fail to appreciate the hidden hardship aspects. Grading hardship posts remain a problem due in large measure to the highly subjective nature of the experiences of employees and their families.

**Barney** experienced no support from Head Office when he had ongoing conflict with the HOM, other than finally being offered an intermission transfer.

“You always had this..... “war” going on. You’d be *alone* and you fight alone. You really fight alone”.

“You can’t just pick up the phone and call someone at Head Office and get information or something. There was nothing. No support. You just made do with whatever you had”.

“And I don’t know what he wanted from me. He could have sat down and at least discussed the problems. I tried to do my best. I really did things above my normal duty”.

Eventually:

“I’d be getting ready for work and I’d come downstairs and sit down in front of the TV and wonder: Should I actually go to work today? It was coming to that. I would just *hate* to go to work”.

Barney requested and accepted an intermission transfer.



By contrast, **Songo** enjoyed good support from the desk at Head Office and is satisfied that he gets the help he needs.

Not **Susan**. She discovered that her issues were ignored at Head Office and she finally gave up even trying to communicate. She concludes that it is you and you alone when you are en poste. For her, the department has no human face and an officer is sent abroad with an implicit message of sink or swim. She is referring to technical skills, not even emotional support. Her understanding of the non-supportive culture that exists in missions is that it seems to stem from a non-supportive culture at Head Office.

#### 5.5.9.1 Discussion of a changed relationship

Upon relocating abroad, the official enters a relationship of greater dependence on his department and consequently greater vulnerability. Yet at the same time an official is expected to function more independently.

If Head Office is seen to ignore management or personal problems, stress results. This is seen as due to lack of timely responsiveness with regard to problems. Only one person reported that he received adequate support from Head Office to function effectively. Most respondents have a negative perception of the kind of support they are given.

#### 5.5.10 Head Office rules and regulations within a different context.

Several employees commented on an unexpected administrative aspect of adjustment caused by having to function in a different cultural context.

**Susan** found the different working environment stimulating and dynamic, unlike working at Head Office. But because of the difference between the culture in South Africa and the culture in country Z-----, she had to learn to adjust her functioning in order to be effective and to survive. She realized that she was coming from a different world and could not expect to apply her ideas and training as before.

**Stephen** discovered that you cannot adhere to the letter of the rule as you would not survive in a community that functions so differently.

“You have to go a little bit with the flow of things”.

#### 5.5.10.1 Discussion of experience of different context

In order to be effective one has to learn to compromise between the two systems, namely Head Office rules and the foreign context, and interpret rules in a more flexible manner.

#### 5.5.11 Mission cooperation

As we have seen in paragraph 5.5.4.4, the Heads of Mission play a vital role in the functioning of a mission. This section considers the individual's experience.

**Bonnie** describes working relationships in her mission as goal oriented and good.

**John**, as the sole representative from his section in the same mission, had to carve a place out for himself whilst experiencing negativity towards him. He was stressed and angered by this experience.

Colleagues can cause unhappiness, says **Louise**. One way of dealing with this unhappiness is “to project it onto the country and simply to say you hate the country you are in, regardless of what the country itself is like”.

It is difficult to be an administrative officer as you cannot give everyone everything they need:

“They feel, no, what the hell is he giving us a hard time for?  
They feel that it is a personal thing.”

**Barney** experienced constant conflict with his HOM (HOM). He felt that he had to be at the beck and call of the HOM. His problems, usually infra structural, had to be dealt with on an immediate basis, regardless of whether it was day or night. Barney believes he was expected to put his family's needs on hold and felt he received abuse rather than thanks for his efforts. He began to believe that the HOM resented the fact that he was not black.

#### 5.5.11.1 Discussion of experiences of mission cooperation

From these excerpts we can deduce firstly that a single representative from a particular department can have a hard time finding a niche for himself in a mission.

Secondly even the administrative officer is aware that by the very nature of his job, he cannot make everyone happy and that he encounters negativity as a result. This is an experience that can be hard to live with especially in a small mission.

Louise says that a hardship post can easily become the scapegoat for various problems regardless of their origin. This makes intuitive sense and reflects an underlying sense of lack of control over frustrating aspects of life in a mission.

The overall impression is one of unresolved issues, that arise in the absence of mechanisms for addressing them. Furthermore, in a hierarchical system, it is up to the HOM to address problems, as no-one else is seen to have the necessary authority. If the HOM is remiss in this task, festering situations contribute to an experience of personal hardship.

#### 5.5.12 A new culture: a head on collision?

Learning to get by and to understand life in a very different foreign culture is an ongoing process. It seems that one can never really plumb the depths of a foreign culture completely. A four year posting is not long enough and at best, diplomats live on the fringe of their host society. They rarely integrate with the host community

and enjoy some social support within a foreign diplomatic community.

The initial shock of encountering a foreign environment is followed by a later shock when people begin to realize slowly how differently people behave and think. Getting used to function within a foreign culture seems to be the second aspect, after the climate and the physical environment, to come to terms with during adjustment.

**Eddy** says:

“The initial shock is followed by the shock phase of the different culture and the various differences”.

**Stephen** explains this process succinctly:

“The deeper you go, there seems to be *another* layer. You think at a certain level you know, and then you go a little deeper, then you say it’s more complex again. *Another* layer. So you have to sort *that* one out. The more you know about things, the more complex it becomes”.

Similarly **Johan**, describes the first eighteen months as

“a series of shocking discoveries - as soon as you think you have seen it all, a new thing crops up to shock you again”.

**Eddy** was confronted with an armed police presence on the streets, an experience that unnerved him immensely. He found it

intimidating.

“You think if I ask them the time of day, they might apprehend me”.

With time he realized that the people of C----- enjoy a sense of security and a low crime rate. He also learnt of the historical reasons for this pervasive security presence and then only could he relax.

**John:**

“But eventually you come to terms with another culture and then you stop saying negative things about the host country. When that happens you will drop the friends who are still complaining as you see them as stuck. Otherwise it becomes hard to get on with your life in the country”.

**Sharon** refers to the unending cultural surprises as fun.

“It’s like a story book for me. When you think the story has ended and you turn the page, looking for ‘they lived happily ever after’, the story starts again!

Living in a highly dissimilar foreign culture can result in a sense of cultural deprivation for some. **Susan** says she needs something that stimulates her culturally, be it music, books, or film. She also needs to be able to speak to people who are like minded.

#### 5.5.12.1 Life in a different culture

Living within a different culture seems to have a distinct impact on people. Some people become more aware of the different layers of in another culture as time goes on. Others react by dissociating themselves completely from the foreign culture and only cultivating friendships within the international community.

**Stephen:**

“You seem to be going through different stages and it comes in waves, the cultural shock we experienced. First shock, and then all of a sudden, you realize, but you can manage. And no, you can do it. And you feel quite at home. And all of a sudden the second wave of culture shock arrives”.

“In four years one does not become an expert in a country like Indonesia. The more you know about things, the more complex it becomes”.

**John** describes culture shock as

“the negative interpretation of everything you hear, see and experience, because you do not understand where the other person is coming from”.

Intentions are misread in this way. According to **John**, an Arab man could make a lewd remark to a western woman in the hopes of getting some reaction. If you interpret his behaviour as attention seeking, and consequently ignore the remark, you will not be harassed. He will understand in turn that you are not available for his attentions.

John believes that culture shock can be worsened “by lending your ears out to other people in the mission.” He advises that one should “shed what others tell you about the local people and do your own reality check”.

It took him a good two years before he realized that the local people are mostly friendly!

**Eddy** describes an incident that happened to him early on in his posting which perhaps illustrates an overreaction to a different culture....

His brand new car was damaged by a careless driver who had driven away. Bystanders tried futilely to convince him that this was the fate of the gods. He says:

“I freaked out.....”

I use the word overreaction on purpose as a small incident gives rise to an exaggerated outburst that says more about a build up of frustrations in a new environment than the specific event.

**Barney** is still not comfortable in a different culture with different practices:

“I feel very tense outside because you’re a diplomat. They look up to you, everybody, all of the locals, the workers at the mission, the drivers. They see me go to the garage and I get in my car and I drive with my wife in front of it. The rest of the diplomats they got drivers. They look and stare and say: There’s something wrong with these people. They’re carrying



their shopping bags!'

Barney is aware of a specific code of behaviour that is expected of diplomats. This awareness causes him discomfort.

**Fred and Jo** spoke of a similar dilemma in A-----where they wanted to teach their children the value of a work ethic and found that they were censored for wanting to teach their children to do menial work in a society in which anyone of a certain social standing left such tasks for people of a lower rank.

“One mistake that I made.....I had the kids wash the car in front of the hotel. Clearly this was an embarrassment to them because the children of people of status do not wash cars. Whereas to me, I have a work ethic. Work is an honourable thing. Whether it is high work or low work, it makes no difference.

**Fred** reminds one of the necessity to be sensitive to local customs as it is easy to offend unintentionally.

**Nongile's** experience of bumping up against a different culture is one of frustration:

“ I mean you are so used to go to a furniture shop at home and you get what you want. Here you've got to go through catalogues, try and make the shop assistant understand what you want. And of course, he'll always be making you believe that he understands. At the end of the day he brings

something that you...., you know, they take chances. Sometimes you didn't even ask for this chair, but because it is the stock that has been lying in his shop for months on end, then he'll take a chance. And if you are sympathetic, you lose out. So you ...you land up to be hard, which is not good for your health and for your being as a person. You learn to be hard, you learn to be aggressive”.

Nongile feels she loses out constantly because of a communication barrier even when she takes a tough stance.

### On anger

**Eddy** feels that the difference between the Eastern and Western culture results in an unequal relationship where typical Western tolerance and slowness to anger is taken advantage of. He feels that his tolerance is not respected and that he is sometimes pushed to a point of no return. That is when he experiences anger.

Eddy feels the attributes he values in his culture are counterproductive in a foreign culture and causes him such frustration that he experiences anger. If he wants to lower his frustration level he would have to forego values that he holds dearly. This causes conflict for him.

**Johan** describes a common problem that I shall call the “unreliable workmanship ethic”. I heard many versions of this problem across the continents I visited. Apparently one should not expect things to be done or produced according to the same standards that we are used to in South Africa, nor according to the same time scale. In

fact a “seeing is believing” attitude is far more helpful than believing that tomorrow at ten o’clock sharp means exactly that.

Johan learnt that such a promise shows little more than a fine intention and is open to other realities that intervene to thwart good intentions.

**Barney:**

“Nothing works properly here. Nobody does things properly. They don’t make stuff properly”.

**Sharon** feels that she is misunderstood when she makes jokes or says something that is peculiarly South African.

“You find that they do not know how to respond or they’ll just not respond. There’s one lady at the embassy who has been to other places. She is open and friendly and you can say anything to her”.

**Joan** remembers her embarrassment when she offered cool drinks to the packers who brought her furniture.

“They looked tired and thirsty and dusty, so I offered them something to drink. This was very wrong. I was a foreign woman and I was being too friendly. They made themselves at home and would not leave. They misinterpreted my kind gesture, so I had to call someone from the Embassy to ask them to leave. I learnt, you cannot be polite”.

“This is all about adjusting to the new place and trying not to

take things too personally”.

**Elizabeth** had experiences of harassment. She says all women go through it in C----

“There are certain things that weigh you down, like the constant comments when you walk past. The noises, krr .....from the throat and the.....it’s vulgar. It’s not a flattering attention. It weighs you down. It’s like an invasion of your space”.

Her reactions:

“You feel encroachment of your space and the lack of freedom”.

“I.....I became close to wanting to hit someone”.

“I have never sworn so much as I have sworn here! Either under my breath or at the person. Now I don’t look people in the eye, I don’t notice anything when I walk”.

Eventually she learnt to deal with it psychologically. As she says:

“By the sixth month I woke up one morning and everything was OK”.

Heads of Mission seem to be least affected by culture shock as their lives are not touched by many of the adjustment issues that are related by staff members. For instance, having a chauffeur removes the necessity to learn to cope with local driving practices. They are generally kept too busy to miss a lack of recreation. One

ambassador was aware of the need to keep his staff motivated and would have liked them to have a recreational facility such as older and more established countries offer their employees.

House help is generally affordable in hardship posts. In fact one is expected to employ someone. This provides more opportunity for cross cultural contact and differences to crop up:

“These people are very, very different. You send your cook and when he comes back, you find they cheat you.

The domestic system in B----- seems to be baffling at first.

**Angelique:**

“The cook only cooks, but cannot wash dishes. The cleaner can clean, but cannot touch anything in the kitchen. So you have to control people who do not even meet. It can drive you very, very crazy. Because they will leave cups just like that. Nobody will come and pick them up, they just pass them. And you are the lady of the house!”

**Elizabeth:**

“And another thing that really got to me then, but now I can deal with it, was being cheated all the time. The people are just like.....all they want from me is my money”.

When confronted with difference people become guarded, sometimes because of bad experiences and often because of an inability to comprehend the ways of another culture. Some persons learn to deal with a different attitude and others become tougher.

This toughness creates the next barrier that makes understanding impossible and integration unlikely.

#### 5.5.12.2 Closed and open cultures

In some countries the culture is closed to foreigners.

“One almost never gets invited to a home, says **Bernhard**. It is experienced as a great honour on the rare occasion when it happens. Bernhard felt he had achieved something difficult when he received some invitations to homes.

And **Sharon**:

“You find, the local people.....I haven't really met any of them .....where you can be really friends. Except for the embassy staff, hm, that we befriended. They don't, they very seldom come and visit you. If they come to your place they won't eat, unless they bring food that is local. They look at us as different. That I feel”.

The result is that one lives on the edge of society, says **Jaco**.

**Fred**, a member of staff at the same mission who clearly drew on different experiences, has a completely different view: He disapproved of every local person's behaviour in general and remained frustrated because of his inability to get people to change. He is appalled at the level of fatalism, the lack of respect for the laws of cause and effect; and deplores a general incompetence.



The African culture is not experienced as closed:

**Mandla:**

“It’s quite open. In fact, when you are used to African cultures, they don’t differ that much. It’s just a question of languages”.

Heads of missions have a different experience probably since they mingle with the sophisticated echelons of society. One ambassador described the nationals of his country of accreditation as hospitable, sociable, friendly and kind.

Cultures differ in their acceptance of strangers. Individuals differ in how they react to foreign cultures. Many seem to generalise from a few instances of being misunderstood, or cheated to a condemnation of an entire country as being all the same. An African in Africa has only a new language to contend with and feels otherwise accepted. Elsewhere we saw that South Africans of F---n descent do not feel comfortable in F---, nor South Africans who bear a physical resemblance to the host nationals. This seems to be because they are treated as local people who act as though they are ignorant of the country’s ways and languages.

5.5.12.3 Looking deeper

**Jaco and Bonnie** maintain that what may repel one person can be attractive to another. Both of them like the authenticity of the Muslim world. They are attracted by values of non-consumerism and non-



materialism. Aspects such as oldness and dirt do not put them off.

**Sanette** is aware of the relevance of their city's past for most of mankind in a religious sense.

"The past of this place, forms part of the common ancestry of a whole lot of people worldwide, whether they are Christians, Muslims or Jews. It is enriching. It is also depressing to see what they make of it in terms of local politics.

**Elizabeth** was keen to explore the city and its old mosques and buildings. She had to find a way to deal with the harassment of women before she could venture out. This took her six months.

" The thought of going out there and having people whistle, because you are foreign, put me off for a long time. I'd stay home in stead. I would stay the whole Friday here. It's much easier than having to put up with.....

I think it was mainly: you've got to *brave* that. I've got to get into a taxi and get out and then start walking".

**Susan** says her main motivation for accepting a foreign posting is her interest in other cultures. She sees her life abroad as offering her an opportunity to grow and to come to terms with herself away from the South African context. She is deeply convinced that she can learn something from another culture if she were to look deeper than the superficial things that put everyone else off. She believes she will learn something that may be of enduring value to her.



It is clear that some people are interested in different cultures and different ways of looking at life. They change as they expose themselves to these cultures and incorporate certain aspects into their own world views. Who is that person? The one who overcomes resistance to difference within and opens himself up to alternative meanings? This does not happen immediately and for some it never happens. At best it is a selective process as one cannot plumb the depths of another culture in a few years, nor come to terms with every aspect of it.

Furthermore it is not expected of a diplomat to become integrated, merely to be able to function well and with limited frustration.

#### 5.5.12.4 Language and meaning

**Eddy** is confronted with the realisation that few people speak English and for him it remains “a battle” to be understood.

“The *language* is the biggest problem. In anyone’s existence, communication plays a big part in his day to day life and if you *cannot* communicate, you will then know how a dumb person feels”.

The department offers elementary language courses, but Eddy says:

“A crash course does not help for anything as this language is too different from English”.

Eddy's comments in this regard seems to suggest that it is not possible to imagine a world in which the majority of people speak a language that is foreign, before you experience the effect for yourself.

**Mandla:**

“When we arrived here, we really experienced the cultural shock. Like the language....although I had undertaken a crash course in this language. I noticed that when you actually speak the language, it is not like the grammar you had been exposed to. It had all these new ...where you have to learn new words which were not there when you where going across”.

No matter how well you prepare yourself, you will inevitably find that you cannot cover all ground.

**Deon :**

“One thing that I experienced here for the first time ever is to feel totally illiterate. To feel you cannot read and you get that twice. Once you get a bit of one language under the belt, you're confronted with the other official language and vice versa. But, it's worse than an illiterate person in another country. Not only can you not read, you can also not understand what people tell you. That was a difficult thing to adapt to. You cannot even take time to - what you cannot understand verbally and orally - to figure it out in writing”.

Some countries have a new language and a different script, making

it twice as hard to get around.

Similar customs may have different meanings as **Stephen** had to find out. He says in his understanding guards are employed in order to stay awake at night. Not so in the C---- where “guards do not guard”. Their mere presence is seen as a deterrent and the home is respected as one that respects local customs, by providing work for local people. It is frowned upon to embarrass a sleeping guard by stealing from that house. This is a cultural difference that took a while to understand, says Stephen.

This section points to two aspects of language, namely language as a code for mutual understanding and secondly language is the vehicle for expressing cultural differences. In this latter case the same words or ideas have different meanings attached to them.

#### 5.5.12.5 Different concept of time

Everything happens more slowly in the developing world than we are used to. Everyone seems to be late for appointments and no-one is expected to become agitated.

“No problem, nobody gets cross, nobody gets excited”.

This seems to be in sharp contrast to the western way of “time is money” or of time which is also described as costly.

**Stephen** has learnt to become more flexible in this posting in the East. But **Johan** is still highly irritated by this difference:

“Time means nothing. Someone will look you in the eye and promise to be back in fifteen minutes, only to arrive the next day. It is so impractical!

He says he cannot get used to it, but he is learning to live with it. He has reached the point where he understands that what he interprets as a blatant lie is not meant as such in a different culture. Even though he still gets furious, he no longer explodes! Understanding it helps him to deal with it in a slightly better way. He did rant and rave initially until he realized he could not change an entire culture.

**Eddy’s** family experienced the impact of a culture that will not be rushed when they had to wait a long time before their accommodation was ready.

This different attitude to time can cause irritation and frustration until a person comes to terms with it as a cultural given and not as a personal slight.

#### 5.5.12.6 Coming to terms with difference

According to **Eddy** it is simply human to arrive in a new country and to wish to help them to improve their conditions. Everyone in their mission has expressed similar sentiments:

“You sense that urge when you come to a place like C-----.  
You want to go on a crusade and clean the streets and get the rabid dogs off. You want to paint the place and get the

butchers to work”

But realism sets in eventually:

“When you realize that these guys have probably lived like this all their lives and they are comfortable. It’s their country and you are just a guest here. So for you to be comfortable and happy, you need to find your niche amongst all what’s going on”.

**Barney** says the difference between J----- and South Africa is so enormous that he does not know if it is possible to adjust to it.

“You get used to it. I don’t know if you adjust to it. You always get frustrated in this bloody country. It is such a big difference, you cannot even imagine the difference”.

Eddy came to terms with difference when he accepted his foreign status and resisted the impulse to change an entire culture. Barney on the other hand always experiences frustration even though he professes to be used to difference. He is overwhelmed by and rejecting of the other culture and does not try to find a niche for himself within the greater picture as Eddy did. This should not be seen as a direct comparison as the two men reside in different countries with different contexts. It may say something about the contexts but also about their personalities. In a way Barney, like Johan, has come to terms with expecting frustration but being used to it at the same time.

#### 5.5.12.7 Positive aspect of difference



There is often a lot to see and do in foreign countries. Some countries offer a lot, whilst being hardship postings. Each country has something positive to offer, says Bernhard.

“Our place is full of stuff and memories and all the positive things that we garner from places,” says **Bernhard**.

Living in a different culture and opening your mind to its hidden treasures “brings a spark into your mind”. Becoming aware of the ancient history of the people of the country, through their monuments and buildings, is an enriching experience, according to an **Ambassador**.

Certain countries in the Middle East are exceptionally rich in archeology.

“They reckon there are probably in the region of .....10,000 sites in this little country”.

Some countries have high levels of security which is appreciated by South Africans. In G-----,

“You can stroll on that beach at three in the morning, No-one will touch you”.

Ironically though a bomb may go off in a bus or a building due to political instability.

In A----- it is safe to enough to leave your doors open.

The ambassador in J:

“The other beautiful thing is the colourful people you see in the streets, in different attires and speaking different languages. You taste different food in restaurants and everything is different. So there is something in the mists of this, which makes you say: thank God, I came here. So it’s a hardship post, but where on earth will I get all this bonus”?

The ambassador in S----- appreciates the opportunity to be exposed to another culture and to have the possibility of observing events in South Africa from the outside. He describes a learning process that occurs in interaction with ambassadors from other countries.

It is perhaps noteworthy that none of the positive comments came from persons on a first posting, but from ambassadors and persons on subsequent postings. Typically ambassadors are invited to special ceremonies unlike the rest of the embassy staff. It also indicates that one can learn to appreciate life in a different culture with time, whereas the first posting can be simply overwhelming.

#### 5.5.13 Relationship with host country

Some people go to trouble to find out how the other culture functions and as a result, their adjustment is easier.

You have to learn how the other person thinks if you want to cope in another culture, says **Stephen**.

“In some countries people do not say no. They say yes to please you”. So you need to pose your question in a way that