

## CHAPTER FIVE

### COLLAGE OF VIGNETTES

#### 5.1 Introduction: The conversation is the author.

In this chapter the results are presented in the form of a new narrative, based on twenty five transcribed interviews. General patterns that emerged from the individual stories provide the structure of the new narrative. **This is not an attempt, however, to capture a specific or true essence, as postmodern thinking postulates that there are no essences or prior meanings hiding in stories.**

Furthermore knowledge changes in each moment of interaction. The extracts that are chosen for analysis are either quoted verbatim so that “the conversation is the author” (Freedman & Combs, 1996) or in the form of summarized portions of dialogue. These extracts represent the perceptions of interviewees at the time of the interview and as such reflect subjective experiences, not facts or truths.

The verbatim quotations allow for voices to be heard, giving the reader an opportunity to add his own interpretation. This metanarrative forms the basis of interpretation and analysis.

The reader may notice that respondents' excerpts are not presented in the same order in the different sections, nor is each section representative of all the interviews. This is done in an attempt to present each section as a story. It is the researcher's

intention to give meaning to themes that have built up over time as the interviews were assimilated and absorbed.

Secondly, the results are not intended to give a logical identification of the problems experienced by each person, but rather a general story representing a continuum of experience.

#### 5.1.1 A collage of vignettes

What is it *really* like to relocate to a hardship country if someone in your family works for a state department in Pretoria that relocates its employees internationally? This can be for a once only experience or it could represent the start of a lifetime of transfers. I shall present you with a collage of vignettes as a picture of the adjustment experience that approximates that reality, knowing that the reader brings his own imagination to the text (Riessman, 1993).

Each story starts with a retrospective look at the events that led up to the transfer, casting light on a person's motivation and attitude towards leaving. Looking backwards also gives us clues as to how we deal with the present and provides a yardstick for comparison with the reality encountered in a posting.

At the time of cutting and pasting to create the bigger story, I dreamt of a big picture consisting of many small pictures, each telling its own story. Thus there is a collection of stories and the collection also tells a story. Hence the collage of vignettes.

In the first part of these vignettes, the picture looks bleak and

negative. The interviewees' responses are filled with disillusionment, disappointment, even anger and bewilderment. Reading these vignettes one is at odd times struck by brief moments of adjustment: getting to know the foreign culture, new connections and relationships, though limited, with other officials or between South Africans.

Half way through these vignettes the picture changes, regardless of the hardship experienced. It seems as if the process itself has moved towards greater resilience, adjustment, and the acknowledgment of new identities, and of the value of family life as a supportive system in Foreign Affairs. When people adjust they seem to have less of a story to tell.

The reader is advised to keep this developing process in mind, rather than concentrating on single aspects of adjustment.

## 5.2 Pre transfer stage

It is policy to provide transferred personnel with a period of time for preparation and to present language training and preparatory courses which include spouses. However, in practice this period is often too short. Most interviewees commented on the brief time available for preparation and the difficulty of getting hold of the necessary information about the new posting.

There is often too little time to prepare and hence only the most pressing and concrete issues are addressed before leaving South Africa. But relocating to a foreign country is such an unknown

entity that a newcomer cannot even imagine what kind of mental preparation is required for such an experience.

### 5.2.1 First postings

At the time of my interviews, a system was in place whereby officials applied for specific posts. They were requested to provide a list of three choices. Since then the system is believed to have been changed and employees are currently transferred by the Department of Foreign Affairs, without any choices.

Let us consider some of the responses to my request for the story of a transfer.

**Eddy** says,

“Your buddies seemed to know more than you do. I was going to China and Australia. And then I was going to Portugal and stuff like that. When the penny did fall, it was *here*. You are going to -----”.

For Eddy the posting procedure seemed like a random process that had little to do with an employee’s preferences or capabilities. His choice of words, highlight the impersonal and arbitrary nature of the placement policy. His words create an impression of some senior person playing a game to determine where he would go. The posting procedure is further diminished as he says he is seemingly the last to know his destination.

Eddy says his ideas of the city were based on what he’d learnt at





school and he discovered that he had been under the mistaken impression that it was a modern city.

One has to read between the lines and note what Eddy omits as he likes to give an impression of being in control of his life almost to the point of fierce independence. He is motivated to succeed and does not like to admit that he might have felt that he was treated in a cavalier fashion. In spite of not feeling that he was placed in the mission for a specific and personal reason, his job satisfaction and motivation to complete his contract are not negatively affected.

For **Sharon**, who accompanied her husband, **Eddy**, leaving her home town and a close-knit family to spend 12 months in Pretoria, was a bigger emotional wrench than settling down overseas. Even so, she found that everything she had anticipated turned out to have been disappointing misconceptions.

The mission had an ethos of strong mutual support which provided Sharon with emotional security, almost replacing her own extended family that was absent in Pretoria. However external conditions required an adjustment process and the limitations placed on her own need requirements required another adjustment process.

**Barney**, whose first posting was to a country in East Africa, described his shocked reaction when he and his colleagues were told during training that none of their applications for specific posts had been successful. Soon afterwards he was told that he was destined for a post that had not been advertised within the department at all.



He believes he was manipulated into taking this particular post and had little choice but to accept, as he wanted to go out on a posting. However he felt as though he had been “stabbed in the back”, as he did not get what he asked for. This reveals a perception that you would get the posting that you request. A disappointment seems to be felt as betrayal.

Barney indicates that he felt anxious too as he was unsure of what was expected of him. After accepting, he kept on wondering whether he had taken the right decision but finally he and his wife decided they would “make a go of it”.

Barney reveals being disappointed with his posting before he left, unsure whether he should have accepted, unsure whether he was going to perform adequately and generally ambivalent about his situation. He feels resentful that his wishes had not been taken into account by the department at all.

**Vesna**, Barney’s wife and mother of three young children, had some experience of the diplomatic lifestyle as a young girl and remembered the positive aspects she had experienced in a first world posting with her dad. She recalls that at first she and Barney turned down the offer of a hardship posting as they would have preferred a “better” posting. Thinking they might be kept waiting a long time for another posting, they decided to accept it. A hardship posting was very much a second choice for this couple.

**John** describes joining the department “almost as if by accident”.



He was surprised when he was transferred to the Middle East. John must have had the lowest motivation for a transfer to a hardship posting of all the interviewees. Almost everyone else had joined their respective departments knowing that international transfers were part of the job description and implicitly choosing this mode of life.

John seems to have given his transfer a great deal of thought. He and his family experienced great isolation within the mission both socially and at work. His retrospective insights are incisive and angry. He had left Pretoria with an open mind but he was deeply angered by the treatment he and his family received. He points out many simple procedures that would have made their experience a more positive one. His anger seemed to be due to the irrelevance of his presence due to a decision taken on inadequate information, the lack of support for his family and the nature of bureaucratic bungling that made his problems worse instead of improving them.

The decision to send him to a new mission to provide technical backup in the region, was an arbitrary and geographical one according to John. He believes that too little was known about the region at the time to make an informed decision about where a technical officer should be based.

John and his wife, **Amanda** and their little toddler had been living in the Middle East for nearly three years at the time of the interview. John feels strongly that relocation is a “big thing” in people’s lives and that his head office had not handled it with due consideration. Indecisiveness, before the move, on behalf of his





employer had created "navoc" in their lives, by putting an entire family's lives on hold. John eventually came to believe that he was just filling a post and was not necessarily the right man for the place or the job.

His disillusionment contributes towards an attitude of just having to survive on a day to day basis until the end of his contract. He spoke of his intrinsic motivation to do a job with a sense of enjoyment as giving way to doing it purely for financial gain. And when the financial gain falls away, all that remains seems to be resentment.

**Mandla** applied for an African post as he wished to gain experience in African diplomacy. This statement reveals a job orientation that excludes personal considerations. Mandla does not regard the hardship aspects of his posting as a deterrent to his chosen profession. And as we shall see later these aspects had a profound effect on his family's life, making it impossible for the family to live together.

For **Jan**, a mature person who likes to take matters into his own hands, the period leading up to his transfer was quite different. Contrary to the Department of Foreign Affairs, his department offers few opportunities for outside postings. When he was approached and asked whether he would be interested in a posting in Africa, he was delighted even though, as he says, Africa would not have been his first choice. He could see it as an interesting opportunity from a work point of view and immediately started preparations. He adjusted his thinking to accommodate the possibility to work in Africa.





Jan contacted South Africans in this country as well as his counterparts in other embassies. He made enquiries about the schools and read up what he could about the country. Jan regarded this posting as a challenge which would give him personal satisfaction if he could live up to his expectations of himself. He convinced himself that his family would benefit from the exposure and brushed off evidence to the contrary as we shall see later. Jan proceeded to prepare for the transfer like a general might prepare for battle. His determination to succeed and his ability to function independently stand in contrast to Barney's ambivalence and self-questioning attitude.

They had started packing up, when the posting was cancelled. Jan and his wife, **Magda**, had by then set their sights on the move to this city, even though by all accounts it was not an easy place to live in. Still, the disappointment was keenly felt and lingered as a wish to at least visit the specific country.

Soon afterwards, Jan was offered a posting in East Africa. Jan knew little about this country and found it hard to do get hold of information. He managed to convince his employer that he needed to visit the country before he reached a final decision. This he did and visited the school, walked around for a week, made a video for his family back home and decided to accept the posting. He says he went home and announced to his wife and three children that "they would survive".

Two years were to pass between Jan's training and the actual transfer. He describes it as a very frustrating time for him as he



was taken out of his regular post and given odd jobs while he waited for the transfer. It seems that too long a period is counterproductive but too short a time is equally inadequate.

**Magda** welcomed the opportunity to be a full-time mother for their three children and to take a four year break from a full-time teaching job. She had to suppress her need or wish to have more time with her children while she had to work.

Their daughter, **Anna**, who was twelve years old at the time, went on with her life as usual. Talk of moving away from South Africa did not even seem like a remote reality to her until it happened. Is this a clue to the lack of interest in prior preparation that becomes keenly felt as a need once people arrive at the other end? In other words is it too hard to imagine that life could be different in all its small yet significant ways?

**Boet**, a son of eleven years, envisaged life in Africa as a kind of a nightmare until his father showed him the video he had made. The video gave the city an acceptable face. Apart from this, Boet did not give the move much thought until it happened and he had to bade his friends farewell. He was sad.

**Songo** visited D----- ahead of this first posting.

“ I was excited because I knew the place. I thought it was a challenge. It was going to be..... I was wrong because by then I was just alone. ... But when you came with a family it's totally different. If I can just say, I was excited.”

When Songo visited D-----, he thought it might be an exciting



experience for his family. He intimates that it was less exciting for them than for him. He had a challenge ahead of him and perhaps the difference lay in the fact that their challenges did not resemble his. The words, "I was wrong", indicate a contradiction to his expectation of a family who would be as excited as he was and feel the same challenge that he experienced. His words reveal a job orientation and enthusiasm for a new experience.

**Nongile**, his wife was definitely less excited:

"For me, you know, I had a problem. I didn't want to discourage him. In a way, for us, it was going to make our life sort of .... better in a way. We thought, well, let us go. Financially. ....But then of course I had seen on TV.....the minute you tell people that you are posted to X-----. It's.... " X-----, of all places!" Even from my own family, let me be honest. My uncle, oi, he wasn't very keen".

Nongile admits that the posting was problematic for her but that she set her misgivings aside to support her husband. What swayed her was the notion that the family would gain financially and led to her resigned statement: "Well, let's go". Immediately after this statement she switches to the expressions of shock by family and friends. She singles out an uncle who must have expressed serious misgivings. It is as if she is allowing others to express what she might have said or felt but could not admit to as it would have demotivated her husband and affected the integrity of her family. She set aside her own needs to take on a supportive role in accompanying her husband. She does not elaborate what her problem was with going to D-----, just intimates that there was a



problem.

**Susan** got married after she joined the Department of Foreign Affairs as a career diplomat. Both partners knew that diplomats are posted abroad, but neither addressed the issue. Susan says she knew that there was such a possibility, and that one day she would be confronted with the choice of accepting or rejecting a posting. But, at the end of the day, she would want to be posted abroad as this was her chosen career.

A year into marriage she decided to make enquiries about postings as all her fellow trainees had been posted abroad and she felt she had been ignored. At first she was told that all posts were frozen, and no-one was being sent out, but that two hardships posts were possibly available. She was asked to choose one, presuming it became available. She chose a post in F---, but her husband, **Johan** had taken the “frozen” post message seriously and did not anticipate a posting at all. One evening she received a call at home and was asked if she was ready to depart immediately. The couple requested to be given a month to prepare themselves and left amidst shocked reactions by family members.

I am beginning to think that the pressurized departure accompanied by excitement represents a period of temporary blindness to the reality of what lies ahead. The pre-transfer stage is definitely a turbulent and busy period in which the focus is more on getting everything and everyone to the other side than on reflection. That is up to family members. In the next section it will be seen that many arrivals are described as accompanied by a





sense of shock. Is this an expected reaction?

For Susan and Johan, the posting was not a possibility until it actually happened, and then they had a month to prepare themselves for the event. This meant they could only deal with the most pressing arrangements and they left in the good faith that Johan would be able to find something to do when he arrived there. As we shall see, that did not realize and it was to be a long road before he managed to find his feet.

Johan knew that Susan's work might require an overseas posting when he married her, yet he did not think that were many possibilities in a department that was in transition. On his part there was a measure of denial coupled with the belief that he would be able to keep busy in some entrepreneurial way. Susan underwent training and knew what would be required of her, but he had little notion of the reality of life abroad as the spouse of a diplomat. Since it seemed like a remote possibility, he was not motivated to inform himself.

Even so, he delayed starting a business enterprise in Pretoria exactly because of the possibility of a posting abroad. After a year he decided to start his own business. But two months later the posting materialized, and he chose to accompany her, this time at the loss of invested capital. He makes it clear that it was his choice, however costly it may have been. Both were eager about the opportunity.

Johan is acutely aware of the inadequacy of four weeks to prepare for spending four years of one's life in a foreign city. In retrospect



he realizes that many mistakes could have been avoided if they had more information.

Eg: Susan sold her car before they departed and once there, they realized it would have been the ideal car for their country of accreditation. This meant that they could only afford to buy one car whereas each had a car in South Africa.

Both read extensively about their country of accreditation before departure, but still felt ill-prepared for the reality of the life that awaited them. Johan would have appreciated a fact-finding visit in advance instead of an uninformed, blind arrival.

Susan had been prepared for her job but Johan was ill-prepared for life in a country that provided him with no means of earning a livelihood and nothing to do. Neither could have known how this would frustrate him, and what impact it would have on their marriage.

Chris and Lettie went on a first posting to a Middle Eastern country, accompanied by two teenage children and leaving two older sons behind. They left a settled life behind where they were very involved in a church community. Incomplete information about schools and mission regulations in advance - in spite of the fact that the mission was old and established - caused unnecessary problems for them too. The couple said little about their motivation to go on this posting and much about the disappointments and difficulties they experienced at the other side. The nature of their



complaints indicate that they must have expected everything to proceed as smoothly as they were used to in their settled existence in South Africa. They were disillusioned with the reality of a posting.

#### 5.2.1.1 Discussion of experiences of first postings

The motivation for going on a first posting is often a sheer sense of adventure, untempered by any notion of the reality that lies ahead. A good deal of idealism in terms of doing a significant job for one's country is included but is the first notion to be abandoned, if there is a perception that your input has comparatively little value.

Transfer procedures seem to play a tremendous role in determining how a person perceives his or her value to the respective department in South Africa. For a person who is prepared to spend a significant portion of his or her life in a foreign city, it seems important that motivation should be as realistic as possible.

**Barney** felt that he had been manipulated into taking a hardship post and consequently did not feel valued as a person who could make a unique contribution. Barney had never been abroad and had unrealistic expectations of what could be expected of him, both in terms of his work and living conditions.

**Susan's** first experience of being posted mirrored Barney's in the way that she had to put up a fight for a posting after all her contemporaries had been sent abroad, was told nothing was

available and given Hobson's choice. She could not have felt that her services were particularly valued, nor that any effort was made on behalf of the department to buffer the disruption that lay ahead in their lives.

**Johan**, felt that he was simply ignored at all stages and no-one seemed to care whether he needed to plan a life for himself or not. Then he had to find out first hand what his limitations were in F---

### 5.2.2 Subsequent postings

As motivation for working abroad plays a role in successful adaptation, it is not surprising that people who go on subsequent postings are more explicit about their motivation for accepting foreign assignments.

**Fred** and **Jo**, and their two teenage children, **Don** and **Anne**, took up a posting after careful deliberation. Fred knew it was "a sensible thing to do" as far as his family's finances were concerned. However they had spent three years in South Africa and the family was just beginning to feel that their roots were substantial when Fred was offered this posting.

Jo had gone back to her career after a break of many years and enjoyed her job tremendously. Their subjective needs were really to stay put and settle back into South Africa. Anne was settled after a two year period of feeling isolated and being miserable after their previous posting. Leaving again was a great disruption for Anne at age fourteen. Don, however, makes friends easily and has no



problem adjusting.

Thus, the psychological needs of the family were secondary to their need to improve their financial situation. Note that job satisfaction is not mentioned at all. Anne's difficulty in adjusting to a new country is accepted factually. The family is close-knit and supportive and has enough resources to help her overcome this aspect of their lifestyle.

**Bernhard** resents the difficulty he and his wife, **Louise**, experienced in obtaining information about the mission in D----- in advance, in spite of repeated requests. A post report was not ready even though the mission had been established four years previously. This lack of information impacted negatively on their need to be prepared.

Insufficient help from the Embassy, and specifically "when officials do not do their duty", is seen as the single factor that can colour an entire stay in a country.

Bernhard as the accompanying spouse related all the problems associated with settling down and supporting his wife in her duties as leaving him with too little time to pursue or further his own interests. Thus the supportive role does not sit easily with him.

All **Bonnie's** postings had been to countries with a strong religious ethic and the family was keen to return to that part of the world. When she was asked to go to a similar post, she "felt valued and wanted" and happy to oblige. It is interesting that she did not think



of her posting in terms of hardship, but rather as being a particular cultural world - a world she had grown to love and identify with based on positive past experiences. She is not aware of being in a hardship post. Pretoria seems like more of a hardship for her by comparison. There is a good person-environment fit due to an acquired love for another culture. She also has the perception of being sent to an environment where she functions well. She feels her needs are met and she is a happy worker.

Bonnie is the only employee who clearly loves her job and feels that she makes a difference to the lives of others. She works in a supportive capacity in the mission. Her husband **Jaco**, who has had similar training to her, runs the household and supports her work. The couple functions well in a complete role reversal.

**Oliver** and **Joan** were offered a hardship posting at a period in their family life when a "terrible choice" had to be made. Their older son did not adjust well in South Africa after doing matric abroad. This transfer to a "fundamentalist" country came at a time when their second son was in matric. Neither parent wanted to move him and risk a similar destiny for this boy.

And so it was decided that Joan would stay behind in Pretoria with her two sons. Life in this country is particularly difficult for a Western woman who is practically confined to her home and required to wear a veil should she venture out of doors. But, as Oliver experienced, it is equally difficult for a single man as there is literally nothing to do apart from work.

Oliver says, he only accepted the posting as the family was battling financially, not because he wanted to leave Pretoria or break up his family. This was to be the start of a two year battle to keep the family intact and to survive by himself. Oliver describes it as a life of sacrifice and compromise.

Joan speaks of this major decision in their lives as a “split” that was “dangerous”, one in which the couple lost touch with each other in spite of efforts to the contrary.

This is an example of an extreme hardship post presenting a career diplomat and his family with a serious dilemma. If they had not accepted the posting, the family would have suffered financially but by accepting the individual members endured emotional strain and trauma. In this case the need for financial improvement led to an unwise decision risking the integrity of the family.

At the time of the interview the couple had been together again for some months but preferred to see me separately. In the light of what was said I understood this to mean that the traumatic separation had left wounds that made it unsafe for either to speak freely in front of the other without risking further wounding.

They were still trying to reestablish a relationship after being apart in a way that both felt that one had suffered more than the other.

Their motivation for accepting the posting is somewhat similar to that of **Fred and Jo**. The difference is that they are sent to an extreme hardship post which meant that the family could not remain together. Jo and Fred’s family could remain together and



their children benefited from the opportunities at an international school.

**Bennie and Stella**, had come to their posting after a life spent in the liberation struggle. For them personally, life in their host country was not seen as presenting much hardship. Both felt that the rigours of life they had experienced in other places, had prepared them to accept any conditions. They have known food shortages and queues for essentials in the past, but found no shortages en poste, only a lack of variety and limited availability of specific items.

**Eddy and Angelique** also spent many years in the liberation struggle living all over the world. For them too, it is not a new experience to live abroad. **Angelique** was disappointed with a posting in the East as she would have preferred the First World. She was scared in advance as she had heard negative reports about the country.

**Deon and Sanette** and their family of two sons, Jack (17) and Elwin (15) and their daughter Suzy (12) had been living in a politically divided city for three years at the time of my visit. When Deon was transferred it was the first time that the family had to take school schedules and school years into account as the children were at an age that mattered. He was given three weeks notice to fill the post and it was in the middle of the children's school year. This meant that Deon had to leave before the rest of the family and he undertook the task of finding a home.



According to Deon the specific difficulties in this new mission cannot be known to the Department who seem to regard it as being similar to other major cities in the region, when in fact, the infrastructure is quite different and in fact, inadequate by comparison. Nor, it seems that the Department took their living conditions into consideration when calculating their allowances.

Sanette put forward the idea that Deon's experience of their new city, when he was by himself, differed from that of the rest of the family who came together as a group. This meant that they still have different perspectives on their experience. This theme of splitness within the family along various lines repeatedly manifested itself during the course of the interview. I later came to view it as an internalization of the split type of life they were leading in a deeply divided society. This does not mean that the family was not functioning well, it seemed to provide room for individual thought and opinion, which had a certain riskiness to it in the light of the split society they were living in.

**Stephen** and **Jenny** spent a longer time than usual in Pretoria, and even turned down a posting so that their older daughter could finish school. It was to be five years before Stephen was offered another posting at a new mission in the Far East. There is a perception at Foreign Affairs that if a posting is turned down, one is forgotten. This fear of being forgotten often contributes to the acceptance of undesirable postings.

The family had been home for "a very long, but enjoyable time", said Stephen. They were settled and happy. But as usual, the



financial pressure built up and they were pleased to leave, with their daughter now at university in South Africa and their son accompanying them. This was their first hardship post after a number of posts in the First World.

Jenny, a foreign wife, has a different experience of their time spent in Pretoria. She found the financial strain of life in Pretoria to constitute more of a hardship than life in a hardship country. She says they had no money in Pretoria and were very insecure about Stephen's job prospects in a department in transition. Being a foreign wife contributed to her stress as she has always felt unaccepted. She battled, but could not find a job. Furthermore she was suffering with health problems in South Africa.

The posting was seen as a saving for the family - in retrospect - as their living conditions improved considerably. She could not work and was saved from the stress of having to find a job as her husband's income was sufficient to keep the family.

**Elizabeth**, a career diplomat, was posted abroad after a particularly short stay at Head Office. She was torn between the need to spend some time in South Africa and the desire to take on a new opportunity. Even so it took her months to reach a decision.

"The whole three month period disrupted my life somewhat, I must admit".

Elizabeth's had to choose between furthering her career interests and satisfying her need to spend some time in her home country.

Both needs had their own prerogatives and choosing one above the other meant that she could fulfill only one at the cost of the other.

#### 5.2.2.1 Discussion of experiences of subsequent findings

It is very difficult to remain clear about the motives of people who go out on subsequent postings. It seems that little idealism is left about serving one's country, and the emphasis becomes financial survival for a family. As we have seen, many compromises, such as families having to live apart for long periods, are made due to different family needs. The financial benefits that can be had abroad constitute a strong motivation for leaving.

A close-knit family, (like Fred, Jo & children) however, provide a supportive system and possibly psychological resources to adapt to a foreign lifestyle. Work motivation (Bonnie) seems also to be supportive, with a husband (Jaco) who has a flexible behavioural style, leading to acceptance of another culture.

Bonnie, however, was motivated by positive experiences in prior postings, and was not particularly keen to remain in South Africa. She and her husband like the diplomatic lifestyle and prefer it to life in South Africa. Some families mention sacrifices of some kind, such as giving up a comfortable home and a sense of connectedness/rootedness in Pretoria, but we will see that the families who did not have to split up and whose children could do their schooling from home even when abroad, like Fred and Jo's family, fared better on average than families who were forced to



split up, like Oliver and Joan's family because of conflicting needs and extreme hardship conditions.

### 5.3 Arrival stage

The arrival itself signifies the crucial moment when expectations meet reality.

**Johan** describes the first stage as being a shock both physically and psychologically.

**Eddy:** "It's initially a major shock".

**Amanda** experienced shock that was followed by a sense of desperation when she found herself existing in a virtual vacuum, isolated from anyone who was like her and cut off from her former activities. **Joan** describes a similar experience and tells us how she tried to convince herself that she was coping when she knew she was not.

For **Johan** the shocked phase lasted eighteen months as he kept on discovering new things that shocked him all over again. But it seems as if he is referring to the cultural aspect of adjustment and not necessarily to the shock at being confronted with difference and feeling very foreign.

#### 5.3.1 First impressions

**Susan** remembers the drive from the airport to the hotel in detail.

There were masses of people about even though it was well



after midnight. She was struck by the numbers of people who were sleeping on the hard cement sidewalks under pathetically thin sheets. How does a human body get used to such a hard surface, she wondered. The traffic was heavy and cars were crawling around potholes without head lights.

Trying to open the windows of their hotel room the next morning, introduced her to the cacophony of incessant hooters and the cawing of crows.

### **Sharon** on arrival

“I did have this misconception of this wonderful place.....I was very, very disappointed when I got into the airport, the whole family was. It was this gloomy, dusty, dirty place that loomed outside. It wasn't what I expected. Driving to the hotel.....it was even worse. We saw the way people live.....it was really pathetic”.

Sharon describes a rude awakening upon arrival that shatters all the fantasies she may have had about the new country in an instant.

**Eddy**, Sharon's husband says, the difference between his expectations and the reality of the city, “hit me like a block of ice in the face”.

This is a strong image, suggesting stunned shock. If Eddy had been prepared to like his imagined version of the city, how can he now like a reality that is clearly unattractive and offputting?



**Barney** was confronted with “difference” and heat when he and his family landed at the airport in X----- . His first reaction was to wonder what he was bringing his family to. He felt unprepared for the reality of life in this East African country. He appreciated being collected from the airport, but had a second shock when the airport’s lights went out unexpectedly.

The next shock was finding themselves in a rather dirty hotel room. A fruit basket and cot for the baby were welcome, but Barney lay awake all night worrying whether he and his family would cope in this strange country. He had fears of their baby contracting malaria. He wondered whether the country had anything to offer them.

The first morning is equally well recalled. The intensity of the heat was overpowering. He has memories of dirt, of ants in the sugar bowl and a sense of being caught up in an experience that was simply outside his frame of reference.

Barney experienced the arrival as a complex awareness of small things that seemed to strengthen his pre-existing doubts about the wisdom of accepting the posting. Each experience, and reaction to it, served to magnify his ambivalence towards this posting before he had even reached the office.

It is perhaps important to note the effect of a story told retrospectively. As he did eventually ask for an intermission transfer, it could be that this negative slant and enumeration of

events are really designed to set the stage for the eventual decision to leave for another posting and to justify his behaviour to himself and to me.

For **John and Amanda** the complete absence of hospitality and support by the mission marred their arrival and cast a shadow over their entire stay. As a non-mainstream diplomat, John had to carve a niche for himself within the mission and so the couple was equally alone during the first months. They realised that they could either support each other or make it worse by blaming the other.

**Chris and Lettie** described the initial period as “extremely painful” and marked by obstacles. The beginning is “a time of disorientation, confusion and a feeling of strangeness”. It is a period when “one gets lost often and loses confidence”.

It seems that this couple experienced only the bewilderment Bonnie describes further on, but none of the excitement of being in a new place.

**Bernhard and Louise** were taken straight to their new home along muddy and poor roads and found their house in “a horrible state”. Cobwebs and rats provided the only welcome. It was a dismal and depressing arrival.

The shock of a substandard house that had been stripped of items of furniture by other staff members and having to deal with a landlord who was reluctant to fix anything, awaited them. This was the greatest adaptation issue for Bernhard and Louise, initially.



Bernhard and Louise describe an impersonal and inhospitable arrival coupled with a home that was below par. What they are describing is a complete lack of concern for their well-being that gives them an inkling of the kind of mission that awaited them.

“We had to get things running; get air conditioners going; figure out how to work the generator. There was no manual for any electronic apparatus. No remote controls for the air conditioners. And when you come from a cooler place to a tropical climate, it is *hell*. Because you are sweating and uncomfortable all the time. You got to change your clothing all the time, until you get used to it, sort of”.

Bernhard touches on the physical aspect of adjustment, namely the way a body reacts to moving from one climatic extreme to another. His use of the phrase “until you get used to it, sort of” suggests that a person’s body adapts eventually to a new climate and learns to be less aware of it. The “sort of” qualifier indicates that for him this process of getting used to the climate is only relative.

Unlike Barney, **Bonnie and Jaco** associate the first two months in any posting with the excitement of new experiences. However Bonnie remembers too that the initial phase is also accompanied by a sense of bewilderment. You feel a little unsure of yourself - and that can be somewhat depressing - until a new routine has been established.

In far away T-----, **Joan** looked around her hotel room on day one when her husband left for work and thought:





“It’s going to be me and my son.....and whatever I make of it, is up to me. I was on my own”.

Joan appraised the situation after arrival as one in which she was completely alone. She had only herself as a resource in the absence of a social support system, combined with an absent husband, and no family in a foreign context. She creates the impression of a person who is stripped of all her props and now has to perform or fail.

**Elizabeth’s arrival:**

“I was overwhelmed by the size of the place. Having lived in the Middle East before, I thought I knew a little. I didn’t have any illusions about C----- at all, I knew very little, but I thought I knew a bit about the region. But C----- is unique. And that was a big surprise, maybe even a shock. I really didn’t like it in the beginning. It took me a good six months. I was really negative.”

Elizabeth based her expectations on experiences in other parts of the region and was still disappointed. It would seem that it is not possible to construct a set of realistic expectations in advance. The blow is somewhat softened by her prior experiences as she speaks of surprise that borders on shock. But for everyone shock is followed by dislike.

5.3.1.1 Discussion of arrival stage: first impressions



To summarize it can be said that upon arrival in a hardship post, most people expressed shock at what they found. No-one seemed prepared for:

- the impact of a different climate;
- the number of unexpected obstacles to be overcome;
- the disappointment of unmet prior expectations;
- the acute sense of isolation, strangeness and disorientation;
- the ongoing nature of “shocking” discoveries; and
- the psychological impact of pervasive poverty; and
- the inability to find much to like or appreciate.

The literature (Dunbar 1992) speaks of a “honeymoon phase” at the outset of adjustment but in this study on adjustment in hardship posts, it was the exception to speak of an initial excitement or entrancement with what was found. The overwhelming effect of a sharp difference between the known and the unknown, the unexpected nature of such differences coupled with negative perceptions, resulted in a more common reaction of shock.

For some this shock was nevertheless tinged with excitement at least during the first month, due to an expectation of new experiences. This excitement soon gives way to a bewildering phase when one is simply at a loss. This phase is often accompanied by feelings of depression and anxiety about the ability to cope.

Most couples report feeling stress and this stress is played out



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