

CHAPTER SIX

SYNTHESIS: IDEAS FOR THE CREATION OF A NEW STORY

6.1 Introduction

The synthesis is based on an interpretation of the stories and should not be read as results. Based on this synthesis, certain statements can be made about the stories of adjustment that were heard. These are described under headings as “findings”.

These findings are based on my observations, clinical impressions and interpretations of experiences of transferred families and are intended to address problem areas pro-actively. It could well be that these issues are already addressed during the training of FA officials but at the time of my research, it seems that interviewees had various ideas and feelings on this subject.

Even research remains an unfinished story as life moves on and changes take place.

6.2.1 Finding 1

There is an ideal couple in terms of successful adjustment in foreign postings.

My reading of the pre-transfer narrative, combined with the knowledge of how couples function whilst abroad, has led to the following interpretations.

It seems to me that the ideal couple for a long term career in the foreign service is one where the employed partner is able to function independently in his work situation. He or she should be intrinsically motivated to meet the challenges of overseas assignments. Furthermore job satisfaction should be derived from a self-determined set of criteria for satisfactory performance. Such a person should not necessarily expect recognition from the department for excellent performance in order to remain motivated.

The spouse of this person should not wish to pursue an independent career but want to play a supportive role in the family. This person needs to be flexible and resourceful. Indeed some spouses are satisfied to fulfill a supportive role and to work at odd jobs whilst on home posting. Moreover if the couple have children then the opportunity to do active parenting is welcomed by many accompanying spouses. When children need to stay behind at school in Pretoria or when they leave home, the picture may change and there may not be enough to keep a spouse occupied in a hardship posting.

But some spouses wish to pursue independent careers even whilst doing active parenting. This is not a possibility unless a commuter relationship is desired. A spouse who merely suppresses a need for a career so as to accompany a husband or a wife, may compromise on motivation and be less inclined to adjust or to make a complete commitment to her husband's career.

I have noted that the employed partner can be male or female, indicating that their combined motivations and complementary functioning, are more important than the genders of the two spouses. A further condition to the success of such a couple would be a good working relationship in which roles are clear and unambiguous.

In one such couple the female diplomat saw her role as provider for the family whilst her husband was happy in a supportive role. He did the catering and child minding. She would meet contacts and he would invite them to dinners that he prepared. This couple successfully dovetailed their roles in a reversal of traditional expectations.

In another case where the female accompanying partner willingly set aside career aspirations to support her husband, their adjustment was not ideal as the husband could not function independently. He will probably leave FA.

In yet another case of an independently functioning official, an accompanying wife with career aspirations could not come to terms with the limitations to her life and the marriage floundered.

In a last case the independently functioning diplomat's *husband* could not fulfill *his* needs and the marriage folded. Thus it seems that both requirements, that is independent functioning on behalf of the employee *and* a supportive role for the accompanying spouse, are necessary for a successful diplomatic couple.

The need for complementary functioning of a couple is particularly evident in hardship postings where a spouse is more limited in terms of leading a satisfying life than in the first world. Should the employee interpret his third world posting as a third rate experience for himself, motivational problems can occur.

When the combined definitions of Starker (1990) and Burr (1979) are taken into account, namely that "international relocation" (see 2.1.1) represents "an unfolding complex experience that affects every aspect of every family member's life, individually and as a system", it cannot be taken for granted that

all people in the foreign service in their home base as employees, would necessarily be able to deal with the “unfolding experience” in its complexity.

Thorough selection should be compulsory, but the changing attitudes to relocation (see 2.2) and the disruptive effects of relocation (see 2.2.1) need to be considered as well as the possible effects for the family. Chapter two dealt extensively with the changing face of the family, e.g. from single to dual career families and the effect of female liberation.

This means that the ideal family is also a changed family and will also change more and more as the ‘new’ millennium takes its course. FA needs to be constantly aware of these changes and select “the ideal family” to represent, as closely as possible, the changed “reconstructed” new family.

In chapter 2 the effects of stress and the vulnerability of families were also discussed, with several other factors that will have an effect on the family, whether it is the normal or the “ideal” new family. The family’s resources, as McCubbin defines it (see 2.5.4), need to be reinforced in order to retain its stability in the face of the inevitable changes that are concomitant with international relocation.

In chapter 2, the ideal transferee, according to the findings of several international researchers (e.g. Carlisle-Frank, 1992; Hausman & Reed, 1991; Munton & West, 1995) was described as having, amongst others, a high self esteem and strong self concept, an internal locus of control, the ability to cope with change (see 2.7.11) as well as several other psychological attributes. This is in line with the above finding.

However, nowhere in the literature was any reference found to the functioning of

a couple or family as a predictive measure of adjustment after international relocation.

6.2.1.1 Ideal motivation

I am aware of an underlying story in this first finding that says something about the *motivational aspect* of this kind of career. I got the impression that several employees cherish an ideal of doing something worthwhile for their country and are prepared to make sacrifices, such as accepting hardship postings, in order to achieve this ideal. These are the candidates who seem to become quickly disillusioned. Dissatisfaction follows when they realise that they are simply required to do an “ordinary” job. They end up wondering what they are doing in a foreign country and seem to project their dissatisfaction unto the country, *inter alia*.

It seems that the person who sees the job as a personal challenge and is driven to succeed at it no matter what the requirements, fares best in this career. One woman did not consider herself a “good” diplomat, though she was clearly a dedicated and hard worker, as she took more pleasure in the host culture than in the political aspects of her work. Her adjustment and level of personal satisfaction were especially high. This made me wonder why she did not consider herself to be a good diplomat. (Could it be that there is a culture of idealism at FA which may be counterproductive to effective adjustment?).

I conclude that the reasons for choosing this career should reflect healthy self interest rather than idealism. Examples of such reasons:

- an interest in other cultures,
- an internal locus of control,
- a liking of the diplomatic lifestyle, and

- little expectation of reward for exceptional service from a bureaucracy. An orientation towards personal satisfaction derived from self-determined criteria of success, naturally within the framework of the job requirements, is more conducive to realistic adjustment.

3.2.1.2 From motivation to attitude

This section started off by considering an “ideal” partnership for a diplomatic career. Issues of motivation are at the bottom part of this partnership, and results in certain attitudes towards the adjustment experience. A consideration of the beliefs of families who adjusted well compared to those who did not, led to the following observation.

An official who believes that his family will benefit from international exposure, seems to contribute to a positive expectation for the entire family and in turn contribute towards a positive experience. By contrast, an anxious anticipation of potential problems, seemed to result in the realization of such problems. There is an element of “what you expect is what you get” at work here.

Problems do arise as everywhere else in life. What is problematic though, is when problems are not adequately addressed. This has been a theme in many stories where one unresolved issue led to the next until problems are compounded and overwhelming.

This latter finding is crucial. It points to two aspects of diplomatic life, namely:

- When problems arise due to the relocation of a family, they are not readily understood as such. This is mostly due to radically different experiences in another context. It is hard to address a problem if it remains unexpressed because it lies outside the realm of one’s

experience.

I am reminded specifically of parents who could not help a son who was undergoing an identity crisis coupled with serious maladjustment problems after returning from abroad after matric. There is a drastic difference in the experiential world of parents and adolescent children who attend international schools, especially if the parents had grown up in a homogenous and stable context. In a highly communicative family, it seemed as though all family members, adolescents included, talked on an ongoing basis about all aspects of their lives. This kind of mutual support, based on constant communication resulted in healthy functioning in spite of hardship conditions.

- The second aspect of problems experienced abroad relate to the lack of a social support system firstly and secondly the lack of professional help. Families may not believe that a professional from a different culture would understand their particular situation. A family may have to cope with situations that have had no precedent in their lives and for which no guidelines exist.

On the whole, if problems and frustrations remain greater or endure longer than resolutions and/or solutions, motivation suffers. If the only solution to the problems presenting in the hardship mission is seen to be the end of the contract, motivation suffers. People start waiting for their lives to pass by, like prisoners awaiting the end of a sentence.

If DFA is perceived to be obstructive and adding to an employee's perception of discomfort or even maladjustment, motivation suffers and loyalty to the department becomes compromised.

In the literature chapter 2, it was stressed that the ideal transferee should be able to tolerate stress in situations of uncertainty, novelty and complexity

(Carlisle-Frank, 1992). This means, as my finding indicates, that the transferee should also be realistic about the fact that problems do arise, and even more so, in complex contexts. Yet, to stay motivated, transferees have to take responsibility for reducing uncertainty by trying to find out what to expect as far as possible (see 2.7.1.1, no. 5 & 6).

6.2.2 Finding 2

It is not advisable for a family to accept a posting to a hardship post where basic provisions are minimal.

This finding rests on the experiential feedback that occurs when:

- a) there is a large difference between the host culture and South African culture
- b) the spouse is completely curtailed in what she or he can do, to the point of being restricted to a life indoors, and
- c) where the family's schooling needs cannot be met in one country, causing the family to split up.

It would be better policy to post single officials to such hardship posts. But he/she should also have the individual characteristics as set out in Finding 1, that is, to be able to work independently, to be intrinsically motivated, and to derive job satisfaction from a set of criteria for effective performance. But such a person should be able to tolerate loneliness, even isolation and have the ability to socialize within various contexts when basic provisions are minimal. The ideal person may not exist at all. Yet, it is sometimes essential that a diplomat should be sent to such places.

The above criteria, as seen in Finding 1, as well as the criteria as set out in 2.7.1.1, should not be taken for granted. It may be advisable to "lessen" the

complexity by selecting an individual, possibly someone with an adventurous attitude and who loves a personal challenge, to develop the FA office in such a posting. The idea of the important role of religion in managing stress (McCubbin, 1979), especially in severe situations, may also assist a person who has to manage an extremely complex posting. Provided church affiliation can be met, of course, as it is not always the case.

6.2.3 Finding 3

There is a need for effective preparation for a hardship posting.

Most transferred personnel realise this need in retrospect. This need is especially apparent for persons who are transferred on a first posting. Some of the problem areas that have emerged are:

- 1) *A pre-transfer period* that is too short for proper training. This was a common complaint and is experienced as a lack of respect for the needs of the family. It seems not fair practice to keep someone on a line for several months or in some cases more than a year, and then to tell a person to report for duty in a foreign country within a matter of weeks. This is especially true for a first posting. This system causes stress, results in poor preparation, affects job motivation and contributes to poor adjustment in the long term.
- 2) *Lack of information* about aspects of the country, such as the availability of places in an international school, can cause families to be split up without being prepared for it. Often people arrive in their country of accreditation only to realize that there were many things that could have facilitated their stay if only they had been better informed. The departmental libraries should acquire books about the new missions. (e.g. John was unhappy at finding only one source on his country of



accreditation in the departmental library).

- 3) *Misinformation* about requirements for specific countries can result in feelings of resentment when necessary items are left behind or unnecessary items carted around the world.
- 4) *Preparation*: Whilst the employee needs to take the initiative to inform himself about the conditions that await his family, it is incumbent on the Department of Foreign Affairs to motivate the employee *about* this need. This latter may sound strange but the truth is that it is hard for people to imagine exactly what kind of information they need to know in advance. They simply do not know what questions to ask as it is hard to imagine another reality. Several new missions do not have adequate post reports, even a few years after the mission had been established, and many new transferees underestimate the need to be well informed in advance.
- 5) Many instances of costly mistakes, both material and others less tangible, were scattered throughout the interviews I conducted. Cadets are often not aware of the importance of attending courses or of reading post reports in advance. Training should be obligatory (according to John, who said there was no time for him to be trained). Language training in advance should be taken more seriously by families who typically underestimate the importance of effective communication for an effective job and life. A computer technician mentioned that technical training and computer skills could be improved.
- 6) *A visit in advance* has limited value if undertaken by one member as it is not the same as living in the country as a family. This is not to say that entire families need to be sent on advance visits. Many people seem to think that such a visit would be helpful, but those people who undertook such visits generally did not find them helpful as a short visit did not reflect the reality of life abroad.
- 7) *Spouses* are informed in advance by the Department of Foreign Affairs

that they are not allowed to work in foreign countries but it seems that this information is not taken seriously. It should be recognised that a spouse is no longer necessarily a person who is prepared to stay at home and be a dependent of his or her partner. Today a spouse is someone who might have her or his own career and working while abroad may be a right he or she expects to have. The issue needs to be addressed. A spouse may need to know what opportunities exist in the specific posting to avoid serious frustrations and/or serious marital problems later on. In this way an informed decision can be taken about whether a posting should be accepted or not.

Even if the spouse were happy to run the household on a full time basis, it would be wise to include her in the decision making process as it would show respect for the spouse's needs. There are ways in which the department can be more helpful. Psychologically a spouse would take more responsibility for her own adjustment if she could make an informed decision.

- 8) There is a request for *departmental regulations* regarding housing and other transfer allowances to be available for the transferred official. This is to avoid the experience of having to get hold of this information through trial and error. A family needs to know what they are entitled to in respect of the various allowances that are provided, suitable areas for living, allowable house sizes, rental ceilings and the furniture that will be provided. This information should be volunteered. This would preempt a rather common perception of an administrative officer as someone who withholds information that would have facilitated adjustment procedures. Such an approach could improve a transferred official's motivation to perform better in his job.
- 9) There is a request for preparation for *life in a mission* as well as specific information about an employee's role in the mission in order to avoid the

stress of role ambiguity.

Aspects of adjustment, as set out in chapter 2 are discussed with the emphases on preparation. The old proverb “better the devil you know, than the one you do not know” can be taken seriously. This will limit stress and mental health can be promoted (see 2.8). In 2.9.2 Jones (1973) reminds us though that an aspect of learning in preparation of a move, is the moving itself. This again implies an ability to be a healthy “ideal” person with an open-minded attitude and strong coping mechanisms.

In keeping with findings by international researchers, such as Benjamin & Eagles (1991), Frye (1992) and Shahnasarian (1991) who advocate job placement assistance for the spouse, it may be advisable to at least consult both partners prior to a move so that the spouse’s needs are taken into account and the couple can take a decision based on full disclosure of what would be expected of the spouse.

6.2.4 Finding 4

Arrivals are critical periods for families and mission support crucial.

First impressions are remembered so vividly, especially on a first posting, that a state of arousal is indicated. The word I heard most frequently was definitely “shock”, an indication that expectations and reality were very different.

Because of this emotional arousal, arrivals are critical periods for families. This shocked reaction could mean that people were not

enlightened about the posting, or that they refused to register negative reports in their enthusiasm to go abroad. Which one? Perhaps it is a combination of the two factors that contribute to this experience of shock.

The fact that people are not motivated to attend preparatory courses or to register the family in South Africa's shocked reactions before departure would support both interpretations.

An added factor concerns the hardship aspect of the post. Most shocked reactions are expressed as aspects of the physical environment and different cultural practices.

Negative initial impressions exacerbate the adjustment process. Families are in a state of excitement and expecting something that they do not find. This is the time when support is crucial. The support a family receives initially determines how they in turn will contribute to mission culture. In other words this is the way in which a caring mission atmosphere is created.

It seems that a mission is either supportive or non-supportive in its attitude and behaviour towards personnel, particularly towards newly arrived families. Initial non-welcoming and non-supportive experiences tend to perpetuate such a mission culture to the detriment of everyone in the Foreign Service.

Mission support can take place on one of several levels:

- 1) Concrete help can be extended upon arrival in the form of a bag of cleaning materials and flowers.
- 2) Supplying information as needed.

- 3) Reaching out to bewildered newcomers by having compassion for their situation. More practical help can be offered to a house bound spouse in a hardship mission, especially at the beginning.
- 4) Correspondence from a mission to an expected newcomer can cover many aspects of a post.
- 5) A newcomer can be shown around and helped to find her feet during the first month.

The existence of a mission culture per se is a surprising finding for me. Everyone is very aware of the effect a mission has on his life, but I was not aware of it being conceived of as having “a culture with specific characteristics that differ from mission to mission”. Equally people do not seem to be aware of their own contribution to a specific mission culture. Each person’s contribution is generally quite important as most missions are not really very big. An average mission may have about eight or nine families. Since people are always arriving or leaving, the make-up of a mission changes constantly.

Ambassadors, as heads of missions, play enormously important roles as facilitators in the smooth functioning of the mission. To this end they need skills in interpersonal conflict management and an attitude that reflect an interest in each person’s well- being. In the absence of these skills, it seems that missions can easily become unhealthy breeding grounds of dissatisfaction, resentment and unhappiness.

Chapter 2 (see 2.3) gives a full report on how company support can assist in bringing about a new relationship between employer and employee. This will not only assist during the stay at the posting, but should start when departing and must be operative when the relocatee

arrives.

This is the critical moment for a new relationship with the employer. As has been shown, extrinsic reinforcers, e.g. higher allowances, payment (Carlson, 1993, Deci, 1971) are not necessarily the key to successful motivation. If the “soft issues”, that is the psychological (e.g. emotional and social) are taken care of from the start (ch.2, see 2.4: Bayes, 1986, Bowen (1988) and Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991), then organizational indifference will not come about. This latter is a high price to pay for any organization.

When the employee and his family feel that they are taken care of, relocation can become positive, from the moment of arrival, and a sense of capacity for change can develop (see 2.5.3) as Lundy (1994) emphasizes.

Jones's (1973) list of gains, e.g. increased flexibility, adaptability, broader interests, superior socialization skills, improved ability to cope with stress and an increased understanding of other cultures will reinforce the person's self esteem and feelings of worth. In turn this will lead, as Mann (1972) found, to the development of cognitive complexity, flexibility and autonomy.

Although there is a so-called “honeymoon phase”, as discussed (see 2.6.1, no 2), this should not be seen as a period which proves how well the new arrivals have adjusted. As shown, it is often followed by the culture shock phase (see 2.6.1, no 3) where the foreignness becomes a reality. It is then when mission support is crucial and should be offered even when unsolicited. A mission should simply assume that newcomers

need help and act accordingly.

6.2.5 Finding five

A transferred official and his family enters into a new relationship with head office.

Whilst the official and his family relinquish some control over their lives (perhaps unknowingly) when posted abroad, they are expected to function more independently. This is a vulnerable mix in which loyalty is lost if it seems that the Department behaves in a non-caring way. Since big state departments function as bureaucracies, it then follows almost inevitably. I do not believe it need be so.

There is a paradox at work here. A transferred official who can function independently makes the better adjustment, yet I am advocating for more organizational support and of the kind that extends into the family's life. I do believe this is the kind of support that facilitates independent functioning. When people feel uncared for, often expressed as "thrown into the deep end", they tend to address the one variable that they see as being changeable, e.g. allowances. This implies an underlying belief that more money will make them *feel* better. I believe emotional problems need emotional remedies.

There is a general perception that allowances are not worked out on a fair scale. People in the third world compare their allowances to those in first world cities and deduce that they are not compensated for their hardships. There is probably some truth in this statement but I believe that this common complaint stems partly from the new relationship with

Head Office. Financial compensation is offered for the “sacrifice”, but it is not often that an official is satisfied with his compensation. It may seem that financial compensation is given to compensate for “emotional abandonment”? This brings one to the adequacy of financial compensation for the so-called soft issues of relocation, such as:

- 1) difficult decisions rendering families apart;
- 2) divorces because one spouse (usually the accompanying one) cannot have his or her needs met adequately;
- 3) and interpersonal problems within the mission that are resolved at the expense of a junior officer’s self esteem, who then suffers feelings of inadequacy. I am referring to the practice whereby a junior officer may be transferred in mid posting due to unresolved issues with a head of mission.

Financial compensation is not intended to make up for these soft issues but because it seems to be the only form of positive reward or support, it is experienced as inadequate. Nor is money enough to solve problems.

Due to the nature of the administrative officer’s work, he becomes the personification of this new relationship with Head Office as he represents the visible face of the bureaucracy. He is the person who holds the purse strings, who has the power to deny people things that they deem essential to their happiness and day to day living. A request denied could be experienced as a personal rejection.

As in most organizations, administrative officers are often seen as incompetent and this impacts on adjustment. Many frustrations are experienced because of the actions of administration officials for. This is a complex issue.

It must also be realized that the administrative officer often has a difficult position. He cannot please everyone if regulations prohibit the requested needs. A more personal approach in which people are taken seriously and treated with respect whilst following the rules as always, would have more positive results than one in which rules are obeyed rigidly at the expense of the person.

I did meet such persons and their contribution is valued and appreciated. Their attitude stem from an internalised belief system, which impels them to respect the needs of others. Such values can be inculcated during personnel training.

The findings in this section are in agreement with those in chapter 2 (2.3.1) where researchers like Harvey (1982) and Luo & Cooper (1990), advise organizations to take greater responsibility for the well-being of their employees and families. A recognition of the altered relationship between employer and employee during postings abroad, by both parties, could bring about a better understanding and relationship, resulting in more effective adjustment at missions.

6.2.6 Finding 6

Life is lived on the edge of society.

Diplomatic families do not slot into the larger host community. Their social sphere is limited to contact within the South African mission and within the international diplomatic community. Contact with the host community generally does not exist except for senior officials.

This situation is not experienced as problematic in general, except at the start of a posting when a family knows no-one and can experience isolation. This is especially true for an accompanying spouse without children. There is a high degree of interdependence within diplomatic families.

In some countries host communities are perceived as hostile, contributing to a sense of being alienated from the environment. This results in a lifestyle that is more passive and reclusive than it would have been in South Africa. Several families described a life of staying indoors and having no recreation apart from socializing within the mission and watching television. Home becomes a sanctuary that keeps the outside world out of their awareness. An initial reaction of coping with a foreign environment by shutting it out becomes a way of life eventually, albeit a restrictive one.

6.2.7 Finding 7

Children's needs are to be acknowledged and taken care of in order to keep a family unit intact.

- 1) The Department of Foreign Affairs could adopt a more flexible posting policy with parents who have adolescent children. If an employee believes it is better to turn down a posting because of a child's specific need at a point in time, the employee should not be penalised for such a decision. The Department of Foreign Affairs should understand the need to prioritise adolescent needs before job needs, at the stage when children are most vulnerable to changes.

- 2) Children need to learn to relate to, to fit into and to belong to a community in order to be function as well adjusted adults. This need is not met in a foreign community where children experience an “us-them” relationship. Unfortunately the “us” aspect of this relationship is often limited to the family unit which may or may not include the mission families. Do children learn to lead insular lives as a result of this experience? This finding, which is an outflow of the previous finding, would warrant more research.

- 2) The following aspect of children’s needs, is linked to finding six. If the self, and our ideas about the self, is constructed from the different kinds of information available to us (Gergen, 1991, See chapter 4.3.3.7), and, if an important task of adolescence is seen as differentiating from a family in order to develop a strong sense of self, a question arises about the nature of the identity that is formed in contact with a highly, divergent international mix of cultures.

This is a preliminary finding and a longitudinal study examining the relationship between identity formed in a foreign context, resultant self and place-identity; and long-term adjustment of diplomatic children, could cast more light on this aspect of growing up on the edge of society.

In this study adolescents often referred to a sense of diffuse identity and of not feeling that they belong anywhere or that they identify strongly with any one place in this world. This is in sharp contrast to their parents who did not express any such concerns.

These findings are not complete but represent the major conclusions and ideas that could be deduced after visiting hardship missions and attending to the stories of diplomatic families.

Due to the breadth of the study, not all aspects of the findings could be explored in depth. These aspects have created a new awareness and a need to attend to new experiences, by way of further research.