



CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, CRITIQUE AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The findings as set out in chapter six are not complete. The main foci were on the most important issues pertaining to relocation. Others which could be explored are the role of the extended families back in South Africa, the relocation of young children versus those in high school or at a university. But these were omitted and not included as findings since the general consensus of ideas from the stories did not reveal enough substance to come to a conclusion. Nor it is possible to correlate all the findings with the literature study, as the thesis would become too long.

The findings then focus on how people in their adjustment to lives of discontinuity can, not only survive, but may live healthy, constructive and hopefully happy lives. This is in spite of the finding by Weiss (1974) who found that all the provisions for social relations, namely the need for attachment, social integration, an opportunity for nurturing others, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable reliance and obtaining of guidance (see 2.6), are unmet when a family relocates and some can only be met partially due to the time limited nature of a posting. The discontinuity in provisions for social relations is temporary as effectively functioning individuals and families are resourceful and manage to build up their own support group with time.

7.2 The discontinuous lives

The diplomatic family's adjustment in hardship postings is now presented using Gergen's (1986) model of stories (as set out in 4.6). Each story presented in three types, that is the progressive, stability and regressive

types. These describe a protagonist's position vis-a-vis a presumed goal. In a progressive narrative the protagonist advances towards the goal. In a stability narrative the protagonist remains unchanged with respect to the goal and in the regressive narrative, he is further removed from the goal. If the goal is assumed to be adjustment we can use this model to analyse the adjustment process.

The first six month period of adjustment in a hardship post can be likened to a regressive narrative as the family links the beginning of their adjustment to moving into a home. Thus during the hotel stay the family members are further from their goal, even though the employee would have started functioning at the mission.

During the following stage we can describe a progressive narrative as the family moves into a home and settles. However, that is but one story line and the progressive narrative is accompanied by both a regressive and a stability narrative. This is one way to embody Starker's (1990; see chapter 2.1.1) definition of relocation as "an unfolding complex experience rather than an acute isolated event".

7.3 Adjustment as a complex unfolding narrative

The first stage, encompassing the arrival and hotel stay and lasting approximately six months can be characterised as mainly a **regressive narrative**. Unlike the current views of adjustment literature, there is no talk of a honeymoon phase in a hardship posting. Paradoxically the hotel phase is described as the cushioned part as it also serves to protect a family from the full experience of their new country and as such is described as "a soft landing".

The hotel stay and a long wait for a home are experienced as an obstacle to



the goal of settling in a new country. In a sense adjustment cannot really begin until a family has moved into a home and are surrounded by familiar articles. This is when a home routine can be established. This is in keeping with Jones (1973), who stated that the arrival of furniture and personal effects contribute to adjustment (see 2.7.3.3).

The second aspect of this period that is literally regressive, is a **negative emotional state** that seems pervasive and inescapable and is different from the emotional state experienced before leaving for the posting. This is expressed as shock, confusion, disorientation, isolation, boredom, bewilderment, anxiety, anger, vacillating emotions and fear of the unknown. The negativity is accompanied by numerous complaints. Two persons expressed suicidal ideation.

Some of the reasons for the initial negativity are:

- disappointment due to unrealistic perceptions;
- real frustrations experienced;
- communication barriers;
- inability to operate effectively in a foreign environment; and
- a non-supportive mission.

The second stage heralds the beginning of a progressive narrative in which nothing in the environment changes, apart from the move into a house, but the family has grown **used to** their new surroundings and their bodies have adapted to a new climate. They may not necessarily like the surroundings, but they have come to understand that they cannot change it and hence can only live with it as best as they can. Some people manage this better than others. It becomes possible to ignore negative aspects of life in the country and not react to it. Thus this narrative is progressive in the sense that the family has moved closer to the goal of adjustment.

At this stage most people who adjust well make a **conscious decision** to either stop complaining; to make the posting work for themselves; to accept the need to compromise in order to fit in; or simply to become more flexible. A decision to drop a negative attitude is seen as part of the progressive narrative.

For some this is a gradual process with many ups and downs. Many described a day when they simply woke up and felt that everything was fine. Emotional reactions to frustrations even out even though frustrations remain unchanged.

This stage is characterised by words such as flexibility, compromise, acceptance, respect for another culture, acceptance that one cannot change another culture, an awareness of positive aspects of the new environment. These words reflect a move out of a state of emotional arousal and indicate a shift to a reflective attitude in which cognitive decisions take precedence over emotional reactions.

The motivation to stay is renegotiated with the self and is typically based on financial considerations, perceived benefits for children and an appreciation of a few positive aspects of the new lifestyle.

The third aspect of a progressive narrative is the establishment of a social support system and new attachments to replace or contribute to lost supportive relationships.

But a **regressive narrative** comes into play concurrently with the progressive one. Part of the renegotiated motivation to stay the course is based on a negative motivation. The time limited nature of a contract lends itself to a survival mode of existence in which a person reminds himself of the time remaining as negative incentive to survive just so long. However I could also



call it a progressive narrative but then it implies a new goal, namely the return home. But then I would have to say adjustment is dependent on a reward some time in the future.

For the purpose of the present discussion the goal must remain adjustment in a foreign country and therefore I conclude that adjustment is hindered by the knowledge of its time-limited nature. In other words a permanent move would not have the built-in regressive narrative that detracts from more complete adjustment.

In order to maintain a progressive narrative, and move closer to a goal of adjustment, certain things are sacrificed. The need for a fulfilling life and a specific lifestyle cannot be maintained whilst living in a hardship country with its limitations. A regressive narrative takes place in terms of the other goals in life.

These goals include

- a spouses's need for fulfillment and mental stimulation
- the need for a family to remain together
- a need for cultural stimulation
- a need to maintain friendship and family relations
- a need to worship in a church
- a need for an active, outdoor and sporting life
- a need to indulge in favourite activities and hobbies
- a need for continuity so that a level of expertise can be achieved in certain pursuits.
- a need to control important aspects of one's life
- a need for teenagers to establish a national identity before an international identity and not the other way around and the development of attachment to place and community.
- the need to be involved in a pursuit that is meaningful to the person.

There is another aspect to the regressive narrative, namely the slide into avoidance behaviour that takes place when a home on foreign soil comes to represent the entire living space and the entire world for a family. Home is a sanctuary that keeps the hostile outside world out and protects one from unnecessary exposure to its foreignness. This coping mechanism stands in the way of a progressive adjustment. The family is coping but only because they do not expose themselves to their foreign context. This brings us to a consideration of cultural adjustment.

7.3.1 Cultural adjustment as a subplot

Cultural adjustment follows a separate narrative line. It represents a goal of adjustment in as much as a continued experience of culture shock would militate against comfortable adjustment. It is typically a process involving both regressive and progressive lines. It starts off as regressive initially and switches to a progressive line every time a person believes he has reached some understanding of the foreign culture. Then inevitably, because there is so much to learn, something baffling happens and the narrative falls back to a regressive phase until the incident is understood. These narratives form a part of the bigger narrative but have an independent time frame. It has the potential to influence the direction of the bigger narrative depending on whether a person's own cultural experiences are processed in a largely regressive or progressive way.

For instance each cultural encounter for Johan, Nongile and Barney is interpreted as incomprehensible, negative and rejecting and all three react by rejecting the culture. No attempt is made to understand the other culture. Thus there is no possibility of a progressive narrative.

Stephen describes a process of being baffled, of trying to understand and to

change his own attitude so that he clashes less. Then he discovers the next baffling thing and so on. This is a story of a regressive plot line alternating with a progressive one, but in which understanding and cultural sensitivity deepens with each switch.

If adjustment is equated with being used to a specific environment and establishing a daily routine, then a stability narrative can be applicable to the last part of a stay on a posting. However from the foregoing it is clear that a person needs to be considered holistically and as a person other needs that could clash with the goal of adjusting in a hardship post. The nature of these combined with the importance they have for a person, or a family, determine how complete or satisfactory adjustment can be.

7.3.2 Discussion of discontinuity

Discontinuity and disruptions take place in a cyclical fashion as persons physically relocate; from South Africa to another country; from home to hotel and eventually into a new home; as they start and end social support systems; start a new lifestyle and change it again upon a return home.

The relatively basic nature of the stability narrative and the thin story line it represents in the shadow of the progressive and regressive narratives, reveals a life of vacillation between movements that are either going forwards or backwards. Hence a life of discontinuity.

7.3.3 Discussion of hardship posts

There is a connection between hardships posts and an individual's needs as Kaplan (1983) (see 2.5.2) who speaks of "a person-environment fit", described. The less a posting is seen to meet a person's needs, the more difficult the adjustment and the more regressive the story line becomes.

Hardships posts provide the context for a person in which he has to settle and function. We have seen that some of these contexts are quite inadequate, but whilst they remain inadequate throughout a person's stay, the progressive narratives reveal a changed attitude towards these posts accompanied by novel behaviours that constitute adjustment and that can result in enriched lives. In this sense a hardship post poses a tremendous challenge requiring ingenuity, flexibility and staying power.

7.4 Practical recommendations

For research to be relevant it needs to be pragmatic and applicable. This section looks at possible practical implications of the findings in this study. In the light of the findings presented in the previous chapter, I would propose that the following recommendations be considered for implementation. Some of these recommendations are relevant for the employer and some for the employee. Both are agents with certain powers that can enhance or detract from the adjustment experience. Furthermore, the relationship between employee and employer is one of mutual interdependence. What is good for one, is good for the other and vice versa. Thus the following discussions are to further future research.

My thinking has been guided by a belief that successful adjustment begins with the selection of appropriate candidates. This is followed by appropriate training and comprehensive preparation for specific postings. Once a family is abroad, there should be recognition of their special needs for psychological as well as more concrete support.

If officials abroad could be viewed as fledglings who are on their way to becoming fully mature and independently functioning adults, they may be more supportive and effective in their "parenting role".

Similarly if employees and their families could be advised of: the frustrations and problems they will encounter when abroad; of the loss of control they may experience over their lives; and of a healthy attitude to international adjustment, they may waste less energy on feelings of resentment and abandonment. In turn, long-term motivation and loyalty to the department may remain at higher levels than at present.

The first finding (6.2.1) refers to an ideal couple in terms of effective functioning in overseas missions. The crux of this finding is that one cannot predict successful adaptation to the diplomatic lifestyle by only screening one partner for specific characteristics. I think a certain degree of prediction is possible, based on a certain complementarity between spouses as these narratives have suggested.

It is thus advisable to consult both partners before a transfer is considered so that an understanding is reached about the importance of a goodness of fit for a couple to the required lifestyle.

In terms of healthy motivation there are certain things that I would like to convey to cadet diplomats. I believe they need to hear that their work for the Department of Foreign Affairs could take them anywhere in the world, including the third world. If they join to work in the first world only, they should rethink their decision as diplomats are required wherever the government has missions.

First postings are learning experiences that test the employee's ability to function in any setting. The job remains the same, even though countries and working conditions differ.

The ideal family is one that communicates openly and who listen to their adolescents with openness and acceptance. They do not presume to

understand the world of their children. These families seem to be able to cope with the storms and create a safe haven for their growing children, regardless of their context.

I am thinking too of the reported value of a religious affiliation in terms of facilitating adjustment. International church affiliation provides families with their children a kind of continuity in the absence of continued social support and can take the place of it. For some families the absence of their specific church compounded the hardship element. They had to be flexible enough to create a house church for themselves in order to meet this need.

Finding two (6.2.2) refers to extreme hardship postings. I would like to add the recommendation that the nature of the hardship post should determine which official should be sent there. The extreme posts require different treatment. More consideration should be given to the filling of these difficult posts and more consultation with the couple should be part of the decision making process.

A single employee with the right motivation could be given preference, or a family with small children *if*, for instance, the spouse is a person who functions well in isolation.

A family with school going children, who can attend an international school, and who can stay together have a better chance of a successful adjustment in an average hardship post than in a tough one. But if there is no school and absolutely no possibility of a remotely normal life, it would not be wise to send a family or a couple to such a mission.

It is important to remember that families who relocate to hardship posts do not have access to a social support system initially to buffer any adjustment problems that may arise. The stress of being split up can render a family

doubly vulnerable and less able to deal with problems that arise as a result of being split up. Conversely a family who stays together can muster their resources to offer direct help and support to one member who may need it.

Fortunately there are few hardship posts that are so extremely limiting. The people who are prepared to go on these postings, for whatever reasons, should be given more moral and psychological support from Head Office to help them cope with difficulties.

The third finding (6.2.3) points to the importance of motivating employees and their spouses to attend preparatory courses and to inform themselves of the conditions that await them before departure.

It seems too that there may be an optimum period for preparation that should be respected by employee and employer alike.

It may be helpful to remind officials at missions that they should be forthcoming with necessary information.

It may be helpful to compile a “guide to life at a mission” for officials and their families. This would cover:

- all aspects of an employee’s life that are subject to rules and regulations,
- protocol at a mission, and
- include guidelines for establishing a supportive mission culture.

All of the above could be rectified or implemented at little or no cost to the departments concerned and would result in a happier and more motivated workforce, happier families abroad and considerably less adjustment stress.

The fourth finding (6.2.4) brings the following recommendation to mind.

I would like to suggest a thorough debriefing with a new couple within the first few days after arrival, by the administrative official at the mission. They could be informed about the various allowances that they are entitled to; their

specific housing regulations and how to go about finding a house - down to the last detail. The officer should explain too how houses are maintained by the mission as well as the procedures for reporting problems, the nature of problems that the mission assumes responsibility for, and the system that is in use.

Such a procedure would preempt and prevent mistakes that waste time and exacerbate the adjustment experience. A couple would feel that their needs are being respected. One official suggested that the mission should rent furnished and self catering accommodation for a family if their hotel stay is to exceed a month. A mission knows in advance of an employer's arrival and could be prepared for such an event.

The finding that newly transferred families need more moral and practical support initially and on an ongoing basis from HO, should be considered. Perhaps the Departments involved could investigate and implement procedures whereby direct communications between an official and Head Office can be set up with the aim of listening to adjustment problems and practical problems, offering support and help in analysing problems correctly so that the correct actions can be undertaken.

This is especially important during the first months in a posting.

The fifth finding (6.2.5) points to a new relationship between HO and a transferred family. It seems that neither party is fully aware of the extent of the dynamics of this relationship. I would like to recommend that sensitivity to family needs becomes a priority and that transferred officials recognize their own vulnerability so that they do not necessarily demand more money but rather for more appropriate solutions to problems.

The last finding (6.2.6) reflects the responsibility of the family to themselves to make their life on the edge of society work for them. Accompanying

spouses without children must expect to work harder at making friends and be prepared to attend international women's groups or to cultivate a feasible interest.

Language training helps to cross cultural barriers by facilitating communication which fosters goodwill and serves as a window on another culture. This in turn leads to better understanding and lessens frustration.

The following recommendations relating to preliminary findings could be studied in greater depth.

- 1) Adolescents experience identity diffusion as a result of living abroad. They do not establish a South African identity during their formative years and typically adjustment problems occur when they return home. I believe this is a preliminary finding indicating a focus of further research, so that the phenomenon is studied in depth.
- 2) There are differences between missions in terms of effective functioning. At present it would seem to be due to the personalised way on which heads of mission manage the people in the mission. It would be interesting to study why some perform better than others.
- 3) The finding that a mission culture exists would suggest further research into the phenomenon with the aim of improved preparation for life at a mission. It could be empowering for a person to know that his input directly contributes towards a negative or positive atmosphere or that altruistic actions could contribute towards a better climate in the mission.

7.5 Critique

It has required almost superhuman discipline to honour the complexity



inherent to narrative research so that the end result, whilst reflecting that complexity, is digestible and applicable.

A part of the thesis dealt with an organization. It was somewhat problematic to find a balance between respect for the organization, relaying approximately correct information and still to maintain a “research mind” as an overarching approach.

My insider status has both advantages and disadvantages. I think it makes me more understanding, but perhaps less critical, than an outsider would have been. In identifying the issues and findings, I would have been influenced by my own status as an accompanying spouse, as a mother and as someone who has lived in several hardship posts. I probably had least empathy with the issues of a transferred official.

The field of study was very wide for a single researcher. This breadth has served to highlight several findings that could be researched in greater depth.

The Department of Foreign Affairs was still undergoing its own developmental adjustment process at the time the study was undertaken. It is difficult to assess the effects of this transition on organizational practices and in turn on employees.

7.6 Concluding comment

My own journey as a FA spouse started in 1973 when my husband was transferred to Beirut. Over the last twenty eight years we spent long years living among other cultures, some not so dissimilar to our own and others quite different. There were periods of excitement and of disappointments, exhilarating moments, frustrations and enriching experiences. I am thankful that I had the opportunity to have been exposed to so much, to have lived as

a global citizen and yet equally happy to be back on African own soil.

This study has brought me to a higher level of understanding not only of my journey but parts of those of my compatriots.

Throughout these years we were in a unique situation as South Africans living outside our country. We literally had “a bird’s eye-view from the outside looking in”. It seemed easier to understand the path that our country was following from that position as we did not get caught up in internal polarisations. As representatives of Foreign Affairs, we have a special duty to our country, to understand and relay its policies to the world at large. In this way we hope to have contributed in a small way to the interdependence of nations and global cooperation. To work for the department is not merely a job, but requires dedication on behalf of both spouses and a willingness to adopt a FA lifestyle.