

as mother and wife. She cannot fulfill both at the same time as her husband is in one place and her children in another. However the two are committed to making the situation work as well as they can.

5.5.16 The experience of the spouse

This section covers a variety of responses. The biggest adjustment seems to be required on a first posting and in postings that offer virtually nothing to do. A career person has an enormous adjustment as it is not possible or even allowed to work in foreign countries and this is not always fully comprehended at the outset. Most mothers seem to welcome the opportunity to spend time with their children, but for some it is not enough.

In some countries regulations have been changed to allow for spouses to work. But in the Third World it seems not so simple.

Sanette:

“If you are in a country where the culture is totally different, where you have language problems and so on, it’s just not practical”.

Magda worked full time until the family was transferred. As a mother she always felt guilty that she could not give her children more support during crisis periods. As a result she welcomed this opportunity. But at the same time she is a person who needs to keep busy and very quickly became involved in many activities. Looking back, she says she should perhaps have given herself time to adjust before getting so busy. Jan counters that these activities helped her to adjust. Magda finds her life enjoyable and likes having



an international group of friends. She has not missed her job and wonders whether it will be possible for her to go back to what she was doing before. In spite of keeping busy, she misses intellectual stimulation.

“I find it easy to find things to keep my hands busy but not my head”.

This is a refrain I heard from many accompanying spouses in all parts of the Third World.

5.5.16.1 Boredom

Jenny tells us that the single biggest problem for a spouse in a hardship post is boredom. **Johan** and **Oliver** concur. **Amanda** says the spouse has to recreate a life for herself with very few building blocks and that is a big issue.

A spouse has to create a life .

“You find that lots of people say there’s nothing to do in B----. There IS nothing to do in B-----. You got to go out there and do things. You can’t just sit at home and say something to Santa”.

Stella advises a spouse:

“ To get into something solid so that you feel yourself worthwhile”.

Stella touches a core issue here. For the woman who needs to feel that she spends her life doing something “worthwhile”, the

diplomatic life does not offer much, especially once raising children is completed.

Joan:

"I think the major problem in any post, not just a hardship post, is having too much time on your hands. It is so *dangerous* and also so disruptive in your life, because in that time you think about 'poor me'. You focus a great deal on yourself and how hard it is. If you don't get out there and do something for yourself as soon as possible, you get into a self-pity rut very quickly. And you become a tremendous burden on your husband who is trying very, very hard to do the new job. When the wife becomes involved in self-pity and she's miserable, then the husband dreads going home. So you have husbands working long hours to avoid that. Because the wife is just not occupied".

"You need a reason to get up for in the morning. Not just to get a call from your husband to say: now we've got to go here or there. I *cannot* believe that anyone can get satisfaction from staying at home. I can't believe it. It's impossible. You *need* to talk to others".

Joan addresses the need for women to be connected to others in order to be happy as well as having something useful to do. When neither happens, there is a risk to the marriage.

Oliver contrasts hardship postings with life in the first world where his wife was happy:

“She loved it there. Every day when you get up, you don’t have to scratch your head and say what do I do today”.

Nongile:

“Your mind becomes so stagnant. There is nothing that you are doing, that’s constructive. At least, with them, (men) they’ll be getting something from Head Office to deal with. With us as spouses, nothing”.

Vesna was busy in an African posting but says that B---- has nothing to offer a spouse. Yet she has

“the freedom of staying at home and doing stuff at my own pace. I appreciate just being at home. Hm.....for me to know that I was always available when my children needed me”.

“But I need to do something to keep the mind occupied, so that I am not totally preoccupied with the children.”

Many spouses use the opportunity to study correspondence courses.

Stella says her issue is to try and keep busy and she only manages partially.

“It’s not what I want, just what I can”.

Stella continues:

“I gave up a fulfilling job and now I am sitting in my husband’s shade”.

This has been a huge change for Stella. During her life in exile,

which involved long absences from her husband, her work sustained her. She had to be strong and self-reliant and is now learning how to indulge herself and what to do with so much time to herself. She also has to learn how to relate to her husband again as it was not always possible for them to live together.

Johan intended to start a business enterprise in B---. He knew he would not have much to do and would have to generate his own options. He tried various undertakings but nothing materialized and eventually his energy for trying dried up. He became frustrated and then depressed and tried to avoid the reality of having nothing to do, by not getting up at all in the morning and started to drink alcohol during the day.

He says **Susan** understood his dilemma but did not experience it. She was his only sounding board, but reached "saturation point" when she ran out of ideas.

After a year he could not handle his situation anymore. Johan could not envisage a solution at all and was scared of losing his mind. He had started thinking of jumping out of the apartment's window. That is how bad it was for him.

At this stage, the crisis had assumed insurmountable proportions. For Johan it was the most difficult period of his life and he found it painful to talk about. He packed his bags and returned to South Africa. The couple decided to separate because of the impossibility of their situation. But once in South Africa he realized that removing himself from the one problem - the fact that he could not work and the effect it had on him - created the next problem. He did not like being away from his wife.

Even so, he set himself up again at some cost and found a job in Pretoria. He then found that he was worried about Susan. It was too difficult to be married and so far apart, yet to return to the same situation would have impossible.

The crisis was resolved when he was offered a non-official job in the mission at a small salary. He returned and this changed his life completely. Johan says he would have done the work for free as it meant so much to him. He could recover his sense of self worth along with a feeling of accomplishment. He felt less shut out of his wife's world. His life started taking on meaning again after a long period of feeling useless and of wasting his life. He welcomed being able to contribute to the household budget, even if it was in a small way.

Johan's biggest problem during the posting, was his inability to find work. But Susan believes his biggest problem was his inability to deal with not working. She sees it as a problem of inner weakness whilst he sees the problem as circumstantial and due to external factors.

Whatever they choose to believe, it is clear that this crisis pushed the relationship to its limits and they were dangerously close to becoming another divorce statistic. By telling us about it we can understand how one relationship almost floundered in spite of a loving foundation.

This marriage came to the edge of destruction when one partner was in crisis. This crisis was the direct result of finding nothing to do. Now that both are reasonably fulfilled, the marriage can survive

again. Everything was problematic at that stage, Johan says. Even a silly thing like shopping became an unbearable issue

5.5.16.2 Emotional and financial dependence

Joan, speaking of hardship posts, says you cannot rely on your husband for all your friendship/emotional needs,

“because then he begins to *resent* you. *I’ve* had that. It’s not healthy”.

Mutual dependence seems to work for couples, but if one partner relies more on the other, the relationship becomes skewed and unhealthy.

Sharon is still uneasy with having given up her financial independence. She feels it skews the power balance in her relationship with her husband.

5.5.16.3 Isolation

Joan tells of a young mother in T----:

“When I visited, I used to phone her and she used to talk non-stop. It was not a dialogue but a monologue. She had to talk, talk, talk. She was coping, but she found it *hard* to cope. The alternative was too awful to imagine. She said: you know, sometimes a week passes and I don’t even get out of my home.....”

Joan says it is good to realise that the wives of the international

community find themselves in the same boat as you do and to seek them out.

Susan sees the isolation in a wider context. She is isolated by her Head Office, isolated from the positive aspect of experiences by her husband's negative focus and those in the mission. This has made her life rather lonely and self-sufficient.

5.5.16.4 Lack of information

Johan says that in retrospect his biggest hurdle to adjustment was not having specific information as far as his activities would be concerned. But he adds that it was difficult to be interested in such detail before the transfer had become a reality.

5.5.16.5 Discrimination against non working spouses

Bernhard resents a simplistic and discriminatory attitude towards a male spouse as someone who has nothing to do and who sponges on his partner.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is perceived as hindering the (male) spouse when he attempts to get involved in a financial enterprise when abroad.

In a similar vein, **Louise** says:

“It is very acceptable for the woman to follow the husband's career and it's not the other way round. A few times Bernard found something that he could possibly get involved in, that would maybe bring in money. It was always squashed.

Louise says her husband had to deal with all the stressful aspects of their moves (they had to move house three times in two years) and the problems he encountered in a supportive role, especially when she was HOM. This left him with little time to do what he wanted to do.

5.5.16.6 Opportunities

Bernhard says he feels that his

“vital years are slipping away. His friends are advancing in their careers, his wife is advancing in hers with his support” and

“ I am just treading water. I am going nowhere. I am not doing a damn thing. I may be getting basil to grow and I might be perfecting the Spanish tortilla, but I haven't got much satisfaction in the last few years. And I *hate* it when people ask me at cocktail parties what I do with my time. So that is true. I am unhappy”.

Louise wants spouses to know in advance that it can be tough and that divorce is not the solution.

Magda appreciates the opportunity to be a full time mother instead of having her attention divided between work and home, as it was in Pretoria.

Sanette says it is just not feasible to expect to work in the Third World. In R---- the language barrier would be the first impediment. In the second place, she'd hate to take a job away from a local

person. Sanette belongs to an international group of women who meet monthly and form various interest groups. She has found it interesting and challenging to be part of this group and has enjoyed the opportunity of going places and doing things she would not have done by herself. She has found these activities enriching on a personal level.

It was a tough decision for **Jenny** to give up her career as a teacher to accompany her husband on his posting.

Songo:

“We thought to keep her profession going, at the same time, she could do some voluntary teaching at schools. What we noticed was that it would be difficult for her sometimes, because the level of English in primary schools would be quite a big problem. Even if she was to help out, she would battle with that”.

5.5.16.7 Role reversal

Jaco says;

“I gave up my life, my work, everything.....to follow a woman!”

At first his friends thought it was an exciting thing to do but six years later they considered him crazy as he was without a job and had nothing. Jaco believes that they have no idea of what he had gained. Even so, he found the first year difficult due to unclear roles. The complete role reversal was a new experience for him and he had to find his own way out in the absence of guidelines. He now

has a sense of accomplishment as an accompanying spouse. He feels useful as he believes his role as an actively involved parent is good for their daughter. Having a child helps him meet people with similar interests. He is proud of his contribution towards a fund-raising effort for which he prepared South African dishes. He is happy with his own social network.

Jaco believes the lack of ambiguity around their roles, has made it easier for them to adjust.

“She cannot cook and I do not bring in money”.

Mutual support and good listening skills further contribute to their adjustment. The challenge for diplomatic couples seems to lie in achieving a good working relationship in which inequalities are balanced out to mutual satisfaction.

Bonnie and Jaco have reversed traditional roles: Bonnie works and is motivated by the need to support her family and Jaco supports her entirely by taking over traditional “female” duties in his role as house husband. He looks after their daughter, he does the catering and runs the household. He acts as sounding board for his wife when she comes home and believes he is particularly suited to the role as he had the same training in administration as she did.

Jaco wants to hear about his wife’s problems and to help her fight those battles. He admits that he can become too involved in her issues. I found a similar dynamic between Bernhard, a non-working spouse and Louise. He also invested a great deal of energy in his wife’s battles and was not particularly helpful! His way of demonstrating solidarity with her issues would be by wanting to fight



her adversaries.

Amanda, like Bernhard, had the same qualifications and experience as her husband. She also did the tests and believes that she performed better than some of the people who were transferred, but was ignored. She wonders whether a spouse is automatically ignored?

She believes that being married means that you are no longer seen as an individual. However she appreciates the opportunity to be a full time mother to her little daughter.

Susan thought their baby would help **Johan** adjust by keeping him busy. She was very disappointed to realize that he was not interested in spending time with their baby.

5.5.16.8 Someone's spouse

A spouse is not always included in invitations to social functions.

Louise dealt with it by not accepting invitations which excluded her husband.

Vesna experienced the opposite. She feels as though she has been thrown together with her husband and cannot have a separate life. She says she can either go out together with him or not at all. She misses having her own life.

“You are not considered as an individual. You are someone's spouse”.

Oliver was aware of how his long hours away from home impacted on his wife who had the opposite situation: nothing to do, no contact with anyone and living in a foreign country. It almost wrecked their marriage.

Sharon finds that her husband's diplomatic duties keep him away from home and that she has had to adjust to being a "homebody".

"I have never stayed at home. I've always been a person that works. And this is the hardest. I've had to adjust to not getting up in the morning to go in for a full day's work. We are here for a year now and I actually, my person took a pounding. I've never been dependent on my husband before. Now, he looks at me and says: 'what have I done for the day', as if.....am I contributing?never mind, you're preparing a meal in the evening, or you picked up kids, helped with homework. You still feel less a being. I would say that you are now basically 'a nothing'. That there, for me, is the hardest. At the back of my mind, I've still got this thing, that I am not a whole person".

In spite of feeling "incomplete" or perhaps because of it, Sharon is also studying through UNISA, volunteer work, professional catering, manicures and pedicures for friends, housework, looking after her daughters and so on. None of which makes her feel like a complete person.

"You've given up your independence. I think it gives the man extra power and they can manipulate you in whichever way



they want”.

Nevertheless, she is doing all these things so that she will not go home with a blank curriculum vitae. For her, adjustment is contingent on creating dreams for herself that she will be able to realise when she returns home. She is using the time in B----- to prepare herself as far as she can. She has started several ventures and will continue with whichever proves successful.

Joan, after a lifetime as a diplomatic spouse, suggests that the way to cope is by forging an identity for oneself.

“You’ve got to be something”.

Merely by saying so, she underlines **Sharon’s** experience of feeling like a “non-person”. She also intimates that this does not happen by itself but that it requires an active effort to take place.

5.5.16.9 Summary

I interviewed three male accompanying spouses, two of whom had serious adjustment issues. Both men were feeling unfulfilled. The third one had come to make the lifestyle work for him by taking on a supportive and complementary role to that of his wife.

The female accompanying spouses reflected a similar picture that is softened by motherhood which inherently satisfying and enough for several of the spouses. The others enjoy motherhood but do not find it fulfilling enough. The major complaint is the lack of things to do for an accompanying spouse.



5.5.16.10 Change in identity - relationship with self

Stephen believes he has become more flexible in his personality. Living in J----, he has not found it possible to adhere to his learnt notions of right and wrong. Instead he has become aware of “a large grey area”. He realizes it would have been much more frustrating for him if he had not adapted in this way.

Stephen had to decide whether to stay in his chosen career after transition in South Africa. He describes the process: being more flexible carries the risk of losing self respect if you need to adapt more than you would have under different circumstances, and if others see you as staying in a situation because you are too weak to leave. So an internal battle is fought between ego-dystonic change and the need to adapt in order to survive. He had to redefine the reality of staying (versus leaving) as a decision that requires more strength that leaving would have required.

Louise says the difficult experiences she has had to endure had confronted her with herself in a novel way. She had to reject old ineffective coping mechanisms and learn to put her own best interests first - or sink.

Gain takes place once you have come to terms with losses.

“There is a lot of hardening in a positive way”, says **Bernhard**:

He believes he has lost his naiveness and has turned into a slick traveller, undaunted by financial systems, medical or language problems. He is “not intimidated by the fear of being a foreigner any

more”.

Johan believes that he behaved abnormally during the first two years in M--- due to the specific and abnormal circumstances that made it impossible for him to work. When the circumstances changed to make it possible for him to be productive, he reverted to normal. The experience has helped him to mature through discovering his own limitations. He discovered that he can push himself further than he thought he could, though he still prefers to operate within a safer comfort zone.

Amanda, who suffered from depression - like Johan - also speaks of discovering her own limitations. She had always thought she needed to rely on someone, but learnt that it was not necessary.

Jaco speaks of becoming comfortable with his own roots. Even though he functions in English, he has had to research Afrikaans and South African culture in order to enlighten foreigners about this heritage. This process has made him more sure of his own identity.

Sharon has not managed to equate a busy life with a feeling of fulfillment. She speaks of feeling less than a whole person since she is financially dependent on her husband and unable to plan her own spending. She has lost her status as his equal, since she cannot contribute to the household.

Eddy has had to learn to compromise AND not to think of compromising as synonymous with loss.

“Sometimes it is for the good of all concerned”.

Oliver says he had to learn to survive without his family in an extreme hardship posting.

“Nothing can shock you anymore. This is it. What more can you do to me?”

He laughed ruefully as he spoke. He had “bottomed out”. When he found out that his next posting was in a country torn apart by political strife and unrest, he was elated. It was not as bad as Z---- and he could be together with his wife again.

Bonnie says you get to know different and unknown parts of yourself when you are faced with a different culture. She believes you change when you realize that the new culture is not wrong, just different. By exposing yourself to this difference in an open way, you reappraise your own thinking, beliefs, value system and ultimately your lifestyle. She believes that the final decision lies with the individual and is based on what is suited to that individual and, in turn, determines what she takes on. For Bonnie this change is seen as culturally enriching. She has experienced a weakening of her own cultural ties as she has started appreciating other lifestyles.

She no longer accepts anything in an unquestioning manner. She says that religion has become less important to her than leading a moral life, which has come to include a Middle Eastern notion of what constitutes good and bad behaviour.

Jo describes a process of adjusting to a local norm that constituted

foregoing certain values. She prefers doing things herself to giving orders, but this was frowned upon in B----. Initially it was hard for her to accept this.

“Then you start realising later.....I start demanding things from people. You become what they make you. Then you start becoming unreasonable. You know, / am the foreigner. / am the person of status. *Why* aren't you serving me already?

Fred says he dug his heels in and refused to accommodate local customs which clashed with his own norms.

“I've almost been a poor adapter in that I've insisted on certain things, with few exceptions”.

He maintained his value system and preferred to live with a constant experience of disillusionment and even disdain. He admits he has written off the entire nation as simpleminded and backward, yet he enjoys living there. I have included Fred's contribution in this section - which seems to be the opposite of the heading - precisely as it illustrates an idea of self-image stability as conducive to an easier adjustment.

And thus change is almost unavoidable if you wish to adjust and become tolerant of difference. The notion of choice is inherent as there is no stopping anyone from following Fred's way.

Johan too says he does not believe he has changed. What has changed, is his situation which has merely normalised. This allowed him to return to his own normal level of functioning. He adds that he

has matured and discovered that he can push himself much further than he thought he could. He admits he has acquired a bad temper which he cannot shake off.

And then he reveals how he had become convinced that he was turning into an alcoholic at the peak of the adjustment crisis. When his circumstances changed, he could stop easily, to his eternal relief. But he says there was a risk - and a fear - of becoming an alcoholic.

Barney:

“ The fact that I can accept so much dirt around me.....is definitely a change. I am getting a bit lazy as well, because now, we are not doing a lot over weekends. Sitting around. Hanging around. Even during the week, you cannot produce the same results. You're battling. Your whole life is a battle”.

Like Stephen, **Songo** has learnt tolerance in Z---- and believes he is reacting less emotionally than before. But **Nongile**, his wife, says the market place has taught her to be tougher.

Susan has become more assertive in her personal life whilst more tolerant of outside differences. She realises that her greater assertiveness has corroded her connectedness to her husband and family as it has made her less accommodating.

As people change in order to cope with their new set of circumstances, they risk growing away from those they love and relationships are put at risk.

5.5.17 Diplomatic Families

Are diplomatic families any different from families who do not move about the world? I think so, yet it is debatable.

Stephen and **Oliver** believe a hardship post is toughest for the spouse and children. However it is even harder for a family man who has had to leave his family behind and finds himself alone like Oliver. Bachelors would cope better in a place like B----, says Stephen.

Fred and Jo contribute their family's good adjustment to the closeness enjoyed within the family and their Christian faith.

"You've got a basis from which to evaluate things and to evaluate yourself".

5.5.17.1 A close family

Several families described their family functioning as being particularly close and emotionally supportive. The closeness is attributed to *a unique shared history* according to **Deon** whose family has been on the move since their children were born.

Jan, who went on posting for the first time after living in one place for many years, speaks of this closeness as *a survival mechanism* that is especially needed at the beginning of the family's sojourn but that falls away as the family members start stabilising.



But in a highly mobile world, the family becomes the only aspect of life that remains the same.

Elwin(15):

The only *stable thing* is our family. I mean schools change, houses change, countries change, languages change.....everything except for the family”.

Deon:

“We have less of a life outside the family than we might have had if we had always stayed in the same place. We would have been less dependent on one another emotionally.....whereas here, *everything* has to happen within the family because that’s where it’s at”.

“The security in the last resort is in the family”.

This degree of closeness and adjustment that relies on slotting into an international community, raise questions. What happens when these children try to readjust into a more stable and non transient community? What takes the place of the emotional dependence that they are used to when they leave home? Are they prepared for it?

In spite of the closeness, **Sanette** describes Deon as an absent father because of work pressure.

“I have to do more because he is not here. The children would benefit from not being exposed to me so much. They might like to have other inputs as well”.

Anna at fourteen had stronger relationships with her peers in South Africa than with her family. After the transfer, she had to learn to turn to her family for emotional support, until she had reestablished friendships among her peers and settled down.

Anna remembers:

“It was difficult to form conversation. It was difficult to speak to my parents and my brothers. I was not used to it. But I was dependent on them for emotional stimulation. I never told them everything, but now I *had* to.....it was necessary for my personal survival”.

“We are in the same boat and we can support one another. It was not a nice adaptation but it was worth it”.

Magda describes their family functioning in South Africa as quite different. Every family member was involved in his own life, each busy doing his own thing. Each one more or less, going his own way. In D----, the family spends far more time together and is more involved with one another. They are more dependent on one another. Magda says she does not look forward to returning to the old way of functioning when the family returns to South Africa.

However, **Jan** says the increased degree of mutual interdependence was higher during their first year than it was at present, three years later.

5.5.17.2 A closed system



Jaco, Bonnie and their young daughter, **Samantha**, consider themselves a nuclear and self-sufficient unit. They are aware that their self reliance had made it difficult to accord a place for a grandmother back in South Africa “as we’d learnt to cope without her”. Neither parent knew how to facilitate grandmother’s reconnection within the family. (Susan on the other hand, was happy to cultivate this nuclear family as she wanted to minimize family interference.)

But then Samantha exercised her say and demanded to have a granny. Her parents relaxed and learnt to value the time they could have alone with each other. They described it as a rare luxury, which ended when they were transferred again.

After many years abroad Bonnie describes her family ties as weakening and as needing conscious effort to reintegrate family members back into her life. She says her mother was hurt by “the lack of attention” as she had expected their relationship to return to an earlier footing. Bonnie experienced this demand as an invasion of the family’s space.

Bonnie and Jaco describe the nuclear diplomatic family as a closed system that displays a high degree of interdependence within that family unit. Mutual support needs to be high and intertwined lives are the norm. As a result a person with a high need for independent functioning may find it hard to find that space within a home. This sounds similar to **Vesna’s** yearning for a life of her own which she lost when she gave up her job to join her husband.

The Father's Perspective

In summary it seems that diplomatic families are more

interdependent than other families due to their relatively isolated status within foreign communities. The family is also seen as a closed system and the only constant in the lives of children. The closed system is adaptive whilst abroad but the family may find it harder to slot back into a greater community when they return to South Africa. Interfamily support plays a bigger role in these families lives as their emotional survival depends on it.

5.5.17.3 Family relationships in South Africa

Family in South Africa can resent it when one member goes off to work abroad. **Louise** realised the nasty comments about her job were due to the fact that her family missed her. Families are not prepared for the reality of the distance and the different circumstances that they have to deal with. Louise says their relationship with their families have changed . They feel they are *obliged* to visit everyone when they go on home leave, but no-one is ever satisfied with visits as they are berated for the shortness of a stay. They felt unappreciated and failed to make anyone happy.

This couple will no longer travel the length and breadth of the country to see everyone but will stay in a central place so that those who wish to visit them can do so. **Bernhard** had to learn to deal with guilt feelings when relatives complain of never hearing from him, when he thought it was the other way round.

It hurts when family crises occur in South Africa and no-one thinks of informing the couple just because they live far away. Bernhard did not know of his father's hospitalisation until two weeks after the event.

Sharon speaks of missing home especially at festive occasions and family celebrations.

John considers himself a mobile person and moving around is not a problem for him. **Amanda**, on the other hand, like Sharon and Joan, had been close to their families and missed frequent contact. Amanda says she missed the easy access to her family and contrasted it with a plane journey across continents.

Barney described his family relationships as “strange, because you don’t see your family so often”. **Vesna** manages to stay in touch with her parents. They are very close, and telephone and visit for long periods. Apart from that, Vesna also writes twice a week.

In summary then it would seem that diplomatic families have to work harder at maintaining family ties and that these relationships are more complicated due to the distances involved and long absences. The consensus seems to be that it is inevitable that the quality of the relationships undergoes a change. The degree in which diplomats are affected by these changes, depends on their attachment to their families of origin.

5.5.18 Children

Jan is of the opinion that their children underwent a far bigger adjustment than the parents. Jan ascribes it to the fact that adults have more life experience to draw on. Moreover, he had his work to occupy him fully. He does not think the old saying that children are so flexible and adjustable, is fair.

A big fuss was made of **Samantha** when she started school in Amman at age eight and this positive beginning helped an essentially shy and insecure little girl to adjust very well. She was pleased with being “the new girl”.

However **Amanda**, in the same posting with a baby girl, found the Middle Eastern attention to her baby threatening and off putting. She believes that “white children are in demand” and lived in fear of having her child abducted. She had had no guidance and did not know how to deal with the unwanted attention.

Guy told me that his children have to amuse themselves indoors as the pollution levels are too high to let them play out of doors. **Vesna** does not want to take her baby out onto the streets of M---. It is simply too dirty.

Eddy spoke of his satisfaction with the school system and the superior education his children were receiving at the American International School. He is pleased with the emphasis on developing the individual fully. Seeing his children happy helps him to cope with the little everyday frustrations.

“For me, I’m totally impressed and that is the one big plus that will come out of my posting here. We knew that at the end of it the kids would benefit much more than anyone else. Being exposed to friends from other cultures, they learn to accept people for what they are, not for their religion or colour or whatever”.

Children also have to adapt to a lifestyle of little physical freedom. Some children excel at international schools.

5.5.18.1 Children's adjustment

Suzy arrived in F----- at age nine and she remembers her arrival well:

"When we found out we were coming here, I was kind of excited. I didn't really know what it was going to be like, but I think I expected too much".

"The school was really hard for me when I came because I couldn't really speak English, and I was just learning it in South Africa. And I think I learnt it pretty fast. But, at the beginning I had some real problems because of my accent. People sometimes could not understand what I was saying. And I didn't understand some of the British and American expressions they were using. So it was pretty hard for me".

"I felt lost. I just spent four years of my life in South Africa. That was it. I just finished learning Afrikaans properly and then you switch to a new language".

I don't think I did too bad. Kids at my school were pretty nice and I made some friends pretty quick".

Suzy speaks of a tough beginning but is proud of having coped with the challenge of learning a new language, making friends and adapting to a new set of circumstances.

Magda's sons, **Boet** (11) and **Ben** (8) had a harder time to adjust initially than Anna who seemed to cope initially and only showed signs of stress later on.

Ben could not read or write English and struggled. He developed stomach aches before school, started crying each morning. He also had to adjust to having a male teacher. Magda dealt with the situation in a very sensible way and he soon adapted. He did not learn English overnight but he was given extra attention at school which encouraged him to make an attempt to learn the language.

Magda remembers too that the boys fought a lot during the first six weeks and drove her "up the wall". She learnt later that this is a typical reaction for children who have been uprooted.

Joan cautions against letting family problems go unaddressed, especially when abroad. Teachers at international schools generally understand the extent to which children need to be adaptive as they move from country to country and can be a good resource for new parents.

Joan believes it is easier for young children to adjust than for their mother as they have the routine of school on a daily basis. **Don's** experience of adjustment bears this out:

"I think one of the things that makes it a little different for me is that I was removed from it. It has always been my parents between me and whatever else. All the information about the country, I get through my parents. Almost like I've been in my own small little world. Basically home, school, church and

friends. I don't generally get to interact with the people here. So for me it's been a totally different thing".

"The experience has been great. The friends I've made are great. I feel very secure. Good things to do".

Sharon relates how

"...the elder one (13) took a bit of strain at school in the beginning. They were calling her names and making her life sheer hell and miserable. She made friends with this one little girl and thereafter she started making friends with others. She's now settled, she's done very, very well. The little one didn't find it so bad, she had just turned six and found it easy to adjust".

Anne (18) tells of her arrival four years previously:

"It generally takes me longer than my brother to settle and it can be tough when your brother has friends the first week of school and you're still.....sort of hoping someone will let you into their group. And *then* I found a really good friend, Katie. And we just had like everything in common. Finding friends was a major part of settling in, of course".

South African children need to adjust to the American system where the stress is on independent functioning. **Boet** had problems at first.

"You have to do everything by yourself. In South Africa the teacher gave us the information for a project with the instruction to take what you need. Here the teacher tells you to do a project on a subject and to do it all by yourself. 'I am not going to help you.' "

or think it was



Henry remembers arriving in America at the age of thirteen and describes a period of two years during which he felt unsettled. He even wanted to return home after six months,

“Because I hadn’t really found my place, my niche, with good friends and things to do”.

He describes it as a time when he just existed and did what he had to do. It sounds as though it was a lonely period for him in an unfriendly city.

Elwin (12) arriving in December which is halfway through the international school year, was moved forward half a grade. He remembers having a lot of catching up to do.

Now, two years later he has this to say about his adjustment:

“I personally don’t find it a nice place to live. I mean, I’m happy here because this is where I live now. This is where my friends are so it’s good.”

Elwin may have adjusted to his circumstances but he does not like the context.

Anna was fourteen and at the Pretoria ballet school when her father was transferred to B---. Her heart was set on ballet as a career and this transfer meant that she had to give her dream.

She remembers the arrival in B----:

“The road from the airport was probably the biggest shock of my life. I was speechless. I could not take in anything. I could not think. It was not happening to me”.

Her usual coping mechanism was no longer available:

“I wanted to dance so badly. If dance is part of your life, you dance when you are sad and it shows. If you are happy, it shows too.

I wanted to move, to do something. I did not know a soul and my friends were very important to me for support. I am an active person and I like going out, but there was nowhere to go to. I was stuck in the hotel”.

“It was fantastic for me when school started as it presented me with a challenge. However it was a culture shock too. I had to get used to racial integration. At first it was strange to see how a black girl and a white girl could hold hands and be best friends”.

With time “the unthinkable became feasible” as she came to the conclusion that she had been brought up in a blinkered world. Anna describes her adjustment as a process of discovery in a new set of circumstances. Not having a choice provided the impetus for the adjustment and her own response provided her with the discovery that it is possible to change.

She found that she adjusted quickly to some aspects, whereas others were an ongoing process. I suspect it may be difficult to differentiate normal developmental growth from adjustment in another society. Her story then touches on identity changes which I will discuss in the next section.

All children mention the need to make friends and the need to

address the challenges posed by a different school system, including the need to acquire a new language. Once these needs are met, they seem to settle down.

5.5.18.2 Children and identity

This section does not relate to hardship posts as such, but more to the effect of a succession of postings on the development of a child's identity. I believe it is an important aspect of growing up in this particular lifestyle, one that has received no attention hitherto. I include excerpts that relate to this topic.

Deon's sons, **Elwin** and **Jack** say that they should know who they are and what they want to do with their lives, but neither does. They are not quite sure about a South African identity due to their limited exposure to the South African culture. Their friends are international and to identify with one would subsume taking on aspects of a foreign culture. I think they cannot but have diffuse identities at this stage.

I asked Deon's sons about their identity:

Elwin:

"I don't feel I am anything in particular. Some of my friends who have led the same life, say it's like they are rootless. I don't really belong to any country or nationality".

Jack (17):

"I don't really identify with South Africans. I don't really feel like any specific country is my home".

"We are an international family. Or at least.....the kids are



international. My parents are more South African than I am. We are looking for an identity. And that is much harder in our situation to know exactly who you are and what you want to do. None of us really know what we want to do, what we want to study at college or what we want to be when we grow up”.

It is one thing to say you are an international child but quite another to define the concept and that is where these children are. A foreign context with a variety of cultural inputs can result in confusion. How will this be resolved for these children?

Jack’s mother spoke up here:

“But if someone asks Jack, he does not hesitate to say he is South African. With a genuine accent. He is just trying to sound American otherwise”.

Is **Sanette** saying that it is enough to know what your nationality is? I think her children are saying they do not know what the content of that identity is. Does Sanette want to believe that they are South Africans when they do not believe themselves to be so? Does she really understand what it is like for her children? I am aware that parents do not really understand the dilemmas that face their teenaged children who grow up abroad, and try to minimise their children’s anguish by dismissing their genuine concerns.

High school with privileged children in a first world country, can give a teenager a skewed idea of life.

Oliver:

“It was easy at school. Our son enjoyed the sweet life.



Everybody passed. It was one of those easy going American schools. And holidays.....they would discuss - his friends were wealthy - where to go. France or wherever. And he thought that was what life was all about. He was a spoilt boy”, says Joan.

Oliver and Joan came back to South Africa with their older son who had just finished matric in Europe and “*that’s* when the trouble started”.

In **Oliver’s** words:

“He lost his group of friends and found it difficult to adjust. He was moody and unpleasant with people. He found it difficult to communicate and eventually he became very unsocial. He’ll never recover”. He was a lovely boy and then.....something snapped, because of the change”.

Joan says:

“I sent him to university and he started to call me every second or third day. He said: ‘Where do I fit in? I.....hm, I *don’t* fit in’. ‘What am I, he said, what am I? I don’t really feel like a South African. How can I? I haven’t really spent many years in South Africa. I feel like a misfit and I look like a misfit. I want to leave”.

This plea for help was not heeded. Joan’s reaction was to tell him to make friends, the very thing he found impossible to do. His university was in a different city. Coming from an interdependent family he had no resources to fall back on.



He did not adjust at university, failed his courses and has ended up doing an insignificant job. In his parents' eyes he is a misfit and a failure. Joan says:

“ So I have this son who doesn't know what to do with himself. A son who doesn't have a reason to wake up in the morning. It *hurts* so much”.

Oliver understands after a fashion that the loss of friends and the change of country contributed to his son's problems. He did not understand enough to be able to help his son. This father's pain is that he could not protect his son from damage. He has to live with the knowledge that his chosen career had unwittingly caused his son to suffer. He has reacted by going to extremes to protect the second son from a similar fate. His reaction is so extreme that it borders on being inappropriate.

Oliver's second son is fine and well adjusted. He returned to South Africa at the beginning of high school.

Oliver watched as his once happy older son turned into a difficult teenager and then an asocial adult who did not realise his potential when he could not adjust to life back in South Africa.

Joan describes it as

.....”the case of a child who has successfully hidden his unhappiness - be it in a hardship post or otherwise - from his parents. And it's been part of his development”.

Even in the course of one posting, covering the years between fourteen and seventeen, **Anna's** identity changed considerably.

She has started to feel less and less South African:

“It’s like memory, it goes away systematically, bit by bit. And you *can’t* get it back. It just goes and one day you wake up and you say: Gmph, I don’t even know how to fit into South Africa any more. I’m not on the same wavelength any more. You think differently”.

She has become so integrated into an international way of thinking that she has started wondering whether she wanted to return to South Africa with her parents at all.

Anna describes an individuation process that took place for her in an international school. She says she had to establish who she is without being able to fall back on a South African societal norm.

“It is difficult to do in a school with such a variety of nationalities and personalities. It is an easier process in South Africa, because it is predisposed. You are presented with how to be a South African and need only adjust to the givens”.

Furthermore she says it is easy for someone from a conservative home to go astray in a more liberal environment. This makes it more important to be sure of who and what you are. One has to set limits for yourself. She is aware that her moral values have become more liberal than they would have been in South Africa. But she had to learn lessons the hard way, by making mistakes and paying dearly for them.

Anna says she would definitely have been a different person had she stayed in South Africa.

She had to come to terms with the loss of her dream of being a ballet dancer and copes with the lingering sadness. Overall she appreciates the opportunity for growth that she was exposed to. Anna is also grappling with a more global identity and wonders how to define herself and where she would fit in.

These excerpts raise the issue of a break between parents and children due to a radically different socialization process for teenagers as compared to their parents. This makes it very difficult for parents to guide their children through uncharted waters and results in even greater confusion for teenagers than they already have to deal with.

5.5.19 Friendships

What happens to old friendships when a family starts disappearing for years at a stretch? Most people manage to stay in touch with their families but often old friendships lose out.

“We do...keep in touch, phoning them. They are also phoning us, especially my in-laws, and my parents. But from friends, I think we have lost touch. You can send them Easter cards, or Christmas cards, they don't even respond. But when you go to SA, it's as if you are no longer part of them”.

Stephen says he and his wife put most energy into the friendships they made in their first posting and maintain links with those friends whenever possible. They have good friends in Pretoria too.



“Now you don’t make an effort to make friends any more. You realize you are just going to see each other for two, three years and then you go, I go. You meet lovely new people but you need to protect yourself against hurt, so you don’t go that extra step”.

Bernhard experienced the painful reality that his friends in South Africa dwindled to a few and then none. He was hurt that his friends in South Africa did not keep in touch or respond to his long letters. Eventually he realised that his friends are still in their familiar surroundings and do not realise how important it is for the one who is living in a foreign country to stay in touch.

Barney:

“You don’t see them much, so it changes. It does”.

It is almost inevitable that one will lose touch with friends in South Africa. It seems to be harder for the women than the men. Today, of course, email has become a way to stay in touch.

The children who spoke to me were more aware of the quality of their friendships as having friends seem like an important measure of adjustment for them.

They speak of the transient nature of their friendships.

Suzy (12):

“You make new friends the whole time, but your old friends leave”.

Jack (17):

"I guess we are sort of used to that anyway because we move the whole time. We are used to saying good-bye to all our friends at the same time. Hm, *it's not easy*. No, it's not a pleasant experience. Especially at the school; there is a sort of impermanence about it".

"I don't know what friendships are like. You know how people say they've known each other for all their lives? They grew up together? I have never experienced that because we have always moved around. So, I don't think the friendships I have are very different from any other friendships I've had.

Elwin (15):

"The friendships are more superficial just because you know it is not going to last. You will *have* to say good-bye, like, in the near future. You don't expect to see the people again ever. So you never get, you don't get so attached to people".

Suzy is still coming to terms with transient friendships:

"For me, it's more kind of new, because when we were living in Pretoria I was really small. Friendships weren't like *that* important to me. Then you don't have all these problems and stuff that you talk to people about. And now, I think that it's harder for me to say good-bye to people. And hm, I think about people a lot after they've left. And a lot of times I wonder what I would be doing if I was still living in South Africa. I am just used to saying good-bye and.....yeah. I

think it's easier for my brothers because they've been doing this for longer than I have.

Sanette as an adult has a different approach and insight:

“Because you know the people are here for a very short time, your relationships are sometimes very intense. Because you know it's not going to last forever, you try and *make up* for it. It's the other extreme.

Jaco says his entire stay is clouded by the knowledge that a friend may be leaving any day. He is always prepared to take leave as “someone, a friend is always leaving”. Still, it is easier for the parents than for their eight year old daughter, **Samantha**. Jaco recounts that as she is at a British school, her friends inevitably depart for England. In her mind England has become a place that gobbles up her friends. She reacts by refusing to say good-bye to anyone nor will she see anyone off at the airport. When I arrived, she asked me how long was staying for. Her mother explained that was her way of deciding how much closeness she should give herself in order to avoid getting hurt.

Even adults experience the hurt of giving up friendships. For children it is a way of life and they know no other. It seems that bonds with others cannot be too deep as the loss incurred would then be greater.

5.5.19.1 A glamorous life?

There is a popular perception that the diplomatic life is glamorous.

Is it really?

Sharon is hurt because her lifelong friends have changed towards her. She is seen to be leading a glamorous life and as “above their station”. She felt quite lonely when she returned home.

“We went home and my sis asked: ‘Are you still living like a queen?’ So I said: If living like a queen is getting up every morning and walking around the house and getting into the cab and going shopping, just to *look*..... if *that’s* a queen’s life, then I wonder what *real* queens do.

Oliver says:

“It’s not a glamorous life, this. It’s a job like any other job. You know, National Days, they get so boring. And I’m going to go to all of them”.

A hardship post is even less glamorous than first world postings:

“When people are posted to London, they dress well and when they go back to South Africa, they look like people who have been abroad. You don’t look different. You are still wearing your Woolies clothes. Even something to show off - there’s nothing”, says **Angelique**.

5.6 Departure

When the time comes to leave a posting, families are confronted with leaving new friends behind in order to return “home”. By now, the new house has become home for many people. Although **Don**

says he regards the family home as mobile and consisting of the personal effects within, and not the walls.

A new adjustment lies ahead and reentry issues surface. Eventually a cycle is established of a posting abroad followed by a period of a few years at home.

Jaco: Departure is experienced as “a terrible wrench, a horrible and difficult experience we could *never* get used to”.

5.7 Reentry

At the end of a contract of four years abroad the family returns home. This time their children receive no special treatment and are expected to slot into school life like all the other South African children. Foreign allowances fall away and the family has to learn to live according to a drastically different budget.

Reentry and children

Children’s adjustment abroad is facilitated by the nature of the international community that is based on a common characteristic of transience and heterogeneous identity. Returning to South Africa represents a different situation. They return to a school where they are now the exception. They are South African in name, but have little idea of what it means. They do not know the codes and norms of the society yet their parents are familiar with this society. I often wonder whether parents implicitly assume that their children should know the same things as they do.

Boet at twelve, doubts that he will manage to go back to an Afrikaans school after three years of English medium schooling.

5.7.1 Home posting

Bonnie and Jaco found their first home posting a negative experience. They had no money and few friends left after being abroad for six years. They missed a support structure and they had to change to accommodate their parents' demands on their time. They had become used to being a nuclear family of three and would forget to visit their parents who then would express discontent. Bonnie says it took them 6-7 months to readjust.

The second time around they had prepared for the inevitable financial hardship. Furthermore Jaco had developed his catering skills and thought he would be able to contribute to their income whilst at Head Office.

Sharon is worried that she may not be able to go back to earning the salary she used to get having been out of the job market for a period of four years.

Unlike most women who prefer to settle down first, **Joan** tries to find a teaching job as soon as the family arrives back. Even if the house looks terrible, she says.

Johan says he would not expose himself to a similar experience. His wife would have to resign her job if she is given another hardship posting.



Mandla:

“I think I will be careful with the next one. If people were allowed to go ahead on posting just to assess the conditions, it would help a lot”.

5.7.2 Implications for personal affairs in South Africa

John and **Amanda** decided to rent their home out while they were abroad. Being so far away presented complications though and they had so many problems that they sold the house eventually. It was simply too difficult to manage at a distance.

Sometimes officials arrive home to a house that had been rented out and depending on their luck, considerable expenses may be incurred to have accumulated problems seen to.

Some families sell their home on departure and have to start all over again.

Few families are prepared for the drop in living standards due to a lower salary. In spite of the various complaints whilst abroad, housing is generally of a high standard, and one's lifestyle though limited, is better than at home. Thus part of a home posting's adjustment is having to drop that standard.

A home posting is generally a period of financial stress and everyone is keen to go on a next posting to relieve the stress.

Oliver:



“Although the job was enjoyable, you know, home salary with two kids.....we were broke”. “That’s the thing about this job. If you rely on your salary, then.....*you have to go out!*” “If you were clever, you will not be in overdraft the first year. The next year is tough, tough, tough. You’ve got to pull strings all over. You don’t just *get* a posting. You gotta go and see people and *talk* to them. Get on the *right* side of people”.

Joan:

“I know that I have a profession, but it is getting more and more difficult to find jobs now. Wives are finding it harder and harder to find a job, even the younger ones. At a certain age you have to rely more and more on your husband”.

5.8 The cycle starts again

Is everyone prepared to go out again?

5.8.1 Motivation for leaving again

Most people on a subsequent posting indicate that their willingness to go on a posting abroad is solely for financial gain.

Joan, on hardship posts:

“Let me put it this way. One is forced to accept these posts. And it is certainly preferable to go to these places than suffer the kind of financial difficulty one suffers at home”.

Some endure unhappiness but stay the course as they do not like to give up. **Amanda and John** cite sheer stubbornness and not

wanting to show they have lost, as pulling them through.

Sharon maintains that many South Africans have a negative attitude:

“They don’t stay here because they wanted to come here badly. They *don’t* want to be here and they are putting obstacles in their way. Why they cannot do this, why they cannot do that.

Fred and Jo consider their four years in A--- to have been a particularly valuable experience *because of* the difficulties they experienced. An added bonus was the fact that their daughter won a scholarship to study abroad.

Barney and Vesna are not sure that they would be prepared to go out on another posting.

“We don’t know if we want to do this again. **Maybe** this is not for us. I don’t know. Sometimes you feel it’s a job, you’d enjoy this. And sometimes you feel that this is not funny. I’d rather be home. I’d rather have my family around me. I’d rather be poor again. Then we were happy. We lived well. My wife worked but we lived well. We had everything. OK, now we can afford to pay for our house. That’s about it.
If you get a nice posting.....if there is such a thing.....it will be much easier”.

Mandla would not be prepared to live under similar circumstances again:



“The next posting will have to be a posting where I am sure that I will go *with* my family and there are no health risks. That's the main problem. Health risks”.

Elizabeth, a single woman, joined the service because she enjoys the kind of challenge it offers her. After a few postings she is beginning to feel torn between her need for a family and an end to constantly being uprooted on the one hand and her commitment to a career.

I asked **Amanda and John** whether they would go out on another posting and the answer was:

“YES! But this time we would be psychologically prepared to do so”.

He added that they had learnt the hard way how to deal with the people in the mission and how to find a house. That is sad though, as this couple will perpetuate the non-supportive kind of mission culture simply because that was the model that they experienced.

Most people learn the hard way what a foreign posting is about and repeat the experience for a variety of reasons as we have seen. I suspect if a couple survives the first time and find the experience pleasurable they will be prepared to go out again. Secondly one has to go where the job is too.

Sadly I have to relate that Johan and Susan divorced when they returned to South Africa. I believe that Eddy and Sharon were also having marital problems, in spite of their positive approach to the



hardships they endured. Perhaps Sharon's need for job fulfillment stood in the way.

Elizabeth gave in to her wish to start a family and married when she returned to South Africa.

The findings from this narrative will be presented in the next chapter, along with recommendations for changes that could be implemented to facilitate the adjustment of diplomatic families in hardship posts. These findings will also be compared to existing research findings.