

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY OF ADJUSTMENT

1.1 Introduction

This study has been a long time in coming. After 25 years of marriage to a diplomat during which time I accompanied him to three hardship missions and two missions in the developed world, I was singularly aware of the adjustment requirements demanded of me each time we moved. I brought up four children within the parameters set by a "gypsy-like" lifestyle and qualified as a psychologist, partly to understand the adjustment problems of my own children and partly because of a research interest. Furthermore I found the lifestyle not sufficiently fulfilling of my own needs. I became convinced that the diplomatic story needs to be told and that lessons could be learnt from this story which may soften the experience of those who follow in our footsteps. Apart from a fulfilling experience, I was aware of a discontinuous quality to the lives of our family.

A typical posting abroad lasts four years after which the family returns to live in South Africa, in Pretoria. After a two year period at home the family is posted abroad again. Whilst abroad children attend international schools where English is the language of instruction. In the past many parents opted to let their children board at high schools in Pretoria, but it seems that the current trend is to keep children within the family (Shaw, 1993).

In general, diplomatic families have to adjust to a lifestyle of change and discontinuity, a foreign culture and an unknown environment. It seems that the greater the difference between a home environment and a foreign environment, the harder the adjustment process. A further adjustment is required to live and function within the South African mission abroad. A mission can be described as a microcosm of South Africa, representing an



instant family with all its concomitant expectations and disappointments.

Diplomats in general are perceived to have a higher divorce rate than the population at large but to date no study has addressed this perception.

Diplomatic children are considered “spoilt brats” as they have been exposed to so much and yet find it hard to settle or adjust. They have a broad perspective on life, yet their families seem to consider them maladjusted well into their twenties.

The degree of adjustment required of a diplomat and his/her spouses, and family when transferred abroad or when returning home seem to be underrated and misunderstood. This is a lifestyle that has both an enriching and harmful potential, one that leaves no-one untouched. It is a life of difference and complexity, with unexpected richness interspersed with periods of ennui. But above all, it is a life of change and discontinuity.

My contention is that if we can understand this process of adjustment and all its pitfalls, specifically from a South African angle, diplomatic families could be more realistically prepared for the particular exigencies of their lifestyle.

As the number of missions abroad has virtually doubled since the advent of democracy in 1994, and most of these new missions are in the Third World and classified as hardship postings, I chose to limit my study to this context. Furthermore, hardship posts appear to require a different type of adjustment, one that many South Africans have not been exposed to at that stage.

At a seminar in South Africa in the early nineties where I was presenting a preparatory course for couples going on a first posting, I was asked what choices were available for an accompanying spouse who had a career. I was stumped for an unequivocal answer and realised that this question would become more and more relevant as the number of dual career families

increase. Having joined the professional ranks as a psychologist, the question came to have particular relevance in my own life soon afterwards, when I found I could not work in a specific posting. My disillusionment was sharp as I was aware of great needs and yet my skills were not wanted. My disenchantment was even greater as it meant that there was nothing for me to do apart from supporting my husband in his role. After seven years of earning my own salary and enjoying job satisfaction, I was unprepared for a return to financial dependence and the loss of a professional role. A sudden empty nest did not help either.

I was living in a difficult and newly opened hardship mission where it seemed that our embassy personnel had a hard time trying to come to terms with local conditions. I was very aware of the adjustment problems that were seemingly projected as hatred of the foreign environment, blamed on administrative officers, revealed as an unwillingness to work together and generally resulting in conflict ridden interpersonal relations. I felt compelled to undertake this study. Families were overwhelmed by problems without realising that these were probably largely due to adjustment stress. There was as far as I could see no safe haven where anyone could express frustrations without seeming disloyal to the country or being obstructive in an office set up.

This research was undertaken with the permission of the Department of Foreign Affairs: to visit missions abroad and to interview personnel, (see Addendum A) with the sole purpose of research. The Department's view is not formally or otherwise expressed or endorsed in this study and the department is moreover under no obligation to use any of the resultant findings. However, consultation with the Head of Human Resources and the Senior Psychologist at the Department of Foreign Affairs confirmed the need for such a study. A Deputy Director General informed me that plans to initiate a study of hardship missions had to be shelved due to other priorities and a

lack of resources.

I have been aware of the difficulties experienced by families who are uprooted and trying their best to settle in foreign countries so that they can represent their country. Often it seems that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) is not supportive enough of the emotional and physical needs of their employees in foreign offices. Moreover, there is a tendency, rightly or wrongly, to view these diplomatic families as people with an entitlement mentality, forever complaining or dissatisfied.

With this study I attempted to provide the staff at South African missions with an opportunity to speak and to be listened to without prejudice. I wanted to assess for myself whether their gripes are real and what could be learnt from their experiences. At the same time I wish to state that I am aware of the limitations inherent in any bureaucracy and that I do have an inkling of the difficulties involved in taking care of staff who reside abroad. The aim of this study is not to discredit the DFA but to contribute to existing efforts to improve employee conditions.

1.2 Definitions

The following concepts are put forward to situate the reader within the context of this study.

1.2.1 The South African Department of Foreign Affairs

This is the South African state department based in Pretoria that transfers most individuals to missions abroad. These missions are administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs. The aim of such missions is primarily to act as a channel of communication between the South African government and the government of the particular

country.

Other departments, such as the Department of Home Affairs, Defence and Trade and Industry also accredit officials to South African missions.

I did not differentiate among departments and the interviews were conducted with officials from all departments.

1.2.2 A Foreign Service Officer

The Foreign Service Officer is a South African person who represents South Africa in the international domain and who undertakes actions to promote and maintain an appropriate and desirable image of the Republic of South Africa. He/She is responsible for managing South Africa's external relations, informing the government about developments abroad which have relevance for South African decision-making and building the country's public image. The nature of the work encompasses:

- Representation: duties include attending official functions, negotiating agreements and treaties on behalf of South Africa and conveying messages from the South African government to officials of the host country.
- Foreign Policy: drawing up and submitting documents to the host country, attending international conferences, drafting background and policy documents and providing inputs for determining the RSA's foreign policy.
- Information: observing, reporting, analysing and estimating situations and developments in the host country in respect of political, economic, social, media and other actual affairs.
- Administration of the embassy, mission or consulate.

(These definitions and descriptions were provided by the Human Resources Section at the Department of Foreign Affairs, 1999)



1.2.3 A diplomat

A diplomat is defined as a well-balanced, self-fulfilled individual with a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the dynamics of his/her country of origin and the accredited country, with the capability of applying this understanding and knowledge in the best interest of the Republic of South Africa.

(Courtesy of Department of Foreign Affairs, 1999)

1.2.4 A mission

I refer to a mission when speaking of a formal South African government office that operates outside the borders of South Africa. A mission that has full ambassadorial status is called an embassy whereas a consular office headed by a consul-general, is referred to as a consulate. Thus the word mission refers to both an embassy and a consulate.

1.2.5 A hardship posting

Hardship, in the context of a specific country/countries, can be classified as those adjustment factors which affect the day to day lifestyle of an expatriate's family posted to a new location and which is different from what is available in their home country.

Ten factors are generally used by international companies to classify countries in hardship categories and are determined from the home country.

These factors are:

- 1. climate,
- 2. pollution levels,
- 3. health risks and services,
- 4. language and culture,



goods and services,
isolation,
social network and leisure,
housing (utilities),
education,
personal security, and
socio-political tensions.

(Courtesy of the Department of Foreign Affairs, 1999).

It is not clear from the definition of hardship countries how the degree of hardship in any one place is quantified. Yet, foreign allowances are based on a combination of cost-of-living analyses and degree of hardship. It seems to be difficult for the Department to rank order missions in terms of degree of hardship. At present though, there are three categories of hardship: namely severe, average and minimal. Degree of hardship also determines the number of trips that an official can take to South Africa per year or two-year period. The department provides the official and his family with air tickets to travel to and from South Africa.

Postings in the First World differ from hardship postings as none of the hardship criteria or factors listed above are applicable in the First World. In general, all amenities are of a similar or higher standard than in South Africa. In these postings home leave is generally granted after two years. In a severe hardship posting, an official and his family are granted return tickets to South Africa, along with three days' special leave, every two months.

By definition then a hardship posting presents an incompatible environment for a diplomatic family. But South Africa has a large and increasing number of hardship posts situated in the developing world. It would seem that some reluctance exists - for whatever reasons - among diplomats to fill these posts. This may leave the Department with a dilemma in filling hardship posts

or to fill these posts with motivated people. In general most people will happily accept postings to what will be a compatible environment for their families and few will welcome the idea of living with their families in an incompatible environment.

The 2000

The Department currently compensates its personnel in hardship posts by offering them financial incentives, additional trips to South Africa, and the airfreighting of grocery consignments. A policy of expecting all diplomats to alternate postings between the First and Third World was introduced at one stage but as far as I could determine it has now been withdrawn.

The additional trips to South Africa, designed to help people cope with excessive environmental demands, seem to have both advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages are: to continue their bonds of friendship; and to have the support of family life in South Africa. Moreover, such a visit serves the purpose of providing the family with a break from hardship conditions. All in all, continuous visits to South Africa confirm the official's culture and heritage.

The 2000

One disadvantage seems to be related to the frequency of trips. It seems that the more frequent the trips, the less likely it is that a family can really adjust to their local conditions, however hard these may be. They do not remain long enough in one place to adjust. It seems hard to create any kind of continuity within the expatriate community if a family is away one week in every two months. What serves as a solution to one problem can contribute to the next problem.

Furthermore it is financially draining for officials to travel so often as heavy costs are incurred. Officials do not maintain homes in South Africa. This means that a family has to impose on relatives or rent accommodation and transport. Neither seems to be an ideal option. Lastly travelling to and from

the Third World postings can be tiring as planes are often scheduled to depart and land between midnight and five in the morning.

These are human reactions and emotions. Some may be justified, others may be assumptions or perceptions. Since assumptions and perceptions shape behaviour, these statements and feelings brought me to the realization that an investigation into an understanding of the lives and expectations of Foreign Affairs families was justified.

1.2.6 Other nations

Major Western countries seem to provide a different kind of support to their personnel in hardship posts. For instance, American embassies have a regional resident psychiatrist who attends to the mental health needs of personnel. In the case of national disasters a team of psychologists is dispatched to the area to debrief victims (Personal communication by the American psychiatrist based in Cairo and covering East Africa, 1998).

The German Foreign ministry, I believe, instigated a similar study in the early nineties to assess the adjustment of German families. The findings were used to implement changes in living conditions (Personal communication by the German Ambassador to Ethiopia, 1998).

British families have a safety net at their Head Office in London which is run partly by spouses and backed by the British Foreign Office (Personal communication by a British spouse in Ethiopia, 1998).

Many foreign embassies offer some form of recreational facility for their nationals in hardship missions. For example, the Tanzanian embassy in Addis Ababa has a sports club for the use of the Tanzanian community.

1.2.7 Adjustment

Based on a social constructionist view, adjustment is neither an objective fact, nor a subjective experience. Adjustment can be viewed as “a set of linguistic possibilities within which social life comes to be organised” (Terre Blanche, 1999, p.3). Furthermore adjustment is the reaction to an experience that can become known in language. The way adjustment is conceptualised, by the individual, with due consideration of the often internalised norms of a significant group, will influence subsequent behaviour. Yet, it is a subjective experience that provides the substance of that which is languaged about as linguistic possibilities. This view situates the adjustment process in the realm of language.

Adjustment is a dynamic process as opposed to a fixed, unchanging given. All forms of life have the inherent ability to adjust in response to external demands, but when these demands are perceived as excessive, the capacity to adjust may become overloaded.

The next paragraphs deal with the aim and purpose of the study, followed by a description of the development of the research process.

1.3 Aim of study

The expressed aim of this study is to explore the adjustment of South African Foreign Affairs officials and their families who live in hardship posts. My observations and experiences, reflections and cryptic notes over many years had to be tested.

It is the purpose and objective of the Department of Foreign Affairs to prepare new families for postings abroad before their departure by way of lectures and workshops. As a clinical psychologist and as a diplomatic spouse with

Foreign Affairs exposure abroad, I have personally presented some of these workshops. These presentations sensitized me to individual differences in the experience of diplomatic postings.

Thus the purpose is to find a meaningful synthesis of personal adjustment stories in order to broaden and deepen the understanding of the experience of adjustment.

1.4 Procedure

I decided to gain firsthand information from diplomats and their families. To this end I travelled to seven missions in the Third World and conducted 28 interviews with 18 families, couples or single employees. All these participants were willing to tell me their stories of adjustment and to share their experiences as South African families in hardship postings with me.

1.4.1 Development of study

The study can be divided into several stages for the purpose of clarity. However these stages are not as distinct and separate as this discussion would have them, but overlapped and even took place concurrently.

1.4.2 The first stage

The first stage has already been briefly described in this chapter. Informally the first stage reflects my own experiences and feelings in Foreign Affairs over many years. These experiences and feelings became psychologically more meaningful after my training as a psychologist. This training combined with the lessons from a clinical practice, had a strong impact on my way of observation and thinking. In my first posting as a qualified psychologist, the scientific mind and scrutiny of my own observations of people, their



experiences within foreign contexts, sharpened my awareness. This brought the urge to study the lives of people in the often “overturned” world of diplomats in foreign missions.

1.4.3

1.4.3 The second stage

To study the lives and experiences of people in general implies complexity. These people are continuously in a process of adjustment as they are exposed to various cultures, religions, languages. They represent different subgroups (individuals, couples, parents, children, family) and live in small or big missions. They need to cultivate short-term relationships in foreign countries in order to have a social support system. There are so many variables that the task is almost impracticable.

1.4.4

During this stage I started to make a transition from the linear and positivistic philosophy to the processes and complexities of constructionist thinking. The discovery was a discovery of how my mind, unbeknownst to me, has always operated: amazed at differences, the virtual impossibility of comparison, the problem with language and description, my discomfort with the clear cut answers of the social sciences which based its principles on those of the natural sciences, and so on.

1.4.5

This “discovery” now for me consciously acknowledged, will be discussed more fully and in depth in the chapter on theory, as social constructionist thinking is the broad underlying paradigm for this thesis.

1.4.6

1.4.4 The third stage

1.4.7

A study of constructionist thinking brought me to the realization that I would have to personally come into contact with as many diplomatic families as possible in their natural contexts. In order to realize these interviews I

decided to visit a number of missions so that the study would be as naturalistic as possible.

I also wished to see and experience these hardship contexts for myself as an added form of “reality check”. The next task was to select a number of missions to visit.

Since I did not have, nor was I able to procure sponsorship for this study, I decided to use my travel privileges out of the North African mission where my husband and I were stationed at the time that I undertook this study. I therefore visited missions that were more or less within the range covered by my special travel privilege to South Africa. I was given special permission by the DFA to use my travel privilege in this way. For practical and financial reasons the missions were thus limited to a specific geographic area and included countries in the Middle East, Asia, North and East Africa.

1.4.5. The fourth stage: a reading of relevant literature

I started by reading international publications on international and national relocation and adjustment. This was important as I could discover no studies which focused on South African diplomats and their adjustments in hardship postings. I found one study on the adjustment of American diplomatic children and no study taking the context into account when considering adjustment.

This strengthened my resolve to focus on South African diplomatic families. Just as there are universal aspects to adjustment, I assumed that there are uniquely South African aspects that need to be identified in order to address this issue adequately.

A summary of international research findings is presented in the literature

review (Chapter Two).

1.4.6 The fifth stage

This stage, although overlapping with the previous four stages, represented the search for a theoretical foundation (Chapter Three).

This search was extremely important for me because in reading the research results on the issue of international relocation I felt dissatisfied for several reasons. Firstly, the majority of papers reviewed represented quantitative research findings. I wanted to have a qualitative focus and I did not know at that stage how to integrate quantitative research findings with my intended design.

However, as I proceeded with my interviews and started the interpretative process, I realised that several themes were familiar and were indeed covered by the literature reviewed. I decided to proceed with my interpretative design and to synthesize my findings with those from the literature, in the final chapter of this thesis.

Thesis

Underlying my dissatisfaction with the quantitative research and its positivistic tradition, was the realization that my orientation leaned towards a qualitative approach within the social constructionist paradigm. Thus I had to design my study *ab initio*.

Chapter

1.4.7 The sixth stage

Adjustment in hardship missions lies in the meaning that people attach to their experiences. The purpose of the study is a search for meaning, rather than law as in realist research. This stage represents the style of interviews and a consideration of questions such as the following:



- Who to include in the study and who to exclude, e.g. should I interview couples together or separately? Do I include interviews with the children and their parents, and/or as children in a group or individually?
- Do I conduct the interviews at home or at the mission office?
- How long should interviews last?
- How do I record interviews?
- Should interviews be structured, unstructured or both?
- How many hardship missions should be visited for a “realistic” view of the experiences of adjustment of South African people in a foreign context?
- Should the analyses be based on individual, couple or family experiences?
- How can I communicate about the experiences and effects of hardship postings on officials without being biased, or too optimistic and/or negative? I wish to add value to the formal preparation for foreign postings without risking to discredit the merit of the study through subjective bias.

These were only some of the questions for the preparation of the research and will be discussed at length in the chapter on methodology (Chapter four).

5 Outlay of the study

Chapter two represents a review of the current literature on international relocation and covers the soft issues of relocation. It is a wide field and the information is almost overwhelming in scope.

Chapter three addresses the theoretical basis for this study. The post-modern paradigm provides an introduction to social constructivist thinking which in turn is followed by a section on narrative research.

Postmodernism proposes to replace objectivist ideals with an ongoing critical stance towards the products of the human mind. Social constructionist theory proposes the idea that our beliefs about the world are social inventions and reintegrates the power of culture in the way a person is shaped (Hoffman, 1990). Narratives are the guidelines whereby people live. Therefore eliciting a narrative becomes a valid way of understanding how a person constructs his own reality.

Chapter four describes the research methodology and method of narrative analysis. This has been a process oriented study and in the absence of recipes the research model was almost created as the analysis proceeded, thus making it difficult to separate methodology from method. A qualitative design is best for an exploratory and interpretive study in search of meaning.

A collage of vignettes are presented in chapter five. It is composed of excerpts from the interviews and organised in terms of the critical moments of relocation itself. The discussion following these excerpts introduce the first stage of analysis.

Chapter six consists of the findings that emerged from the meta narrative.

Finally chapter seven, include a discussion of these findings and practical recommendations as lessons learnt from this study. The story of adjustment is presented as a complex story that has simultaneous and consecutive lines of a regressive, stability and progressive type of plot. A critique of the study is included as well as possible areas for future research.

1.6 Confidentiality

None of the transcribed interviews with all the officials are included in this



study for reasons of confidentiality. These fully recorded and transcribed interviews are separately bound and only available for the examiners of this study and for future researchers. The latter would need to apply for permission to read these transcripts at the Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria. Extracts from these interviews are however quoted in the study.

Consent forms were signed by interviewees, and an example is attached as an addendum.

I have also taken the utmost care to change names and scramble some data to ensure confidentiality. I recognize my ethical responsibility not only towards the individuals and families who participated in this study but also to the Department of Foreign Affairs of the South African Government.

I would like to emphasize that all interpretation is my own and does not reflect official Foreign Affairs opinion or policy.

I have used the pronouns he and she interchangeably throughout the text simply because I find reading he/she irritating. I hope I gave both sexes fair treatment.

Finally, the fundamental mission of the science of family psychology is to improve the quality of family life (Pinsof, 1992). Given the increased mobility of the world's work force, the relevance of such a project is enhanced.