



DISCONTINUOUS LIVES:  
LISTENING TO THE STORIES OF SOUTH AFRICAN DIPLOMATIC  
FAMILIES IN THE THIRD WORLD

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I also dedicate it to my children: Tonya, Richard, Neil and Lisa who grew up in a series of discontinuous contexts. They are four individualistic and well adjusted young adults today.

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## Summary

Diplomats spend four years at a time abroad in South Africa's foreign missions, and after a home posting to Pretoria, typically lasting two years, they leave again. Children attend international schools. Thus diplomatic families have to adjust to a lifestyle of change and discontinuity, foreign cultures and unknown environments. The extent of this adjustment seems underrated and misunderstood.

Since 1994 the number of missions abroad has doubled and most of the new missions are in the third world, hence the focus on hardship postings. In this narrative research, interviews were conducted with diplomatic families in several hardship posts. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the process of adjustment based on first hand information.

Adjustment is described as a complex unfolding narrative with regressive as well as progressive story lines. The first stage lasting up to six months is seen as regressive, since the person is further removed from his goal of adjustment than at arrival. The rest of the stay is largely progressive if adjustment is seen as "being settled in a familiar routine". Regressive elements refer to environmental restrictions.

Findings include a description of an ideal couple for the foreign service; a need for effective preparation for a posting is confirmed; a changed relationship between Head Office and an official when abroad; diffuse identity among adolescents who spend formative years abroad, resulting in poorly understood adjustment problems on reentry; importance of attending to the soft issues of relocation instead of focusing on financial compensation.



Key words: Foreign affairs; adjustment; hardship missions; international relocation; eclecticism; modernism; post-modernism; accompanying spouse;

## Opsomming

Suid Afrikaanse diplomate bring vier jaar op 'n slag deur in buitelandse missies, gevolg deur 'n periode van sowat twee jaar op hoofkantoor voordat hul weer uitgeplaas word. Kinders woon internasionale skole by.

Diplomaat gesinne moet dus kan aanpas by 'n lewe van verandering en diskontinuiteit, vreemde kulture en onbekende omgewings. Die omvang van die aanpassings blyk onderskat te word.

Sedert 1994 het die aantal buitelandse missies haas verdubbel en meestal in die derde wêreld, vandaar die fokus op ontberingsmissies. In hierdie narratiewe navorsingsmodel, is onderhoude gevoer met gesinne in verskeie ontberingsmissies. Die doel was om 'n beter begrip te bereik van die proses van aanpassing gebaseer of persoonlike inligting.

Aanpassing word dan beskryf as 'n komplekse ontplooiende narratief met beide progressiewe sowel as regressiewe storielyne. Die eerste fase, wat tot ses maande kan duur, word gesien as regressief omdat die persoon verder van sy doelwit van aanpassing is gedurende die fase. Die narratief oor die res van die verblyf is meer progressief van aard as aanpassing gesien word as "gevestig met 'n roetine". Regressiewe storielyne verwys na die beperkende effek van die omgewing.

Bevindinge sluit 'n beskrywing in van die ideale egpaar vir die buitelandse diens; die behoefte aan effeltiewe voorbereiding word bevestig; diffuse identiteit word gesien by adolessente wat vormingsjare oorsee deurbring. Dit kan lei tot aanpassingsproblematiek by die terugkeer wat nie goed verstaan



word nie; 'n fokus op die psigologiese aspekte van aanpassing is nodig aangesien alleenlik finansiële kompensering nie wesentlike probleme aanspreek nie.

Sleutelterme: Buitelandse Sake; ontberingsmissies; aanpassing; oorsese verhuising; eklektisisme; narratiewe navorsing, modernisme; postmodernisme; accompanying spouse; stres.



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### ADDENDA

Addendum A	A letter from the department of Foreign Affairs in which permission is granted to visit missions abroad in order to undertake this study.
Addendum B	List of countries visited.
Addendum C	A copy of the consent form that was signed by each participant prior to an interview.

Transcribed material:



A bound copy consisting of five fully transcribed interviews is available from the Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY OF ADJUSTMENT

#### 1.1 Introduction

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

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

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

instant family with all its concomitant expectations and disappointments.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### THE STUDY

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

lack of resources.

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

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

## 1.2 Definitions

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

### 1.2.1 The South African Department of Foreign Affairs

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

country.

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

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

### 1.2.2 A Foreign Service Officer

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

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

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



### 1.2.3 A diplomat

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

(Courtesy of Department of Foreign Affairs, 1999)

### 1.2.4 A mission

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

### 1.2.5 A hardship posting

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

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

These factors are:

- climate,
- pollution levels,
- health risks and services,
- language and culture,





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

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

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

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

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

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

The 2000

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

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

The 2000

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

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

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

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

#### 1.2.6 Other nations

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

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

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

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

### 1.2.7 Adjustment

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

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

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

### 1.3 Aim of study

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

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

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

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

#### 1.4 Procedure

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

##### 1.4.1 Development of study

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

##### 1.4.2 The first stage

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



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

#### 1.4.3

#### 1.4.3 The second stage

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

#### 1.4.4

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

#### 1.4.5

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

#### 1.4.6

#### 1.4.4 The third stage

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

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

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

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

#### 1.4.5. The fourth stage: a reading of relevant literature

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

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

A summary of international research findings is presented in the literature

review (Chapter Two).

#### 1.4.6 The fifth stage

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

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

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

#### Thesis

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

#### Chapter

#### 1.4.7 The sixth stage

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





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

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

## 5 Outlay of the study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 1.6 Confidentiality

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW: RELOCATION

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter a literature review is given of research done on the subject of relocation and its effects on the family. In view of the fact that research on the experience of officials of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs is to be undertaken, an extensive investigation into relevant literature was done in this chapter. Though there is a substantial body of research on relocation, many researchers (Ammons, Nelson & Wodarski, 1982; Brett, 1982; Martin, 1996; Munton & West, 1994; Noe & Barber, 1993) considered the effects of domestic relocation only. Since the overlap between domestic and international relocation is relevant, both types of studies will be reviewed. This review constitutes a synopsis of most of the recent literature on relocation over the past three decades. The current literature refers mainly to American studies (Ammons et al., 1982; Brett, 1982; Noe & Barber, 1993;) and to a lesser extent European, especially British studies (Martin, 1996; Munton & West, 1995).

These studies seem to be based on research which is overwhelmingly empirical in nature. A veritable plethora of variables has been analysed and tested, individually, in relation to others, or considered in terms of a time-limited process. This has resulted in a large body of findings which seems to be difficult to structure in a meaningful and hopefully non-overwhelming way. Surprisingly few qualitative studies have been undertaken. Dunbar (1992) speaks of a dearth of evaluative research on overseas postings in terms of adjustment, satisfaction, and performance.

Based on the literature, the following aspects of relocation is discussed:

Defining relocation;



- Changing attitudes to relocation;
- The organization and relocation;
- Relocation and the family;
- An adjustment process for the family;
- Determinants in adjustment;
- Relocation and mental health; and
- Coping strategies.

### 2.1.1 Definition

Relocation is simply defined as changing a residence and establishing a new address (Humke & Schaefer, 1995). This is a rather general definition covering domestic as well as international relocation. Although there may be similarities, international relocation is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from domestic relocation. For example, one is not often required to learn a new language or to learn to interact with a new culture when moving around within one's own country. Nor can the degree of disruption to a family that relocates domestically approach that which is experienced in a move abroad.

Starker describes relocation as

“an unfolding complex experience rather than an acute isolated event”  
(p. 56, 1990).

One of the most important aspects of relocations seems to be the inherent stress that is involved (Adelman, 1988; Ammons, Nelson, & Wodarski, 1982; Schoeni, 1991; Pinder, 1989). Burr (in McCubbin, 1979) defines a stressor event as one that produces a change in the family social system in terms of its boundaries, structure, goals and processes, roles and values.

International relocation involves changes in the physical and social milieu of the family. Work, school and lifestyle patterns are suddenly different for every

family member (Steinglass & Edwards, 1993). International relocation involves learning to live and function within a foreign culture (Church, 1982; Phalet & Hagendoorn, 1996) and building up a new social support structure (Adelman, 1988).

These definitions and descriptions imply that the entire family's functioning can be affected after a transfer and that the effects may not be immediately apparent.

Perhaps I could combine Starker (1990) and Burr's (1979) definitions by saying that international relocation represents an unfolding, complex experience that affects every aspect of every family member's life, individually and as a system, in the process of coming to terms with a different set of circumstances in various environments for a specific number of years.

#### 2.1.2 A common phenomenon

In general it seems that relocation is a common phenomenon both in America and Britain. Mann, writing in 1972, refers to relocation as a "major certainty today". According to Luo and Cooper (1990) 800,000 people relocate annually in America and 250,000 in Britain (Institute of Manpower Studies, 1987). Starker (1990) says that 20% of the American population change residence annually. The data from Australia, Canada, Britain and Japan reveal similar figures (Stokols, Shumacher & Martinez, 1983).

No formal research quoting international relocation figures for South African diplomats, seems to be available. It is known that the Department of Foreign Affairs currently has eighty-nine diplomatic missions abroad and four hundred and eighty employees and their families are serving four year contracts at these missions. Other state departments, such as Defence, Trade and Industry and Home Affairs have three hundred transferred employees working under the

administrative aegis of the Department of Foreign Affairs within the same missions. Half of these missions are situated in the so-called undeveloped and developing world. (Source: Personnel Section, South African Department of Foreign Affairs, 1999).

To my knowledge, no formal research study has been undertaken to explore the experience of South African transferred officials and their families.

### 2.1.3 No single theory

Jones noted in 1973 that many of these studies have explored variables in terms of a general focus but have not been based on an accumulative theory. Indeed, no single satisfactory theory has been put forward to explain the phenomenon of relocation. Stokols and Shumaker (1982) advocate the adoption of a contextual approach as a framework for organizing a theoretically and empirically diverse literature. Such an approach should reflect the dynamic nature of adjustment processes and the fact that these processes occur within the total life context of the individual.

Werner, Altman and Brown (1992) argue that phenomena should be studied holistically, as simultaneously involving people, psychological processes, the physical environment, and temporal aspects. Furthermore, none of the aspects of adjustment can be understood except in relation to one another.

### 2.1.4 A social record

What has emerged is a social record of the past thirty years and more, some clarity about the effect of certain variables, some confusing and contradictory findings, and many unanswered questions. The changes in attitudes and values in society over time are clearly reflected in these articles and these changes are

yet another factor in determining the adjustment phenomenon following relocation.

It may be useful to look at the recent history of relocation in the wider context of the social changes that have taken place over the past thirty years.

In an age of democratic rights, children's needs are given more serious consideration than ever before in our history. Women are insisting on equality in the workplace and at home. Women who previously had to work for financial reasons are now insisting on the right to their own careers. As a result some employers are reassessing their policies and taking note of changes (Benjamin & Eagles, 1991; West & Rives, 1993).

## 2.2. Changing attitudes to relocation

An awareness of a changing attitude regarding relocation seemed to register in the last three decades of the previous century. Prior to this period, families did not relocate on a large scale. For the ones who did, wives were mostly homemakers who willingly accompanied and supported their husbands' careers. A male accompanying spouse did not exist yet. But the effect of globalisation, an appreciation of the interaction between work and family, the shift from single to dual career families, amongst others, brought about a shift in the attitudes towards relocation (Brown & Orthner, 1990; Starker, 1990).

In this section the impact of such societal changes are discussed in terms of the new reality and subsequent to a growing awareness of the disruptive impact of relocation.

### 2.2.1 Moving is disruptive

Before 1970 it was generally accepted that most Americans adjusted relatively easily to moving. However, the negative effects had been underestimated



(Starker, 1990). In 1990, Luo and Cooper noted that during the previous ten years, the public had become more aware of the potential disruption of moving. Few families believed that moving was easy. It is a major logistical undertaking that involves renting out a home, decisions about packing up and storing possessions, the physical packing process, rearranging finances, leaving churches and other community ties, uprooting children from their schools, peers, and a way of life, and saying good-bye (Shahnasarian, 1991).

As early as 1972, Pachard described the American nation as “a society of torn roots” (Brown & Orthner, 1990). Stokols, Shumaker and Martinez (1983) question the social and personal costs of our increased freedom from geographical constraints. Mendendall and Oddou (1985) cite research findings of significant rates of premature returns of expatriate managers during the two decades leading up to the eighties. High financial costs are incurred as well as the “invisible” losses of self-esteem, self-confidence in managerial ability and prestige among peers.

Thus it seems that as more people relocate more often, the effects are becoming apparent. In this new climate, an awareness grew that an exclusive focus on the family’s financial well-being could result in a neglect of the emotional needs of the individual members.

### 2.2.2 New balance between work and family

In the nineties a shift in focus from work to non-work activities took place. Many parents were no longer prepared to put the requirements of the workplace above the needs of their families. Cornille (1993) described a new social emphasis on interpersonal relationships over corporate advancement that put relocation in a new light. Kilgore and Shorrock (1991) as well as Bowen (1988) spoke of an awareness of a basic human need for balance between work and family. Bowen described work and family as “inextricably intertwined”. Thus if a family has

adjusted well the official can be presumed to do his work well. The opposite will also be true.

### 2.2.3 From single to dual career families

In 1982, Brett wrote that the typical corporate move involved a male employee with a non-working wife and two children. In 1984, Bayes found that men were still the primary wage-earners even in dual-career couples (constituting 74% of all couples); their careers were given priority and spousal support was still a given. In the nineties, the majority of employees in industrialized countries are members of dual-career families (Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991; Shahnasarian, 1991).

Relocation becomes even more complicated for such families who have to decide whose career takes dominance and whether a commuter relationship is a feasible or wanted option. Shahnasarian (1991) suggests that the accompanying spouse who forsakes a job to accommodate a spouse's relocation, finds the experience more distressing than the employee. This situation led to the phenomenon of what became known as the "reluctant wife".

### 2.2.4 Female liberation and the "reluctant wife" .

In 1973, Jones found that women believed it was better to move than to endanger their husband's opportunities for upward mobility. A decade later, Donohue and Gulotta (1983) wrote that families who relocate subscribe to a unique value of putting the head of the household's needs first. It was culturally expected of women, at least up to the seventies, to be "compliant and cheerily accepting" of their husbands' job transfers (Starker 1990). Companies too have such an expectation from spouses (Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991).

By the nineties, the pendulum had swung around. Now Lundy (1994) questions the underlying assumption that a woman must adapt to her husband's relocation and that the vicarious experience of his career satisfaction will be sufficient for her. A new breed of women are juggling family needs with a pursuit of their own careers. They no longer necessarily comply with the traditional male dominant breadwinner role, but seek equal power in relationships based on economic independence.

We need to address the question of whether wives of today are still prepared to put their husbands' careers first?

Noe and Barber (1992) found that a spouse will be unwilling to relocate if it meant a drop in income, status or seniority, and doing less satisfying work. Spouses find it equally hard to move if they have been employed for a considerable period. Frye (1991) speaks of the phenomenon of the "reluctant wife." Some couples decide on a commuter relationship and in so doing postpone the relocation issue (Shahnasarian, 1991). Relocation remains hardest for career women who will often move mainly to maintain the relationship with a partner (Bayes, 1986). Furthermore the accompanying spouse of today is increasingly a male person (Lundy, 1994) (See also par. 2.6.4) who may have a different experience of being an accompanying partner as a woman would.

#### 2.2.5 Company support for spouse employment

Some organizations in America seem to acknowledge the neglected role of the modern spouse, male or female. Given the current situation, companies today cannot overlook a spouse's employment situation, and some of the larger companies in America now provide assistance in the spouse's job search (Benjamin & Eigles, 1991; Rives & West, 1993). Shahnasarian (1991) goes even further and speaks of an "entitlement" to spouse relocation counselling services, standard in many leading American organizations. This has resulted in a new industry of relocation career consultants who provide assistance to spouses

(Benjamin & Eagles, 1991).

Frye (1991) mentions a growing appreciation of the needs of dual-career families and to concrete steps being taken in certain multinational organizations to help spouses find employment.

It seems easier to find employment after relocation if a spouse has transferable skills and a flexible attitude towards alternative and new options. Sometimes she or he may have to be prepared to accept a substantial drop in income (Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991). This seems especially true in the Third World where salaries are much lower than in First World countries.

International spouse relocation assistance can be a key to success if :

- it is individually tailored to meet professional and personal goals;
- it offers support where needed;
- begins before the move;
- provides job search strategy assistance; and
- continues until the spouse is involved in the new community;

(Benjamin & Eagles, 1991).

An obvious complication for spouse employment overseas would be local immigration laws that prohibit employment. A different language would also limit options (Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991). A further limitation in the case of employees of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs, is the nature of reciprocal agreements between governments that determine whether spouses are indeed at liberty to work or not. At present the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has such agreements with a number of countries (Source: Personnel Section, South African DFA, 1999).

This means that spouses either have to comply or follow a career physically and geographically removed from one another. This may lead to frustration in the first

case and estrangement in the latter. Taking the above into account, the question is: can we now expect an increasing number of employees resisting postings abroad due to “actual or anticipated adjustment problems of spouse or children” (Noe & Barber, 1992) or due to possible threats to family stability due to relocation?

During the seventies and eighties an increasing resistance to relocation began to manifest itself (Frye, 1991; Noe & Barber, 1992). Quoting a 1987 Institute of Manpower Studies survey, Munton and Forster (1990) found that 63% of managers were not willing to relocate because of family reasons. However, professional reasons for relocation seem generally to outweigh personal and family concerns (Brett, 1982; Brown & Orthner, 1990; Donahue & Gulotta, 1983; Fisher & Shaw, 1994).

Personal attitudes are important too. Sanchez (1992) found, in a study of workforce entrants, that a person’s level of independence - seen as a lack of family attachment - was the best predictor of willingness to relocate. Although resistance to relocation is not the main concern of this study, diplomatic families are not immune to societal changes and the impact of these changes are already seen in an unprecedented number of commuter marriages and rising levels of frustration among accompanying spouses. It could be part of the reason for a high divorce rate among diplomatic couples (Sanchez, 1992).

## 2.3 Relocation and the Organization

In this section the change in the relationship between employee and employer that takes place when the employee is abroad, is discussed. The problems that are experienced are referred to as soft issues and it seems that these are not always addressed satisfactorily.

### 2.3.1 A new relationship

Living abroad apparently results in a new relationship with one's employer. In the absence of an established social support network, the organization becomes the major source of information, one's link with the home country, and represents financial security. A state department determines how often and for what purposes one can visit home. It determines the type of housing to be lived in. It prescribes a certain code of conduct particularly in the case of diplomats who assume the role of representatives of their countries.

These are a few of the ways in which the organization assumes greater importance in the transferred official's life. It follows that the organization should assume greater responsibility for the well-being of its employees and their families. But the official often suffers from a lack of recognition once abroad, as he is "out of sight, out of mind" (Harvey, 1982). In this regard, Harvey suggests the implementation of a mentor program between an official and a person at the Head Office to provide a link during the stay abroad.

Organizations need to understand the impact of relocation on the individual and his family, the resulting patterns of adjustment for the employee, and the domino effect for the organization itself (Munton & West, 1995).

Companies should formulate policies to develop viable responses (Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991). "Solutions should incorporate motivational factors as opposed to hygiene factors such as allowances, increased pay and living accommodations". Harvey, (1982, p 54).

Steinglass and Edwards found that the more input adults have in the decision to relocate internationally, the better their subsequent adjustment (1993). Apart from organizational recognition of psychological motivation other than financial, these findings suggest a relationship between motivation, informed decision-making and eventual adjustment.

Furthermore an organization has certain *social expectations* and values which

are communicated to their employees and their families. The degree to which these expectations are accepted, as reflected in their behaviour, determines the family's ability to manage the stresses and demands of the organization (McCubbin, 1979). There is a difference between the social expectations of a diplomat and his family when he is abroad and when he is at his head office where his family is largely excluded from these expectations. The extent to which his family can comply with the new set of expectations will have a bearing on their adjustment. Apart from the new social expectations, families are confronted with adjustment issues that affect the quality of their personal lives.

### 2.3.2 Soft issues

Luo and Cooper state that organizations have paid little attention to relocation problems beyond that of financial support. Employees are generally given financial incentives to live in other countries. In countries where the standard of living is seen as lower, the employee is given a higher incentive (1990).

The appropriateness of a financial reward as compensation for adjustment issues can be questioned (Harvey, 1982). It seems that the more people complain about the specific hardships they have to endure, the more the organisation feels obliged to raise allowances. However, since specific problems are not addressed, complaints do not disappear and eventually employees earn the reputation of being grasping and complaining. The employee becomes aware of this negative epithet and his attitude towards his employer, and towards his work, becomes negative in turn. Researchers (Carlson, 1993; Deci, 1971) have discovered that extrinsic reinforcers (e.g. payment after a person has successfully completed a task) can often undermine intrinsic motivation (that is, the performance of a task that is rewarding in and of itself). This means that the intrinsic and loyal support of an employee in Foreign Affairs to his home country, may become compromised, making the person's task less positively reinforced, leading to dissatisfaction, changes in attitude and reduced adaptability.

Bayes (1986); Bowen (1988); and Kilgore and Shorrock (1991) speak of *organizational indifference* to the emotional and social issues of relocation. These psychological or “soft issues” are hard to quantify, often go unnoticed, and present the real cost to a company (Benjamin & Eigles, 1991).

The same authors maintain that the most difficult problems are not due to housing but to family and personal adjustment. One way of addressing the initial chaos, is that of permitting a newly transferred employee to spend the first week settling in with his family in order to help reduce the pressures of adjustment (Cornille, 1983), instead of trying to find his feet in a new office environment whilst his family has to cope by themselves in a foreign situation. Harvey (1982) suggests low costs solutions that include better communications, sensitivity to employee stress and better planning.

That is but one aspect of relocation being addressed. Similar problems can be addressed, i.e. by psychologists and other health professionals who can specify the aspects of relocation that are specifically demanding and the ways in which families attribute personal meaning to the crises they are confronted with. Steinglass and Edwards (1993) of the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy, conducted a pilot study on “Risk and Resiliency Factors in State Department Families”. Their specific brief was to review research on family mobility, its consequences and mediators of the potential risk factors of mobility, and to make recommendations regarding provision of services for State Department employees and their families.

## 2.5 RELOCATION AND THE FAMILY

Relocation is an important life event that not only concerns the employee but his entire family (Luo & Cooper, 1990; Lundy, 1994), and involvement by all family members is necessary for a smooth transition (Benjamin & Eigles, 1991). Munton and Forster (1990) call for a more family-centred approach to address the unresolved practical and theoretical issues around relocation. Carlisle-Frank





(1992) cautions that research has shown that relocation is a complex phenomenon, and many contributing factors need to be considered when the effect on a person or a family is being assessed. Steinglass and Edwards (1993) mention both positive and negative effects on families who move every few years.

### 2.5.1 Stress

Hausman and Reed (1991) refer to relocation as *relo shock*, *relocation stress* or *the mobility syndrome*. Cornille, (1993) defines relocation as a chronic stressor event. Adults rated the intensity of moving as a stressor 28<sup>th</sup> out of 43 potentially stressful life events on The Social Readjustment rating Scale of Holmes and Rohe (Steinglass & Edwards, 1993).

The more severe the stress, the higher the probability that family unity and stability will be disturbed. The more disruption relocation involves, the worse for the family (McCubbin, 1979). However, threats to family stability are not as upsetting in families that lack cohesion since the family is not the central source of security (Moos & Schaefer, 1986).

What constitutes a source of security for these families? It seems as if it is something connected to a prior location the family will still be disrupted. If it is something that can move with them, one would imagine the degree of disruption to be less.

While moving as a general event is moderately stressful for adults, it seems to be much more so for children and its impact is typically underestimated by their parents (Steinglass & Edwards, 1993).

Though the stresses experienced in a move are many and varied (Raviv, Keinan, Abazon & Raviv, 1990). Luo and Cooper (1990) report that the top factors associated with relocation stress are: *loss of social contacts* and *family related*

*problems*. A family leaves behind a functioning social support system and arrives in a kind of social vacuum, meaning that the family is entirely dependent on its own resources in a situation which may require resources that are beyond the ordinary, due to the extraordinariness of the foreign context. Steinglass and Edwards (1993) found that family factors were powerful determinants of the adjustment of both parents and children. It follows that the ability to resolve problems that occur would contribute to better adjustment and conversely problems that are beyond the family's resources may fester and produce long term negative consequences. The question is what support do parents have in recognizing and dealing with adjustment related family problems?

Lieberman (1978) believes that personality processes take precedence over social factors as a primary explanatory framework for adaptation. The impact of a move is mediated by factors such as personality, psychological and situational variables, coping strategies and social support (Luo & Cooper, 1990; Starker, 1990), the context of a person's life history and his future goals (Stokols et al., 1983). Steinglass and Edwards (1993) found that coping styles and social network characteristics play important roles in determining the adequacy of adjustment, *but for adults only*.

It seems clear that both psychological and social factors are important when considering the individual and family reaction to the stress of relocating. Furthermore the role of the physical environment and its impact on a person's well-being has just recently started getting attention, especially with the development of the fields of Environmental and Community Psychology, Health Psychology, Environmental Engineering and Social Architecture. It seems necessary to take an even wider look to include the supra context.

#### 2.5.2 Environmental factors affecting adjustment

Dunbar (1992) names environmental factors as mediating a person's performance and satisfaction when working abroad. According to Werner,

Altman and Brown (1992), the environment as such does not cause behaviour, however, it is considered as an integral part of behaviour and of effective intra- and interpersonal functioning. They subscribe to a holistic view of people and places being inseparable, mutually defining, and dynamic. Places also have meanings for people and certain environments support specific activities.

Kaplan (1983) proposed a model of person-environment compatibility that considered the patterns of information available in the environment. He considered these patterns in conjunction with environmental constraints on a person's behaviour and the individual's purposes, as potential sources of incompatibility. This problem can incur high psychological costs especially in the absence of restorative or supportive environments. By definition, a hardship post can represent an incompatible environment rather than a supportive environment.

What is known about the impact of the destination community?

#### 2.5.2.1 The destination community

The characteristics of the destination community seem to be important in the reaction to a transfer. To date these characteristics have not been specified or explored in relocation research according to Noe and Barber (1992) and Fisher and Shaw (1994). Yet, Stokols and Shumaker (1983) found person-environment congruence a predictor of personal well-being. Fisher and Shaw (1994) speak of this congruence in terms of individual preference and aspects of the new location.

Carlisle-Frank (1992) identified population density, economic climate, housing satisfaction, person-environment fit, place identity, and negative versus positive perceptions of the environment, as environmental characteristics that affect adaptation.

In a study of US expatriate personnel, Dunbar (1992) found that persons based in Europe were more satisfied with both their social and work conditions than those in non western and/or third world countries. This finding implies that living in a culture that is similar in some ways to one's own, could facilitate adjustment.

#### 2.5.2.2 Family and its spatial context.

The interface between the environment ( work place, home, neighbourhood, community, city, church, recreational activities, etc) and the family should be explored when assessing the effect of the relocation process (Lundy, 1994). These places or aspects of the environment, constitute the *spatial context* of the family. The goodness of fit between family members and their spatial context needs to be considered when determining person-environment congruence. This congruence refers to the individual's perception of the degree in which his spatial context supports his important goals and activities. Optimal congruence is seen as a predictor of personal well-being (Stokols & Shumaker, 1983).

Apart from these spatial considerations, there is a temporal aspect to be taken into account.

#### 2.5.2.3 The temporal context

The temporal context - aspects of the past and the future in the form of memories and anticipations - of the environmental experience constitutes a further predictor of well-being.

“Temporal qualities are inherent aspects of phenomena” (Werner et al., 1992, p. 299).

Here the emphasis is a person's comparative appraisal of her current, previous, and anticipated environments (Stokols & Shumaker, 1983). A comparison that denigrates the current environment would clearly result in anguish.

#### 2.5.2.4 Prior information

The more information available about the country of destination prior to the move, together with exploratory trips, the easier the adjustment process seems to be (Jones 1973). The relationship is not quite so simple: although reducing uncertainty contributes to adjustment, knowing what to expect does not necessarily breed liking (Fisher & Shaw, 1994). Even a short visit in advance does not seem to be comparable with the experience of living in another country.

What one reads or hears about a place in advance is also never quite the same as experiencing it. For example, seeing images of crippled or starving children on television is one thing, but encountering any form kind of human misery when walking on the streets of a host city, can be quite different.

The next aspect refers to the distance away from one's place of origin as a factor that can cause stress.

#### 2.5.2.5 Distance

Greater distance increases the likelihood of stress (Raviv et al. 1990). This can be due to the stress of not being able to get home quickly enough in case of an emergency, and of increased difficulty with maintaining contact with family members at home.

Not all places though, are equal in terms of the effect it has on the individual.

#### 2.5.2.6 Degree of difference

All places are not equally hard to adjust to. The more different the environment, the higher the requirement for new role learning and the higher the risk of rejection resulting in a lower chance of assimilation. Given that personality is a dynamic construct, this process brings in its wake personality modification with

concomitant changes in values, attitudes, and behaviour (Jones, 1973).

Mann (1972) mentions the *amount of change* required as an important moderating variable in relocation. A substantially different environment is associated with higher stress and anxiety levels (Noe & Barber, 1992). Such differences will militate against a strong person-environment fit (Carlisle-Frank, 1992); the adjustment period will be longer and the need for adjustment skills increased (Dunbar, 1992). High quality in-depth training becomes essential for a radically different environment (Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991).

Apart from physical differences, there are cultural differences to take into account. Mendendall and Oddou (1985) speak of the *cultural toughness* of an international posting. Living in a culture that differs considerably from one's own, can result in barriers to communication, misunderstandings and feelings of alienation. Cultures differ in their openness to foreigners and so-called closed cultures can contribute to this sense of alienation.

An unfriendly neighbourhood also plays a role in the sense of well-being of a new family in a new environment.

#### 2.5.2.7 Neighbours and weather

Unfriendly neighbours do not help the adjustment process, but even the weather plays a role here. In this respect, the summer months are better for arrival in a new country as the neighbours are more likely to be outside - provided they are friendly of course (Jones, 1973).

The foregoing paragraphs have one thing in common and that is that relocation implies a process of change and potential loss that requires personal adjustment.

#### 2.5.3 Change : Loss versus opportunity for growth

The changes associated with moving are enduring and affect virtually every aspect of a person's life (Carlisle-Frank, 1992). By facing the demands of a new situation, people adjust and are changed (Jones 1973). Friends and family in the country of origin can react negatively to such changes.

Moving can mean loss and change for everyone; new demands on the family itself can change the way its members relate to one another (Hausman & Reed, 1991). Specific losses include contact with friends, peers and family, emotional support and familiar places.

“Loss is defined as a state of being deprived of or being without something one has had.” (Peretz, in Hatfield, p 70, 1987).

When a move coincides with the loss or addition of a family member, the resultant instability of family relational patterns become traumatic for all (Cornille, 1993).

Change need not necessarily be in a negative direction. Some researchers have focused on the more positive aspects of relocation: Lundy (1994) emphasizes an awareness of cultural diversity and a sense of capacity for change that come with relocation. Martin (1995) sees relocation as an opportunity for personal growth and satisfaction as well as career enhancement.

Humke and Schaefer (1995) describe mobile men and women as having more interesting lives; as seeing themselves as more capable; as being satisfied with their lives; but not with their social relationships. Brett (1982) argues that a more interesting lifestyle and other gains compensate for unsatisfactory social relationships. She does mention that her study may have been biased as she drew people who had a positive attitude towards moving.

Jones (1973) lists the following gains associated with frequent domestic relocation:

an improved ability to cope with stress,  
increased flexibility and adaptability,  
broader interests,  
superior socialization skills, and  
an increased understanding and acceptance of other cultures.

Mann (1972) found that the diversity of experience that comes with relocation results in the development of cognitive complexity, flexibility, and autonomy.

It seems that the above findings refer to adults and do not necessarily reflect the experiences of children who grow up in foreign environments.

#### 2.5.4 Family vulnerability and resources

It is possible that geographical stress can push the resources of a family to a crisis stage ( Hausman & Reed, 1991; Lundy 1994). We can speak of a crisis when the family's resources cannot cope with the demands of the environment (Hatfield, 1987).

Researchers consider families as being both vulnerable and as having regenerative power: A family reacts to stress but also manages the resources within the unit (McCubbin, 1979). It also remains a source of stability and sameness during times of change (Cornille, 1993; Munton & Forster, 1990). It is interesting to note that during or after a move, family communication focuses on the logistics of the move at the expense of emotional aspects (Benjamin & Eagles, 1991). It would seem that practical imperatives take precedence at such times.

It remains the primary role of the parents to help children adjust to a new community as children acquire coping skills only as they grow older. Children need to feel secure in their families in order to be able to face unfamiliar groups and situations (Cornille, 1993).



### 2.5.5 Parental roles

There seems to be a high association between a positive post-move attitude on behalf of children and their mother's well-being three months after a move.

However, reciprocal causation could be at work here: a negative parental attitude would have a deleterious effect on a child's adjustment and a child's difficult adjustment would have a negative effect on parental attitude (Fisher & Shaw, 1994).

One should bear in mind that children mirror their parents' attitude, whether it is positive or negative (Cornille, 1991). A mother specifically plays a pivotal role in moving (Jones 1973), and if she has a negative attitude about the move her children will display a negative attitude towards their new neighbourhood and school (Humke & Schaefer, 1995 ).

In traditional families the mother can and does still fulfill a nurturing and stabilising role. But in 1994, Lundy views the marriage as an equal partnership and has serious reservations about the wisdom of such a role for the mother. Taking responsibility for the family's well-being is laying herself open for blame when things go wrong and denying her partner the opportunity of taking care of his share of the family adjustment process. This view implies that parents share financial and nurturing responsibilities equally.

But what may be true for one family is not necessarily true for another as families may be at different developmental stages, each person with his or her specific needs.

### 2.5.6 Family life cycle

The specific developmental stage of a family member will also impact on moving decisions and experiences. For instance, Jones (1973) noted that a younger

woman feels more lonely directly after a move than an older woman whose children had left home.

Noe and Barber (1992) found that the higher an employee's age, the less willing he is to relocate. If one considers the amount of physical and emotional energy that is expended each time one moves, it is easy to appreciate this finding. There seems to be an inverse relationship between a person's age and the amount of stress he can tolerate (Raviv et al., 1990).

### 2.5.7 Adolescents

It seems that parents resist moving as their children grow older (Brown & Orthner, 1990), while parents with younger children are more willing to move (Munton & Forster, 1990). Certainly as children grow older conflicting family needs create problems where there are no easy answers.

Loss of one kind or another after a move is almost invariably incurred. The adolescent who remains behind at boarding school forfeits family support during vulnerable years for the sake of uninterrupted schooling and a stronger sense of roots. The adolescent who opts to disrupt his South African schooling and leaves friends behind to move with his parents loses social status, may eventually identify with a foreign country, or remains at the edge of society (Shaw, 1992).

Parents and adolescents could have a difficult time when deciding whether to attend boarding school in South Africa or whether to go to an international school. They are trying to compare a known situation with an unknown one. In the absence of clear guide lines, many *ad hoc* decisions are taken. This can result in much heart ache, and even disruptive reversals of decisions that created new problems. Attending boarding school when parents are overseas is simply not the same as when parents live on a farm that is two hours' drive and a

reasonably priced telephone call away (Shaw, 1992).

Of course there seems to be positive lessons learnt both ways, but sadly the hidden costs may sometimes become apparent only after many years.

## 2.6 An adjustment process for the family

Early work looked at relocation as an undifferentiated event to which people had a variety of adjustment reactions (Steinglass & Edwards, 1993). More recently the process has been divided into phases (Sluzki, 1979). The experience in each phase affects coping with following phases and contributes to the eventual adjustment after a move.

Sluzki identified five phases in adjustment after migration, namely:

- preparation;
- act of migration;
- period of overcompensation;
- period of decompensation; and
- transgenerational impact).

The decision to move is seen as part of the preparation phase. (Stokols and Shumaker, 1982) include a consideration of the relocation history and individual attitudes as contributing to adjustment. Steinglass and Edwards (1993) have identified the following seven phases in international relocation:

- a relocation history and individual attitudes towards moving;
- a decision to move;
- preparation for the move;
- the move itself;
- its aftermath;
- short-term adjustment; and
- long term adjustment .

Carlisle-Frank (1992) urges researchers to incorporate personal, social, and environmental factors into models that describe adaptation to relocation.

Adaptation is viewed as an ongoing process of interaction between individuals and the systems of the family, work environment, social network, community and the society.

Munton and West (1995) see adjustment as a two-dimensional process. The one dimension concerns the personal changes and role changes of the person, and the other has to do with individual differences as well as the specific characteristics of the environment. This comprehensive model seems to encapsulate the complexity of adjustment along several axes.

Authors seem to be in agreement that relocation represents an adjustment process for the employee and his family. Humke and Shaefer (1995) pinpointed five aspects to family adjustment, namely: *social, behavioural, school adjustment, physical health and self-confidence*. This adjustment results from a change in *housing, education, leisure activities, daily routine, lifestyle and a disrupted social life* (Noe & Barber, 1992).

What does this mean for newly relocated diplomatic families? The following section considers the possible effect of these changes and is based on the information at my disposal at the time of writing.

Housing: A house is provided by the employer but usually has to be found by the employee and comply with departmental regulations. The family often stays in a hotel until such time as a suitable house has been found and their personal effects have arrived. The longer this period before moving into a house, the more unsettling for a family especially if they have small children.

Education: Children generally attend American International Schools and are

required to function more independently than in the school of their own culture as at home.

Daily routine and lifestyle: A daily routine changes as a result of changes in school hours, shopping hours, office hours and traffic conditions. Apart from these adjustments, each country has its own pace and style of life, its own customs, and availability of domestic help. It is necessary to find a new lifestyle that maintains some elements of the old within the constraints or possibilities of the foreign country.

Leisure activities: Families in South Africa are used to having a wide array of affordable leisure activities. There is a conspicuous lack of such facilities in hardship postings and where such facilities exist, the costs are often exorbitant. These families find their lives constricted by external limitations to their preferred activities.

Disrupted social life: The relationship between a social support system and stress has been well established. I am including results of relevant research on the specific requirements of a social support system for newly relocated people. (Weiss, 1974) conducted research in the field of social psychiatry that situates the individual in his world of interacting. This represents a shift in the focus of the search for the aetiology of neurotic behaviour away from the individual himself. Weiss provides a set of six provisions for social relationships that are supplied by significant others in an individual's daily life. This work is based on research with newly relocated groups and single parents who had deficient social support structures. It seems relevant here as international relocation represents a break in important social relationships. An awareness of the specific role of these provisions in a person's well-being or otherwise can enhance our understanding of the nature of adjustment in a social "vacuum".

The six provisions are identified as:



- attachment;
- social integration;
- opportunity for nurturing others;
- reassurance of worth;
- a sense of reliable alliance; and
- the possibility of obtaining help and guidance.

It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list (Weiss, 1974).

*Attachment* is provided by relationships that make it possible for a person to have a sense of security and place, resulting in emotional comfort and a sense of being at home. A lack thereof can result in feelings of loneliness and restlessness. Prolonged separation from attachment figures can result in acute distress.

*Social integration* implies the availability of a community where relationships can be formed that are based on shared concerns. These provide a source of information, companionship and social activity. Eventually a shared interpretation of experience can develop.

*Opportunity for nurturing others* refers to the satisfaction adults derive from caring for a child or another person. The act of nurturing provides many people with a sense of meaning and motivation to keep going.

*Reassurance of worth* promotes self-esteem and is obtained from family or colleagues. Relationships that confirm a person's competence in a particular role are essential for self-esteem.

*A sense of reliable alliance* comes from being connected to one's family, who would generally support a family member without question. A decrease in such contact, which is common today, means that this provision is not being met.

*The obtaining of guidance* becomes very important in times of adversity. Most people appreciate having access to a trustworthy and authoritative person who can provide emotional support and facilitate plans of action. A new arrival in a foreign country may not have access to such a person during her entire stay. (Weiss, 1974).

### 2.6.1 Phases of adjustment

Adjustment is also a process with recognizable stages. The relocation literature speaks of three phases (1-3) of the adjustment process (Dunbar, 1992). Lundy (1994), described four critical periods (A-D) during which each individual will have different experiences. Each stage encompasses a different set of expectations for each family member. I have combined these two models as follows:

#### *1. The pre-transfer and preparation stage.*

Events that take place and expectations before leaving play a role in the next stages.

#### *2. The honeymoon phase or the arrival and early post-move stage.*

This phase refers to an initial euphoria that can last several weeks or even months. Everything is new, exciting and full of possibilities.

#### *3 The culture shock phase or the post-move crisis period*

This is a period of disequilibrium and an unpleasant phase that accompanies the realization that things are done very differently in a foreign country. A common reaction is to want to oppose or change the prevailing system. A small and typical example is when a person becomes “righteously” indignant when speaking to fellow country-men about the inability of local people to understand how traffic should flow.

This phase progresses in a cyclical fashion. As soon as someone thinks he is beginning to understand the way things work and people think, something often happens to disillusion the person completely. Lazarus (1977) speaks of “a coping episode” which resembles a state of continual flux that changes in quality and intensity as a function of new information and outcomes of previous responses.

This is the stage when the family seems most vulnerable.

*4. The return to a neutral level of affect or the post-move adjustment period.*

At this stage, some months or even years after arrival, a person accepts that cultures and customs differ and gives up trying to change his environment or to “save” the foreign culture from themselves. He has developed a tolerance for irritating aspects of the different culture.

## 2.6.2 The impact of relocation

Researchers report that the effects of this event range from profound for some families (Munton & West, 1995) to unproblematic for other families, particularly military families (Munton & Forster, 1990). Brett (1992), in her work on domestic relocation, found few differences in well-being between people who do not move and those who are mobile. Other researchers found the relationship to be more complex (Stokols et Shumaker, 1983).

Differences among family members mean that not everyone will be affected in the same way (Lundy, 1994). The following section reviews the specific impact on both employee and spouse in terms of their various roles, before considering the impact of relocation on marriage and children.

## 2.6.3 Impact on the employee



According to Steinglass and Edwards (1993), the meaning given to a relocation is an important factor to consider when assessing its impact on individuals.

Luo and Cooper (1990) mention that changes in the work situation after relocation only account for low stress levels. Martin (1996) found that employees report *no* change in their stress levels after a move.

Munton and Forster (1990) speak of a “*time-to-proficiency*” effect as the work performance of an employee is affected temporarily after a move.

Dunbar (1992) found a higher degree of intrinsic work satisfaction among expatriate managerial and technical personnel than among domestically relocated personnel. This satisfaction is linked to the opportunity of having more autonomy and responsibility. Furthermore there is a higher correlation between intrinsic motives for relocation and satisfaction than for reinforcers such as salary and perquisites.

But while an employee may enjoy greater autonomy and work-satisfaction (Dunbar, 1992; Harvey, 1982), he may just as easily become pre-occupied with the demands of the job and be unavailable to his family (Cornille, 1993; Shahnasarian, 1991).

The role of home support for adequate work performance is stressed, though little is known about the processes by which family reactions to relocation affect the employee’s adaptation to his new position (Munton & Forster, 1990).

Stress at the work-family interface presents an obstacle to fulfilling one’s role adequately in either system (Bowen, 1988). If the family’s adjustment results in dysfunction, then work performance becomes impaired (Munton & Forster, 1990). It seems that the employee is only affected temporarily by a move but a family who is not adjusting well could cause the employee distress. These findings

highlight the need to consider the family's functioning holistically in the case of international relocation instead of focusing on the employee only.

If the employee is able to develop a *sense of coherence*, even at his home base, it seems that his motivation also after relocation and regardless of the adjustment to a new environment, will be high and positive. Antonovsky's (1987) use of this concept implies trust and understanding of a person's world, a world that is manageable and full of meaning, that regardless of daily adversities, struggles and stumbling blocks, he feels in charge of his life with the expectation of relative need satisfaction.

#### 2.6.4 Impact on accompanying partner

The employee's spouse was previously referred to as a trailing spouse. Now, the term "trailing spouse" though accurate, is seen as demeaning (Bayes, 1986) and has been replaced by "accompanying partner" (Kilgore & Shorrocks, 1991).

Women seem to be more stressed by moving than their partners (Bayes, 1986; Lundy, 1994; Shahnasarian, 1991; Stokols, Shumaker & Martinez, 1983). Women report experiencing:

- the loss of a home,
- a career,
- a social network, and
- a sense of self (McCollum in Lundy, 1994);
- loss of personal identity, and
- erosion of self-confidence (Shahnasarian, 1991), and
- boredom and loneliness (Martin, 1996).

But it is the career spouse who gives up a job to accompany a partner who finds relocation the most distressing. The career spouse loses career momentum, his or her network of professional contacts and experiences a shift in job status

(Shahnasarian, 1991).

The spouse's failure to adjust in an overseas posting, is the main reason for failed assignments (Tung, 1987. In Kilgore & Shorrock, 1991). Spouses experience the reduction in lifestyle, disorientation and dissatisfaction that occur at repatriation as having a major impact of longstanding duration. Conversely increased family stress has a minor impact but also of longstanding duration (Harvey, 1982).

It seems clear from recent research that there are both gender and role differences in terms of relocation (Donohue & Gullotta, 1983). It seems that the reasons for the discrepancy between the genders have not been addressed yet (Lundy, 1994). One reason may be that the spouse becomes very dependent on his/her partner and has limited options for gainful employment or even just to keep busy in a foreign country (Shahnasarian, 1991).

The fact that women generally have more active contact with family networks than men before moving, could be a partial explanation for this phenomenon (Lieberman, 1979). Frye (1991) also proposes that accepting a relocation, can lead to feelings of giving up power to the spouse and his company. In these ways women, as accompanying spouses lose more than men when they relocate. Clinical studies have shown that wives who were transferred, tend to suffer from depression (Seidenberg, 1973).

Male accompanying partners report the highest stress levels of all after a move (Martin, 1996) and often report a drop in self-esteem (Frye, 1991).

#### 2.6.5 Impact on marriage

Munton and Forster (1990) say that relocation has a significant impact on the course of a marriage. The authors quote Burgoyne (1987) who found an intimate

link between relocation and decisions to either end a marriage; begin a new relationship; or start a family.

A high degree of *spouse support* is significantly associated with successful adaptation in dual-career couples after relocation (Neims, in Starker, 1990). Starker (1990) reports an increased reliance on the employed spouse after a move, but cautions that over-reliance could cause marital tension. The employed spouse virtually takes the place of the lost social support system. Increased mutual dependence should be the norm until a satisfactory circle of friends can be established.

A relationship can become strained by feelings of anger and resentment by a spouse who feels that he/she had to make a significant sacrifice to remain with the partner. These feelings may not manifest until long after the move (Shahnasarian, 1991).

Domestic relocation does not seem to have such a negative impact on a relationship as Brett (1982) states that mobile couples are more satisfied with their marriages and their lives than couples who do not move.

#### 2.6.6 Impact on children

Parents report social adjustment problems for their children after a move (Brett, 1990). It is relevant therefore to include a discussion on the impact of relocation on children.

Children are involved in a high proportion of moves but not necessarily included in the decisions about the move. Moving is often something that just happens to a child and combined with the changes in his routine and setting, constitutes some of the stress experienced. (Brown & Orthner, 1990).

I have divided the review into two parts, namely younger children and adolescents. This distinction reflects the major spheres of influence during the growing up. During childhood the family provides the strongest point of reference whilst peer groups replace the parents during adolescence.

Young children may experience a move as a disintegration of their immediate world. Nevertheless parents report fewer problems moving young children than older ones (Brown & Orthner, 1990).

Gordon and Gordon (1958, in Raviv et al., 1990) linked high mobility with emotional problems in children. Vulnerability after moving is expressed as adjustment difficulties and regressive behaviour (Sandler & Bloch, 1979 in Raviv et al., 1990).

Long distance moves are linked to a lower self-concept (Kruger, 1980 in Cornille, 1993). Cornille found that children who have adjustment problems are generally those who have problems forming social relationships due to being overly shy, unfriendly or withdrawn. But she adds that the negative impact is short-termed.

Adolescents who relocate seem to experience more problems than younger children, since their peer relationships cannot be of the same quality as that of their more stable contemporaries (Luo & Cooper, 1990). Developmentally they are involved in developing a self-identity and investing in a social life. A move constitutes a disruption of these processes (Raviv et al., 1990). Humke and Schaefer (1995) explain that adolescents risk being rejected by peers at a stage of development when peer acceptance is very important to them.

Cornille (1993) found a moderate relationship between relocation and psychological reactions in adolescents. These reactions can include self-injury, hysteria, depression and thought disorganization.

On the other hand, Brett (1982), the domestic relocation researcher, found that children who do well and make friends easily carry such experiences from school to school.

#### 2.6.6.1 Social disruption and children's adjustment.

In contrast to adult relocation stress which is mainly ascribed to individual personality characteristics and role changes, the major cause of the stress experienced by both children and adolescents are ascribed to changes in the social system. They have to make new friends and overcome the loss of old ones. Children and adolescents need to develop a sense of belonging and need to integrate into recreational, church and youth groups. Basically 55% of their needs are peer interaction related and most of these opportunities arise at school. If the response to their needs is inadequate, the child's experience is worse (Humke & Schaefer, 1995), but successful peer interaction will influence adjustment positively in other areas (Cornille, 1993).

Children who differ from the main group either culturally, ethnically or because of a handicap, will experience the most difficulties in adjusting to a new school (Cornille, 1993).

Luo and Cooper (1990) found no negative effects on the mental health of children who move, on their relationships with their parents and on school achievement. Humke and Schaefer (1995) came to a somewhat different conclusion: they found that repeated school transfers may increase the risk of school failure and that a high number of life stresses for a child or adolescent will have a negative effect on his adjustment.

Steinglass and Edwards (1993) in their review of the literature on children's adjustment after international relocation, conclude that relocations help children learn positive adaptation skills and propose that it is normal to experience

feelings of depression following a move when one is coping with the loss of friends, place in school, neighbourhood and home. They found no evidence of long term emotional disturbances for children

## 2.7 Psychological, interpersonal, social and other factors

According to the literature reviewed, the factors that influence a person's adjustment after relocation can be broadly categorised as psychological, interpersonal and social in nature. Apart from the wide range of contributing factors there is a considerable degree of individual variation in reaction to the demands of relocation. Although these are discussed separately, there is an interaction between these factors.

### 2.7.1 Psychological factors

#### 2.7.1.1 Personality characteristics and successful relocation

As mentioned before, psychological indices show a higher association with adaptation than social indices (Lieberman, 1978).

We see that *the ideal transferee* has:

- \* a high self-esteem (Hausman & Reed, 1991; Munton & West, 1995), and a strong self-concept (Carlisle-Frank, 1992),
- \* an internal locus of control (Luo & Cooper, 1990; Carlisle-Frank, 1992),
- \* the ability to cope with change (Shahnasarian, 1991),
- \* and similarly, stress tolerance in situations of uncertainty, novelty and complexity (Carlisle-Frank, 1992),
- \* flexibility (Dunbar, 1992),
- \* enjoys subjective well-being as a stable trait (Munton & West, 1995),
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- \* flexibility (Dunbar, 1992),
- \* enjoys subjective well-being as a stable trait (Munton & West, 1995),
- \* has orientation towards conceptual intellectual processes (Carlisle-



Frank, 1992),

- \* an open-minded attitude and
- \* a willingness to make use of new information (Frye, 1991),
- \* a realistic expectation of what he or she is going to find (Fisher & Shaw, 1994),
- \* an ability to experience and express a wide range of emotions freely and safely (Hausman & Reed, 1991),
- \* a high exploratory tendency (Stokols et al., 1983), and
- \* specific attributions about relocation (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

This kind of information has implications for the selection of successful candidates for overseas assignments. But Kozloff found that the chief criteria reported by companies for international assignment selection are technical skills and willingness to relocate. At the same time, these companies name personality characteristics and interpersonal style as the principal contributors to failed assignments and poor performance (1996).

Hatfield (1987) raises a question about the viability of using standard personality tests which measure traits under static conditions in order to make predictions about a person who will experience transition.

Kozloff (1996) believes that we have to look at the way people think and act, at their beliefs, at how they manage tasks, make choices and interact with others in order to predict whether they will adapt in a foreign environment

According to Kozloff international adjustment and job performance share certain personality characteristics:

- confidence and emotional maturity,
- social intelligence and interpersonal skills,
- critical thinking and decision-making skills,
- ability to handle new situations and conditions,

- independence and self-reliance, and
- the ability to withhold rash critical judgments.

We will take a closer look at some of the recommended personality traits and cognitive styles in terms of adjustment.

### 1 *Self-concept and self-esteem*

A person's view of himself constitutes his self-concept, whilst self-esteem is the evaluative aspect of his self-concept (Gerdes, Ochse, Stander & van Ede, 1981). Aspects of the self-concept, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, mastery and absence of denigration, facilitate adaptive forms of coping when positive. A person with a good self-concept will evaluate stressful circumstances as less threatening and be less susceptible to stress (Vercruyssen & Chandler, 1992).

A person with high self-esteem can recognize and accept ambivalent feelings about a change and will negotiate change with a minimum of emotional turmoil - such a person is seen as resilient (Hausman & Reed 1991).

In fact a person's self-esteem plays a bigger role in the adjustment strategies he chooses than the characteristics of the job itself. High self-esteem is associated with innovative actions in a new job and innovation is seen as an important coping mechanism (Munton & West, 1995).

On the other hand, persons with low self-esteem tend to feel victimized and helpless and will choose ineffective strategies to resolve stress in order to maintain a view of the self as a victim (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

### 2 *Flexibility versus rigidity*

Interestingly very rigid persons "adapt" quite easily mainly because they do very little adapting. They experience few frustrations due to their insensitivity to another culture (Kealey & Rubin, 1983 in Dunbar, 1992). It is however difficult to imagine a rigid person as being capable of good interpersonal relations.

Moreover, most studies stress the importance of flexibility for easier adjustment. One assumes that greater flexibility can result in relatively easy adaptation but at the cost of changes to the self-concept and identity, resulting in greater alienation from the home country. There is probably an optimal level of flexibility.

Kozloff (1996) reasons that a person who is intolerant and knows it, but acts with social sensitivity, is in reality more tolerant than someone who deludes himself that he is tolerant.

### 3 *Orientation of personal control beliefs*

According to Gerdes et al (1981), locus of control refers to where a person believes the control lies for what happens to him during his life. If it is seen as external then other persons, events and circumstances are seen as responsible for what happens to him. But if the locus is internal, he takes responsibility for what happens.

Luo and Cooper (1990) state that an internal locus of control is associated with good adjustment. The more a person is convinced that he cannot control the problems related to relocation, the higher his stress levels both before and after the move (Martin 1996). Carlisle-Frank (1992) hypothesized that control beliefs in terms of perceived effectiveness before and after a move should remain the same for optimum adaptation.

### 4 *Attributions*

The causes that people attribute to events have significant consequences for the way in which they react to those events (Antaki & Brown (1982), in Martin, 1996) and affects the intensity of their feelings (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

If relocation is seen as advancing one's career, adjustment is easier (Dunbar, 1992). This raises a question about the rest of the family? If the family has to relocate because of the job requirements of one member, the others become

vulnerable to feelings of loss of control, ambivalence and resentment (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

Families where all members accepted the reason for moving and were in agreement, adjust better (Gulotta & Donohue, 1982) and their commitment to a common goal could actually bring them closer together (Hausman & Reed, 1991). But if the move is seen as symbolic of a disruption of the family, obstacles can be expected (McCubbin 1979).

#### 5 *Attitude*

Frye (1991) considers an open-minded attitude and a willingness to make use of new information to be cardinal to the adjustment process. Self-statements have been found to predict the approach towards an event like relocation (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

#### 6 *Expectations*

Knowing what to expect helps adjustment by reducing uncertainty (Fisher & Shaw, 1994), especially initially. Having unrealistically positive expectations can result in a feeling of being let down that is hard to overcome. Negative expectations sometimes allow for pleasant surprises that can sustain one during the adjustment phase.

#### 7 *Expression of emotion*

Specific losses are experienced when relocating and mourning for these losses is considered normal. Letting go of the past is also necessary so that new attachments can be formed.

Hausman and Reed (1991), found that being unprepared for the range and intensity of one's own reactions after relocating can complicate adjustment if the beliefs a person has about feelings, compels him to suppress rather than to experience and express a wide range of feelings safely.

## 8 *A tendency to explore*

A personal tendency to explore new places is seen as adaptive when expressed as exploring behaviour (Stokols & Shumaker, 1982). I would like to add curiosity about another culture as having an adaptive function. Taking an interest in local customs and beliefs makes it possible for one to relate to people.

### 2.7.2 The interpersonal arena and social factors

The interpersonal and social arena refer to the social context of a person's life abroad and include host country nationals, the international diplomatic and expatriate community, and the South African transferred families at the diplomatic mission.

The quality of interpersonal relations between the transferred official and the host country personnel constitutes an important aspect of adjustment and functioning.

Awareness, knowledge and involvement with host country persons are important dimensions of performance abroad. Cross-cultural efficacy is related to increased acceptance by host country persons, better personal adjustment and satisfaction with living abroad (Dunbar, 1992).

Kozloff (1996) regards social intelligence and interpersonal skills as important qualities in the person who has to live abroad.

He lists the following as specific "skills" of a person who adapts well:

- language skills,
- awareness of non-verbal communication,
- friendships with host country persons,
- interest in host country,
- recreational participation, and

- initiative to travel.

### 2.7.2.1. The role of the community

It seems clear that interpersonal and community support play a critical role in individual and family adjustment (Cornille 1993).

One role of the community is that of providing norms and expectations of how families can best deal with an event. The community offers social support through interpersonal relations (McCubbin, 1979) and newly relocated people are especially receptive to outside influences (Moos & Schaefer, 1986).

### 2.7.2.2 Social support

The relationships between stress, illness and extent of social support have been thoroughly researched. We know that social support acts as a buffer between a person and negative life events, but what happens in the absence of a familiar social support system?

When a social support system changes or falls away, as in relocation, a person's well-being is affected. A sense of well-being is related to a person's ability to feel secure and to lead a meaningful life. Security is linked to a sense of control over one's life (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

The loss of social contacts is translated as a break in social continuity and increased isolation for family members. Hausman and Reed (1991) speak of an experience of social anonymity.

Jones (1973) equates relocation with social disorganization. However, this finding was based on immigrant studies. Although all the hitherto important and familiar people in one's life disappear from one day to the next when a diplomatic

family moves abroad, the social disruption is of a temporary nature. Moreover, in most postings a diplomatic or expatriate community can be found to accommodate newcomers.

Cornille (1983) draws our attention to the importance of both social support systems and social networks. In a support relationship, the family plays an active role in using the help, the affirmation and association provided by outside groups.

Social support which includes a sense of acceptance, being valued and being part of a network for problem solving is a valuable family resource during relocation (Cornille, 1993). Depending on whether a sense of goodwill and a culture of helpfulness exists within a mission, such help is generally extended to new diplomatic families on an informal basis. When no such help is forthcoming, adjustment can be very difficult.

It is interesting to note how little change occurs for American military families who relocate between bases and who report no problems related to such moves. The military has been innovative through the establishment of family service centres where families receive assistance in all aspects of the settling down process.

Military families are possibly even more mobile than the diplomatic community, thus increasing the chances of finding at least one old friend at a new base. Old friends are a source of information which helps reduce anxiety (Fisher & Shaw, 1993). This is possibly because a resumption of contact with an old friend gives a sense of continuity to one's life. It is the one person, or family, in your new surroundings for whom you have an identity, for whom you are not anonymous.

### 2.7.2.3 Social networks and time

Starker (1990) undertook a study of the development of new social networks and the changes that occur within networks over time. She showed that though



intimacy levels do increase over time, new networks are unstable and in transition even after several months. It takes time to build up a new social support system and even then it can take from two and a half to four and a half years in a new community before stable levels of intimacy can be achieved. She suggested that the absence of a social network several months after relocation should be seen as a normative phase of the move and not as a disturbance in interpersonal relationships.

Carlisle-Frank (1992) hypothesizes that persons with varied circles of friends will adapt more easily than those with limited or no support systems.

McCubbin (1979) emphasizes the value of actively building and maintaining supportive relationships between family members and the community in the management of stress.

#### 2.7.2.4 A religious community

Religion and religious beliefs play an important role in a family's ability to manage stress, especially in more severe situations (McCubbin, 1979). A strong link between family life and church affiliation predicts success in integrating into a new community (Cornille, 1993). In a sea of foreignness, a church represents a community of people who share similar values and belief systems.

#### 2.7.2.5 Role of support groups

Clinicians found support groups helpful for newly relocated people. It provides a safe way to express negative feelings and helps reduce feelings of loneliness and loss. A balance of ventilation and problem-solving can be nurtured in a non-clinical setting (Cornille, 1993).

How can any of the foregoing findings on community and social support apply to a family arriving in a virtual social void? Hausman and Reed (1991) remind us



that openly communicative families find and receive support more easily. Even so, diplomatic families are particularly affected as communities know that diplomats are only staying temporarily and are often not keen to initiate anything more than casual contact.

### 2.7.3 Other contributing factors

The following section groups together those factors contributing towards adjustment as found in the literature.

#### 2.7.3.1 Time

Time needs to be considered as a variable in the adaptation process (Munton & West, 1995). Lundy (1994) feels that the generally accepted period of six months to adjust is too short. Transferred employees take an average of 8 months to adjust at work; upper-level managers need nine and a half months (Benjamin & Eagles, 1991). If adjustment includes the time needed to settle in, establish new roots and deep friendships, it takes from six to eighteen months (Carlisle-Frank, 1992). None of these studies included the specific context of the new environment as a variable.

After nine months in a new environment, children display a higher level of anxiety than those who have been there for a year. The first year seems to be the most critical (Alston & Nieuwoudt, 1991).

Somewhat confusingly, Humke and Shaefer (1995) find that it takes an average of 23 days for adolescents to establish peer relationships and 17 days to adjust academically. It seems rather short, but it is important to note that their study refers to domestic relocation presenting similar academic situations.

At three months after a move children report

- \* having fewer best friends,
- \* spending less time with friends (especially boys),
- \* spending less time in sports,
- \* reading less for pleasure, and
- \* and spending less time with their parents (especially for adolescents) than before the move (Humke & Schaefer, 1995).

Time, of course, has a particular relevance when it comes to the development of relationships (Werner et al., 1992), as there is still no such thing as an instant relationship.

### 2.7.3.2 Relocation history

Pre-move history:

Martin (1995) found that the longer a family had been in an area prior to moving, the higher the resultant general stress levels when they relocate. Stokols and Shumaker, (1982) have suggested the concept *place dependence*, which is defined as a person's subjective perception of being strongly attached to a place, to explain this effect. Carlisle-Frank (1991) calls it *pre-location attachment* and predicts that high pre-move attachment will slow down adjustment. In the light of the foregoing, Fisher and Shaw's (1993) suggestion that a first move away from a place where people have lived for a long time, will be more traumatic than any number of subsequent moves, seems understandable.

This brings us to a consideration of the frequency of moving and its effect on people. Let me note that Munton and Forster (1995) and Humke and Schaefer (1995) have called for longitudinal studies to measure the attitudes and emotions of family members over the course of relocation.

Number of moves:



The literature has produced mixed results on this variable. Jones (1973) found that the more one moved the quicker one adjusted. But each overseas move presents unique problems and past experiences in other places may not be relevant (Fisher & Shaw 1994). Martin (1995) adds that the fewer times one moves, the more stress one experiences each time. There seems to be agreement that first time movers have more problems (Lehr & Hendrikson in Gulotta & Donohue, 1982), excepting Dunbar (1992), who found no difference between novice expatriates and experienced movers in terms of well-being. He adds that prior experience abroad is more useful in the sense that one learns appropriate inter-cultural behaviour and cognitions. Prior experience also seems to help in bringing about more realistic expectations about a move (Shaw & Fisher, 1993).

In addition Humke and Schaefer (1995) point out that a higher rate of mobility is in fact associated with more adjustment problems and a higher risk of maladjustment and dysfunction. The risk of children having to repeat grades and exhibiting behavioural problems also increases with the number of moves.

### 2.7.3.3 Extraneous Problems

Problems - such as housing problems, having to stay in a hotel for a long time, a family separation - can also have an affect on one's attitude to adjustment (Fisher & Shaw, 1994).

This is an important variable as moving problems are virtually inevitable and as such certainly contribute to the stress of relocation. In fact, much of relocation stress and irritability is contributed to the various problems and obstacles encountered. Problems often become an important focus for a family and are invested with an inordinate amount of emotional energy. Once a problem or obstacle has been eliminated, that energy available for adjusting to the new surroundings.

Jones (1973) specifically mentions the arrival of furniture and personal effects as contributing to adjustment. Werner et al. (1992), describe the psychological function of decorating a new house as twofold: it results in a sense of attachment to the new home and a sense of control over the environment.

## 2.8 Relocation and mental health

Contrary to the traditional view, relocation is not an acute or short-term life stressor that has uniformly negative effects on health occurring at the time of moving. This earlier view ignored the longer term health consequences of relocation. (Stokols et al., 1983). This means that some people may experience relocation as an acute time-limited stressor whilst others may experience it as a chronic state of imbalance, both having a specific effect. Thus both the traditional view and the view proposed by Stokols et al. (1983) become relevant in relocation.

In some cases relocation itself becomes a coping strategy for dealing with some problem in one's life (Stokols et al., 1983). But *blocked mobility* - the inability to improve one's life situation through moving - can be more harmful than the move itself.

However, when symptoms of mental or emotional disturbance are present, they are due to the reaction to change and these reactions vary from person to person (Hausman & Reed, 1991). The psychological state of imbalance that results from relocation can lead to physiological, affective and behavioural stress reactions. If these are acute or long lasting, illness symptoms may occur (Stokols & Shumaker, 1982).

Negative symptoms can occur even if the move was seen as desirable (Bayes, 1986), but Stokols and Shumaker (1982) state that desirable events are definitely not related to health problems! It does not seem useful to pursue this line of



enquiry unless the person's total life context is taken into account.

For some individuals part of the distress experienced during relocation may be related to unresolved experiences of separation and loss linked to childhood trauma (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

### 2.8.1 Frequent relocation

Stokols et al. (1983) found a direct relationship between frequent relocation and a high number of distress symptoms. The intensity of the reaction to relocation is mediated by factors such as desirability of the move and degree of predictability of what will happen to one.

Frequent moves drain a person's emotional and physical resources, lessening motivation to invest time and energy into reestablishing credentials. This can result in isolation and depression (Seidenberg (1973) in Brown & Orthner, 1990).

High mobility individuals report a higher number of illness symptoms than low mobility persons (Starker, 1990). High mobility has been linked specifically with high coronary heart disease figures (Luo & Cooper, 1990). Starker (1990) quotes research that found the rate to be twice as high as in low mobility subjects.

### 2.8.2 Symptoms

Relocation adjustment can be accompanied by an increased sense of well-being (Luo & Cooper, 1990) especially initially, but may also produce symptoms of anxiety, stress and uncertainty (Noe & Barber, 1993), sleep problems, depression and unhappiness, and a feeling of being on edge, (Jones, 1973), as well as experiences of pain, anger and confusion (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

One study found that mobile wives are particularly vulnerable to depression,

often given to substance abuse and described as defeated women (Seidenberg in Starker, 1990). Physical symptoms include headaches, eating and sleep disturbances, and muscle spasms (Hausman, 1991).

### 2.8.3 Psychopathology

Are these symptoms indicative of psychopathology? Not necessarily, says Lundy (1994), and even ineffective responses are not evidence of mental disturbance as they can be seen as normal reactions to overwhelming circumstances (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

Many people cope effectively with very serious crises (Moos & Schaefer, 1986) as people are generally fairly creative problem solvers. However, professional help should be sought when excessive discomfort is experienced beyond a reasonable time period (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

## 2.9 Coping strategies

This section represents a review of the ways in which people cope with the stress and negative symptoms experienced during and after relocation. Coping behaviour is an important dimension of family adaptation to stress and is broadly defined as a strategy for managing stress. Such behaviour is effective when a sense of security and meaning in one's life can be re-established (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

Martin (1996) noted that an exploration of the ways in which people deal with relocation problems as such will increase our understanding of its impact.

### 2.9.1 A crisis calls for strategies

The more active and problem-focused a person's coping strategies, the better his

adjustment (Munton & West, 1995; Starker, 1990).

Negative reactions activate coping strategies to reestablish daily routines and to manage unpleasant feelings. The success or failure of these attempts determines whether a person will grow in this process or become ill. Life crises force the development of new cognitive and personal skills for effective adaptation. Our need for psychological and social equilibrium, impels us to use strategies to restore such balance. The inability to deal effectively with a situation, may result in future problems in dealing with transitions and crises (Moos & Shaefer, 1986).

Ineffective strategies compound problems and include:

- \* excessive drinking and or working,
- \* increased dependence on a partner for emotional security, and
- \* destructive aggression

(Cornille, 1993).

Munton and Forster (1995) report that people seem to have fewer coping resources following relocation. It is worth bearing in mind, that there are several ways in which stress-related problems can be dealt with. Skills that are effective in one situation may not be so in another (Moos & Schaefer, 1986). When symptoms cannot be dealt with in the usual way, people will resort to other mechanisms in a trial and error way (Cornille, 1993).

### 2.9.2 Adequate preparation for a move

Munton and West (1995) state that one cannot actually *prepare* for moving as you learn to cope with moving by moving. Jones (1973) says that a little training can help but agrees that the actual moving is the learning process.

But moving is not just a physical process and inadequate preparation exacerbates eventual adjustment problems (Dunbar, 1992). Carlisle-Frank



(1991) also believes in the value of preparedness as a way to reduce uncertainty. These researchers are referring to preparation in terms of specific information about the host country and information about cultural differences.

### 2.9.3 Coping is an attitude

Coping begins with the right attitude towards relocation. For those who view change as an opportunity and relocation as a challenge, and who are prepared to take action to make things happen, adaptation comes more easily (Neims, in Starker, 1990).

Attitude towards a move is reflected in the kind of *self statements* we make. A person who is given to catastrophizing, judging or overgeneralization will not only expect such outcomes but also believe them to be true. This in turn will lead to negative emotional experiences. For example, believing that you will never make friends again or that this move represents the worst thing that has ever happened to you, is not going to help anyone to adjust happily.

On the other hand, telling yourself that you will make the best of the situation, or being open-minded about meeting new people will help (Hausman & Reed, 1991).

### 2.9.4 Explore your surroundings

Stokols et al. (1983) speak of a high level of exploratory behaviour as helping adjustment. Individual coping skills are important in accessing services (Cornille, 1993).

### 2.9.5 A normal schedule

The sooner a normal schedule can be established, the better for the family



(Jones ,1973).

The most important task is to make friends, whilst retaining contact with old ones. This reduces the sense of loss (Cornille, 1993).

#### 2.9.6 The spouse

Corporate wives cope by: *fitting into the corporate lifestyle; by developing self; and by becoming more independent* (Gulotta & Donohue, 1982). Lundy (1994) does not consider this approach as adaptive or sound in terms of an equal partnership. In a discussion on the effect of relocation on the spouse, she points out that all three coping mechanisms have one thing in common, namely it is the woman who must adapt. She must identify with her husband's job and be satisfied with his career successes. She should rely on herself for getting her needs met and develop outside interests. This leads to a minimilisation of the husband's role in the family (as she takes care of everyone's adjustment needs) and undermines the mutual interdependence that can exist in a marriage. Furthermore, if a woman is still unable to adjust she is seen as the problem.

#### 2.9.7 Children and adolescent coping

Current conceptualizations of adolescent coping is still in an early stage as it has not been as well researched as adult coping behaviour (Vercruysse & Chandler, 1992).

Adolescents who use approach strategies as opposed to avoidance strategies adjust better (Vercruysse & Chandler, 1992). Girls are more likely to complain about stress and seek support than boys (Raviv et al., 1990). It is not clear whether this strategy is effective.

Children who are copers report less anxiety than those who catastrophize in imagined stressful situations. Catastrophizing is quite common among younger

children. Coping behaviour increases with age so that at sixteen twice as many coping skills are used as at eight years of age. Positive self-talk is the most commonly used strategy across all age groups (Brown et al., 1985).

### 2.9.8 Parental involvement

It seems important to discuss the reasons for moving with children before departure and allow the child some level of control during times of confusion: for instance, allow him to decide which of his favourite possessions should stay behind, travel by sea or remain with him during the trip.

Humke and Schaefer (1995) found a significant correlation between adolescent companionship and intimacy with new friends on the one hand and active *parental involvement* (e.g. enabling proximity to peers and meeting other parents) in the adolescent's social world following relocation. This is an important adjustment strategy to help counteract the well documented difficulties that adolescents experience with peer relations after relocation (Cornille, 1993).

A helpful approach for children and adolescents include the following:

- approach the move as an adventure;
- facilitate contact between the teens in the new city and your teens in advance to discuss schools, activities and allay fears;
- arrange a pen pal at the new school for a head start with a friend;
- subscribe to the school newspapers before moving; and
- clarify course requirements in advance

(Benjamin & Eagles, 1991).

In summary it seems that a positive, constructive attitude, combined with a willingness to explore new surroundings in order to create a new comfort zone, will facilitate adjustment.



There are certain actions parents can take to help their children adjust more quickly. Spouses need to be aware of possible changes in their relationship. Although there are few answers to issues that are currently in flux, an awareness of the issues can pave the way towards individual ways of dealing with them.

It seems relevant to relate these findings to the South African context.

## 2.10 South Africa, its diplomats and relocation

Taking all of the above into account, the situation for the South African context may not be much different. As mentioned earlier, a search of the literature revealed that no formal studies of this nature have been undertaken in this field with a specific focus on South African diplomats. Thus it becomes pertinent to relate the foregoing findings to South African diplomats who have to relocate and specifically to postings that fall in the hardship category. Because of the lack of formal research most of the information stated below is based on communications with South African Foreign Affairs officials or reflect my own knowledge and experience as a spouse of a South African Foreign Affairs official over twenty-five odd years. Although my intention was to be as accurate and reliable as possible, no claim can be made to completeness or preciseness. Nor are these views necessarily endorsed by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs.

### 2.10.1 Missions

Missions abroad range in size from a one man office to large embassies with representatives from several state departments. A typical mission would have a few representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs, perhaps a Defense Attaché and an official from the Department of Trade and Industry. Foreign Affairs have a political division and an administrative division, the latter is responsible for managing the office.

Each mission develops its own specific culture and the mission's reaction to a newcomer seems to have a tremendous and enduring impact. Five of the seven missions I visited had been established since 1994. This newness had extra implications for transferred personnel. The persons opening up a new mission in a very different culture have to do pioneering work and are often left to their own devices.

They need to find buildings, employ local staff without knowing the local customs and systems. The teething problems of a new mission are worse in a hardship post in the absence of a clear formal sector. One example perhaps is that no telephone directory had been printed in Ethiopia for the five or six years prior to the opening of a mission.

It can take a long time to develop a strong cohesive internal dynamic in a mission which would ensure good cooperation. The more people battle initially and the more people feel that they are on their own, the less likelihood of cohesiveness.

The South African mission plays a complex role in the transferred official and family's life.

In the first place it represents a link with South Africa. Mail and newspapers arrive via the diplomatic bag.

Secondly, for a new family it represents an entity that has been in the foreign country for a while at least and as such it is expected to have a certain expertise that the new arrivals lack and need to be informed about. Thus there is an expectation of support at least on an informational level.

Thirdly the mission's administrative section makes a hotel booking for the family, and holds the key to all housing regulations. It determines, for example, whether a medical evacuation to another country is warranted or not and it grants

permission for home leave. The administrative section in turn is responsible to Head Office for all decisions that are taken.

### 2.10.2 Moving as a career imperative

The first question that arises is whether the current Western trend of resisting postings is reflected in South African Foreign Affairs families. If so, it would surely be a contradiction in terms since being a diplomat implies a readiness and indeed an eagerness to go on foreign postings.

### 2.10.3 Posting procedures

In the past South African diplomats seemed to have limited discretion in terms of either choosing or declining postings. Thus a diplomat may be reluctant to turn down a specific posting as it was felt that the official may then be discriminated against and not considered for other postings. This can be seen as a general tendency in most employee contexts.

During the five years before 1997, the South African Department of Foreign Affairs used a system whereby officials could apply for postings. This seemed to result in receiving no applications for the so-called "less desirable" postings. In August 1997 a policy was devised in which the world of foreign assignments was divided into three parts and each officer aspiring for transfer had to serve consecutively in each of these three world areas, ranging from so-called "most desirable" to "least desirable". These areas correspond roughly to the developed, the developing and the underdeveloped parts of the world, with the undeveloped world seen as the "least desirable" (Personal communication: A Senior FA official)

This system was also subsequently put on hold. The latter system may have ensured equity but doubtless, seemed not to suit everyone's preferences. Similar

to the finding of Noe and Barber (1992), it's apparent that a person may be unwilling to relocate to one place yet be quite willing to go to another. As of the year 2000, the South African Department of Foreign Affairs has reverted to the original policy of transferring officials according to departmental needs (Personal communication: A Senior FA official).

And yet, these departmental needs may have consequences for the diplomatic families' needs, effect their adaptation and determine the future relationship between the diplomatic family and the DFA.

#### 2.10.4 The diplomatic family dilemma

It makes intuitive sense that a diplomat may experience pressure from his family not to take up a seemingly difficult posting if there seems to be a clash with the needs of the family. This is particularly true for a family with children who are ready for High School education.

If this is the case, the choices are to 1) remain at Head Office (without the benefit of foreign allowances) and forfeit the opportunity and experience of working abroad; 2) resign from the Department; 3) leave a spouse behind to stay with the children and proceed alone; and 4) take a possibly reluctant family along in the hope that they may adjust eventually.

At present the chances for South Africa diplomats seem to be good that the latter choice will prevail, if career interests and avoidance of negative career consequences are likely to take precedence over misgivings about the effects on families, as the findings of researchers like Brett (1982) and Donahue & Gulotta (1983) suggest.

#### 2.10.5 The dilemma of the spouse

The career-minded spouse faces different dilemmas as at present it is not possible for a diplomatic spouse to pursue an uninterrupted and independent career, unless a commuter relationship is desired. Nor is it possible to be gainfully employed during foreign postings. There are historic and actual reasons for this situation, such as reciprocal agreements between governments and issues of diplomatic immunity. South Africa is not unique in this aspect, as this regulation holds true in most foreign countries and applies to diplomatic spouses worldwide. The South African FDA will give spouses preference (above locally recruited personnel) by employing them in administrative positions at missions abroad should such positions be available. After democratization in South Africa in 1994, many of the new diplomats who joined the Department of Foreign Affairs in a career change, had spouses who were already established in their own careers.

A further dilemma is that a spouse generally needs to find short-term employment during home posting periods in Pretoria when foreign allowances fall away, resulting in a drop in living standards for the family. The common perception is that this becomes harder to enter the marketplace after a break of several years with nothing to show on a curriculum vitae.

In light of the above, it becomes all the more urgent to undertake a study of this nature and to test these observations against the experiences of officials and their spouses.

## 2.11 Summarised findings from literature.

1. The advent of dual-career families have resulted in a dilemma for the spouse who cannot follow a partner around the world and pursue a career at the same time. The dilemma is further complicated by the fact that the spouse has to contribute to the family's finances on home postings and may find it difficult to find work on a discontinuous basis. A lack of attention to the spouse's dilemma



is evident.

2. Relocation is a stressful event for the entire family. The more disruption, the worse for the family. The way a family copes, has to do with the adequacy of their preparation, personality characteristics, psychological and situational variables, coping strategies and social support.
3. The stress of relocation lies in its requirement to cope with the loss of a previous lifestyle and social network, and to create and adjust to a new lifestyle in a different community.
4. It would seem that the employee has the least stress, that children adjust in the long run and that the spouse has a pivotal role to play in the well-being of the family. There is a high association between a positive post-move attitude on behalf of children and their mother's well-being three months after a move.
5. There are four phases to adjustment, namely a preparation phase, the actual move and the arrival phase, the post-move crisis period and the post-move adjustment period.
6. Relocation has been found to have a significant impact on the course of a marriage. There is a strong link between relocation and decisions to either end a marriage, begin a new relationship or start a family.
7. Adequate international adjustment and job performance require certain characteristics such as self confidence and emotional maturity, social intelligence and interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making skills, ability to handle new situations, independence and self-reliance and the ability to withhold rash critical judgments.
8. Cross cultural efficacy is related to increased acceptance by host country





persons, better social adjustment and satisfaction with living abroad. It takes time to build up a new social support network and to achieve stable levels of intimacy to counteract the initial experience of anonymity.

- 9 The symptoms of distress vary from behavioural problems and depression in children especially during the first year, to depression, alcoholism, eating disorders and anxiety in the spouses. These latter symptoms are also seen as ineffective coping strategies. People seem to have fewer coping resources after a move and will often resort to 'trial and error' procedures.
- 10 The situation of a South African family in a Foreign Affairs context seems similar to the assumptions in the literature and the findings in social international research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SHIFTING SANDS OF KNOWING

#### 3.1 Introduction

In chapter one I briefly touched on my dissatisfaction with the general research designs on relocation during the preparatory phase of this study. The majority of papers dealt with conclusions based on quantitative methods which to my mind represented a one-sided, though not incorrect, picture of an extremely complex process.

For me to cover the journey through this complex maze, I realized that my discomfort had also to do with the difference in my understanding of man and his world, and the viewpoints of these quantitative, thus positivistic and reductionistic ways of looking at man and his world.

For these reasons I found myself on a journey of discovering and confirming my own ever shifting epistemology. Because for a reader not knowing a researcher or psychologist's epistemological stance seems to be akin to listening to a politician without knowing to which party he belongs. You may find that you are so busy trying to place the speaker into the right ideological box, that you miss the purport of the words. The psychologist starts making sense once he has been placed within a frame of reference. That is when it becomes possible to give meaning to his beliefs - his epistemology.

The term epistemology refers to those basic premises that inform actions and cognitions. The Collins dictionary defines epistemology as the study of the source, nature and limitations of knowledge (1994). Capra (1996) defines epistemology as "understanding of the process of knowing (p 39) and as "the method of questioning" (p 40).

The first step of a research process for a psychologist, is to define her epistemology. That is her way of thinking about theories of behaviour and about life in general and in particular. Keeney (1992) believes that our practical actions always embody formal ideas. The psychologist's orientation determine a "unique way of drawing distinctions that construct and organise therapy'. Furthermore if we are unaware of the basic premises underlying our work and cognition, we will be less effective as researchers, psychologists and therapists.

Ford and Lerner (1992) remind us that our assumptions influence the way we construe ourselves and the world; the selection of phenomena that is considered relevant; and the way in which we interpret phenomena.

Researchers are people in the first place, shaped by familial, personal, cultural, ethnic and geographical forces. The process, by which thinking is shaped, is as complex as life itself. The philosopher, Kant, believed that ideas are the creations of organisms that are the by-products of navigation through life (in Efrans, Lukens & Lukens, 1988). This implies a certain permeability between humans, our surroundings, the life forces that we are exposed to and the nature of thinking. But not only are ideas informed by our surroundings, we actively use and select information to construct our ideas. This is a dynamic interactive process. Keeney (1992) believes that what we observe about others says more about ourselves than about those who are being observed.

A psychologist who is involved in research during training is exposed to a plethora of theories about human behaviour. These theories take their place among those of all the teachers we encounter on the road of learning to think and reflect on the nature and behaviour of being human.

The practical implication of this learning process is that it evolves into a



process of thinking, a constant testing of theory against practice and life's experiences. It becomes a continuous process of revising theoretical assumptions in the light of practical realities, each informing and shaping the other. And so epistemology becomes a developing process; it cannot be a fixed set of assumptions since the evolving ideas may shift all the time.

Often the terminology that is adopted by various disciplines, theories and paradigms, serves to obscure older roots of concepts. Fifty years ago the term constructivism had not been coined nor was man contextually defined as an eco-systemic "being" . Yet Kant spoke of man being the creator of his thoughts more than a century ago (in Efran et al., 1988). And for the traditional African person there seems not to have been any other way of existing than as an eco-systemic being, though not conceptually defined as such (Mutwa, 1996). An eco-systemic person seems to be one who lives in harmony with himself, others, nature and the universe (Bragg, 1996).

To my mind, the relatively new field of study, called narrative, is really not new either. The formal study of narrative as a life shaping process seems quite divorced from the stories I heard as a child and the undefined effects they had on my life. And yet, the narrative notions of today and those childhood stories seem to be cut from the same cloth. Mankind has always told stories. What is new is the recognition that the stories we hear and the stories we tell ourselves, shape our lives.

The quest for understanding and seeking the answers to the riddles posed by life, will never stop, even if we sometimes rename old ideas.

### 3.1.1 Another way of understanding eclecticism

Many therapists worry about the school of therapy that is best or the most true, as if in search of a single and true religion (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). It is more

My basic assumptions seem to be allied to the ideas of social constructionism, narrative and postmodernism. The narrative and social constructionist metaphors serve to organise perceptions and actions both in research and practice, from a postmodern worldview. The resultant findings have “no other reality than that bestowed on it by mutual consent” (Hoffman, 1990).

Narrative refers to an approach which considers people’s lives as stories (Bruner, 1987, Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Social constructionism implies a consideration of the ways in which reality has been constructed through interaction with others. The influence of social realities on the meaning of people’s lives, is also considered (Gergen, 1984 ; Howard, 1991).

These approaches lie towards the constructionist end of the realist-constructionist continuum. Keeney (1983) speaks of naive realism and naive solipsism as representing the two extremes in thinking along the objectivism - constructionist continuum.

Naive realism refers to the view that there is a real world out there which can be known through the senses. Naive solipsism is the view that the world out there is entirely a person’s own construction.

Keeney (1983) believes that most therapists are probably in a state of transition between the two modes of thinking. This is fortunate as the extreme positions merely provide partial glimpses of the whole picture. At this point I consider my thinking to be closer to the constructionist end but not radically so. There are some things that seem to be more real than constructed, e.g. if I were to compare a table to a movie, I would consider the table to be part of an objective and somehow “real” world whereas the movie can be considered as a construction. Consensus is more likely among English speakers about the meaning and connotations of the word table than of a specific movie.

With the above as introduction, I shall describe my theoretical nest briefly,

before attempting to provide a view or a definition of adjustment as a construct in a way that would be consonant with these approaches.

In keeping with eco-systemic thinking, theoretical perspectives should be anchored in a general historical context that reflects the recent evolution that has taken place in the relationship between man and state; man and himself; and man and society (Sampson, 1989).

In the next sections attention is focussed on the development of pre-modernistic thinking to post-modernism, constructivism and the narrative perspective.

### 3.1.3 From pre-modernism to post-modernism

Theories of social behaviour are first and foremost reflections of current history (Sarbin, 1986). Sampson (1989) states that theories of psychology were developed during the era of modernism and hence best suited to describe that era's framework of understanding.

But we are now leaving the modern era behind and therefore need to look at the nature of the shift from pre-modernism to modernism and the currently evolving post-modernism in order to provide a context for current thinking. These ideas set the socio-historical context for the epistemology of the thesis.

The following section outlines the changes in thinking and in society from pre-to post-modernism.

### 3.1.4 Pre-modernism

According to Schrenk (1999) pre-modernism refers to the period up to and including 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and is known as the dark ages. It is punctuated as follows: In the pre-modern world, God ruled and man had no share or say in his own destiny. The precursor of modern man, who was seen as needing no reasoning ability and moreover "a mere pawn in the hands of

fate, church and state”, provides the background to the paradigm shift from pre-modernism to modernism (Schrenk, 1999). Christian doctrine was the only truth and one’s role on earth was accepted unquestioningly. Knowledge was regulated by the church which had the power to distinguish truth from falsehood. False ideas were equated with paganism (Durrheim, 1997). The ultimate goal of life was to earn a place in heaven and a life of suffering was virtually a guarantee of that goal. Problems were ascribed to sin, and penance was the solution.

In psychological terms one can say that the locus of control was situated in God. Individuals were not free to choose which path to follow; their task was to follow the path determined by God (Sampson, 1988).

Since the basis of one’s beliefs was never questioned, superstition proliferated and was hard to disentangle from Christian beliefs. The notion of personal agency or power did not exist. People were not literate and priests were the “holders” and interpreters of knowledge (Shrenk, 1999).

A sense of personal identity would have been a rare thing in pre-modern times when everything was done in the name of God. Thus the notion of progress in a community or self-improvement could not exist.

People did not travel or migrate much. This meant they had little contact with different cultures which in turn created intra-community stability that lasted for centuries. Pre-modern man functioned as part of a community and his identity was vested within the community. Being outside a community was akin to being “nonexistent, a stranger or dead” (Sampson, 1989).

These basic premises were to change during the next era, the so-called “age of reason”.

### 3.1.5 Modernism

The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries mark the dawning of the age of enlightenment and

reason. Original thinkers broke out of the mould of pre-modernism and started using their ability to reason (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1988). For instance, the development of the printing press led to an increase in literacy and enabled the dissemination of the knowledge of the day. Scientific findings resulted in an ongoing quest to discover the secrets of the natural world (Schrenk, 1999). The darker side of this quest represented a desire to conquer the natural world.

Man's relationship with God changed. Although the existence of God is not denied, humans were in charge of their own lives and destinies. God was no longer seen as intervening in the day-to-day running of the world. Man came to see himself as the centre and dominator of the universe.

The notion of a subjective self was born when a distinction was drawn between an objective outer reality and man as a subjective entity. Sampson (1988) refers to the "emergence of internally directed subjectivism" and equates it with a sense of personal agency. This is also the era in which the "self-contained individual emerged from embeddedness in various collectivities to become the free-standing, central unit of the new social order" (Sampson, 1989, p.914).

Smith (1994) puts forward the idea that the individualistic ideal of the modern era, the fading of a religion based moral code, and the notion of self-actualization place a higher burden on selfhood than it can sustain. He says "human lives are more meaningful and satisfying when devoted to projects and guided by values that transcend the self" (p.407).

Reality came to be seen as knowledge that could be discovered and proven and was unconnected to the observer. Knowledge resulted in progress and a rejection of all that went before. Such knowledge turned into power for the one who possessed it, since he was, and still is, seen as an expert. The person who behaves however has little voice or power - that power is vested in the hands of the professional (Schrenk, 1999).



The Cartesian idea of ordering the natural world in terms of universal laws in order to find grounds for certainty in the external world, worked when applied to the natural sciences. In the Cartesian paradigm, it was believed that scientific descriptions are objective, i.e. independent of the human observer and of the process of knowing (Capra, 1996). When modernist thinking and criteria of research were applied in human sciences, resistance occurred relatively quickly. Criteria of predictability of behaviour, universality and generalization of findings clashed with a burgeoning sense of man's uniqueness.

For modern man social convention determined the norms and values that he embraced. But as people continued learning to reason for themselves; to move about and compare cultures, social conventions were being challenged. (Sampson, 1989). Classical modernism does not allow for complexity or diversity.

Human beings were developing into individualists, thinking themselves experts on their own lives (Sampson 1989). It is my opinion that this was the real seed of post-modernism, which sprouted sometime in the middle of the modern age.

“ Persons were free to establish their own framework of belief and value, to choose the goals and purposes that they desired “ (Sampson, 1989, p.195).

But the stronger the individual thinks himself, the weaker his link to a community becomes and, over time, the state loses its power over people.

At the end of the dark ages, the development of medical science alone spelt the “end of disease”, or so we thought, and brought us closer to greater control over our lives. The modernist's world is one in which he thinks that reality can be grasped and delineated. Logic, reductionism and linear

arguments are the tools used to discover the secrets of the universe. Thus a sense of individual freedom brought about individual power and an internal locus of control - but mainly for scientist, researcher and the elite (Sampson, 1989).

The downside of this freedom, coupled with the numerous and often bewildering choices that face us each day, can however engender a sense of insecurity. According to Gergen (1991), post-modernism is characterised by the stimulation of technological advances and the information explosion which carry in its wake sensory overload and insecurity.

It is understandable that few people are keen to reject the illusion of certainty that accompanies modernism to embrace the often diffuse ideas of post-modernism. However it is equally clear that the very notion of individualism is more of a socio-historical event than a natural one. (Sampson, 1988).

As there was an overlap of a century or two between pre-modernism and modernism, modernist thinking may also prevail well into the next era. Shawver (2000) puts it quite aptly when she says that there are still pre-moderns who explain things literally; moderns who put all their beliefs in scientific sounding theories and now post-moderns who take a “non-literal, poetic approach” to express themselves.

### 3.2 Post-modernism

There is a definite lack of consensus among the various movements associated with postmodernism, as well as many differences and unresolved issues (Gergen, 1994).

Anderson (1997) calls post-modernism an “umbrella word” since its basic assumptions allow for freedom and possibilities. It has also been described as the “new philosophy for the sceptical” (Shawver, 2000). Hoffman (2000) says the movement uses this freedom to challenge the status quo. Postmodernism

supports eclecticism as no theory is regarded as “the true theory” (Bruner, 1990). Bearing this in mind I shall attempt to provide a brief overview of the general line of thinking and issues that arise from this emergent worldview.

Postmodernism is per definition undefinable. It merely defines itself as post and fails to specify an essence (Gergen, 1991). To specify an essence would be modernist and reductionist. Having said that, there is nevertheless agreement that the modernist assumption of representationalism, i.e. that there can be “a fixed or intrinsic relationship between words and world”, has been jettisoned by postmodernists (Gergen, 1994).

To return to the undefinable nature of post-modernism it may be worth noting that a modernist would be uncomfortable with a definition that is in a state of flux or becoming, because he believes he inhabits a world of clarity and unambiguity.

The rise of post-modernism can be seen to have taken place over the last decades of the twentieth century and accompanied the processes of technological development, globalisation and the popularisation of individualism (Gergen, 1991). The state’s role changed to that of indifference to individuals and neutrality in its quest to supervise fairness in societies of divergent interests (Sampson, 1989).

Jordaan and Jordaan (1988) talk of a postmodern atmosphere of pervasive scepticism about rationality. Instead the world is experienced as irrational, unstable, illogical, and without structure or coherence. “Not knowing” is an integral aspect of human existence. The authors continue to state that a postmodernist knows no reality other than the “small life story” created by each individual; that any kind of order to this world is questionable; that everything is relative: and that the individual is not bound by any convention or limitation.

Post-modernism tries to be comprehensive and holistic in its approach and

endorses descriptions that

- recognise the complexity and diversity of systems;
- recognise the role of context (external as well as internal);
- display a lack of precision, clarity or coherence;
- question and reconstruct; and
- include paradoxes and contradictions (Schrenk, 1999).

If modernist science is criticised as not seeing the wood for trees, then post-modernism will probably err by placing too much focus on the wood at the expense of the single tree. At the same time this contextual emphasis can better serve the psychological aim of understanding human conduct (Sarbin, 1986).

A combination of ever-increasing individuality and individual locus of control for layman and expert alike, resulted in an illusion of control over one's life which would hold until forces beyond one's control took over. Then a person is rendered as helpless as pre-modern man who at least had his internalised spiritual beliefs to sustain him in times of trouble and hardship (Smith, 1994).

The post-modern world is one of flux and constant change. There are no transcendent truths, no solid foundations and neat resolutions (Schrenk, 1999). Smith (1994) speaks of " a *fin de siècle* sense of drift and doom".

Post-modernism recognizes the complexity of life by rejecting the modernist notion of the search of one truth for all. The interdependency of all living systems is beginning to be grasped by the post-modern person and resulting in an eco-systemic approach to life on earth.

According to Sampson (1989) the "new organizing principle of postmodern society is away from the individual and towards a more globally conceptualized entity" (p.916) as we are members of a "large, linked society" (p.917).

The postmodern self is “decentralized, flexible and pluralistic” (Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996). Today people are defining themselves with reference to a number of widely differing and changing social situations and become collective selves.

These descriptions raise serious questions for psychology. For instance how does a pluralistic self remain stable? And how flexible can one afford to be before starting to dissemble? Sampson (1989) calls for a theory of the person that is no longer rooted in “the liberal individualist assumptions”, but reframed to address the issues of a global era. According to Greenwald (1993), self confidence and resilience stem from the ability to make secure relationships; to have faith in one’s own destiny; and to be emotionally intelligent.

The fragmented selves, families and societies of post-modernism need a comfort zone. Will materialism remain the binding value? After all, globalisation is largely about economic survival in the new world order often at the expense of family stability. The question facing the postmodern world is that of retaining sufficient stability along with mobility. If newly formed communities cannot be expected to be cohesive or loyal to a common cause then what will make them functional?

Sampson (1988) notes that although globalisation affects the entire world in one way or another, all nations are not construed in similar ways at the same time. For instance, from a sociohistoric perspective, it is possible to describe societies that function in a predominantly pre-modern way, modern or postmodern way. In some societies religion requires an unquestioning allegiance to God and a specific lifestyle. Often a communal lifestyle within a traditional family setup is favoured above the modern individualistic one. These are the countries where the effects of industrialisation, information technology and development are slow in taking off - these are premodern countries that are part of the globally interdependent world. Cross-cultural research provides many instances of a eco-systemic notion of self as being

the norm in many non-western countries (Sampson, 1988).

In the modern era these countries were considered as insignificant by the Westernised nations to the developed world's well-being, but from a postmodern perspective their alternative constructions are considered as valid and as having a definable impact on the way the world develops. Globalisation then has the implication of different cultural notions of being and of self that are meeting and forming - or not forming - new communities (Sampson, 1988). Asynchronicity must result.

A postmodern perspective is based on respect for divergence whereas the modernist perspective assumed superiority of his own group's values and set the terms of human understanding correspondingly (Sampson, 1993). The postmodern therapist is humble about her beliefs and treat them more like "hunches acting as points of departures for discussion" (Shawver, 2000).

So what is post-modernism? No, we do not know what we are heading toward yet and it has not been said (Hoffman, 2000).

The next section explores constructionism, a theoretical stance that is in keeping with the postmodern *zeitgeist*.

### 3.3 Constructionism

#### 3.3.1 Introduction

In the field of personal psychology, George Kelly is generally credited with giving the first constructionist perspective to personality theory in his personal construct theory (Efran & al., 1988).

Constructionism, or constructivism as it is also called, is an epistemological position according to Mackay (1997). It assumes that all mental images are creations of people. A far reaching implication of this assumption, is that



reality is an invention of the human mind (Howard, 1991).

A constructionist acknowledges the role she plays in creating a view of the world and interpreting observations (Efran et al., 1988). A constructionist researcher is concerned with the utility of a model as criterion of validity as opposed to its supposed truth (Howard, 1991).

There are two branches of thinking in this epistemology, namely constructionism and social constructionism. Broadly speaking, the two theories make similar assumptions about the way we know the nature of reality, but differ in emphasis on a personal origin versus a collective origin of constructs of reality (Anderson, 1996). Constructionists have focused on the biological processes of perception and cognition. This has led to a view that information is changed by the process of perception itself and for this reason an external reality cannot be directly known. Social constructionism also posits that reality cannot be directly known but attributes this to the conception that our "beliefs about the world are social inventions" (Hoffman, 1990).

### 3.3.2 Social Constructionism

Social constructionists view life as an "interactional process of constructing, modifying and maintaining what society holds to be true, real and meaningful" (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This social process carries the momentum of "culturally transmitted fabrics of symbol and metaphor" (Smith, 1994). But we *create* the institutions whereby we live and often do so unwittingly, by unquestioningly accepting everything we are taught, as givens (Shawver, 2000).

And so "social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p.266). In this way it reintegrates the power of culture in the way a

person is shaped. This specific effect of culture has been absent in individual psychology (Sampson, 1989).

Social constructionism acknowledges the notion that “our ideas about the world are social inventions” (Hoffman, 1990, p.2). Yet “anything we choose to characterise as human nature occurs in a setting and under the thrall of a way of knowing and is a product of that setting and that thrall” (Bruner, 1990, p.344).

We are not only seen as products of our specific cultures but also as belonging and identifying within cultural groups. Freedman and Combs (1996) stress the vital importance of being *connected* to those around us, living or dead. However current feminist theory and research suggest that many women experience the world in terms of connections and relationships in any case, rather than in terms of the boundaries and separations that characterise self-contained individualism (Sampson, 1988).

### 3.3.3 The notion of reality and of several realities.

Our reality is what we can take hold of, at first literally and in maturity metaphorically. Through interacting with our surroundings, we give them form and meaning, creating the understandable, generalizable patterns that make it possible for us to look ahead, to manipulate and to cope with our challenges (Parks & Stevenson-Hinde, 1982).

The implication is that people actively participate in constructing their reality and thus the notion of reality is replaced by that of a construction. There is “nothing behind and beyond the construction; the construction is what reality is” (Sampson, 1993, p.1226).

For a social constructionist knowledge is not determined by the structure and processes of the world, but is constructed, in part voluntarily, by the person (Mackay, 1996). Basically *we find what we look for* even when we think we are



observing what is there (Cecchin, 1999). Nor does knowledge reflect true reality, but is seen as a process of fitting behaviour and thoughts to experience and observations (Keeney, 1983). This does not mean that there is no real world out there, just that we cannot know it other than through our constructions.

Gergen (1985) goes further and describes our knowledge of the world as not reflecting the world but as “an artifact of communal interchange” (p. 266). As such, knowledge does not reside in someone’s head, but becomes “a shared activity” that exists in language. It follows that all construction is done in language:

- a) internally, by the observer to himself
- b) externally, in communication to others and both verbally and non-verbally (Efran et al., 1988).

Knowledge arises within “a community of knowers”. So the focus becomes the intersubjective domain where interpretation takes place in community with others (Freedman & Combs, 1996). According to Hoffman (2000) social constructionism is essentially a theory about how we weave relationships.

A constructivist acknowledges his or her active role in creating a view of the world and interpreting observations in terms of it (Efran et al., 1988). This implies that hypotheses about the world are not directly provable.

This view of reality has important implications for therapy. The therapist is no longer searching for the “truth” of what really happened in the past, but focuses on history as a key to the unfolding narrative that gives contemporary events their meaning (Efran et al., 1988). In terms of therapy, the goal becomes that of helping the client understand not only how he has constructed his reality, but what price he is paying for his construction and to generate alternative constructions.

If reality is a social construction, then it follows that there are multiple

potential realities. And it would be a fair deduction that the greater the difference between people or among cultures, the more difficult it would be to find common ground for a shared view of reality (David, 1971).

It is as important to be clear about our notions of reality as it is to move on to the next stage. Keeney (1994) cautions against getting fixated on a discussion of what is really real instead of creating what should become realized.

#### 3.3.4 The Process of understanding and meaning

It is difficult to speak of meaning without understanding, or of understanding without taking context or relationship into account. Ultimately the results of the meaning-making process is called knowledge.

This process is the result of an active, cooperative undertaking of people in relationship (Gergen, 1985). Understanding is culturally and consensually determined. It is possible that what is regarded as a true and valid explanation of behaviour in one culture may be seen as completely unacceptable and incomprehensible in another. Varela (in Efran et al, 1988) says that cultural traditions determine what we say and that what is said can only have meaning within that particular tradition. This consideration is relatively new in psychology but necessary to consider when looking at adjustment in a foreign country where conflicting cultural values are sharply accentuated.

The constructivist seeks the patterns that connect: past to present, persons, objects, interactions, beliefs in recurrent interactive loops (Keeney, 1992).

#### 3.3.5 Meaning and the nature of knowledge

As we have seen, meaning and knowledge are intertwined with each other, with the individual and the context he lives in.

We have developed diagnostic systems to help us classify our knowledge, but



a diagnostic classification system is something to orientate a therapist and does not refer to something a client has or owns (Cecchin, 1999).

If context partly determines meaning then Bruner (1987) says there can be no universal standards for establishing meanings *in context*. We can only understand the human condition if we understand what things mean to those persons we are studying.

Hoffman (in Anderson, p xiv, 1997) considers the relational aspect of knowledge: "Knowledge is not a product of the individual nervous system but evolves from the living, changing web of meanings in which all our doings are embedded" and earlier "The development of knowledge is a social phenomenon .....and perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication" (Hoffman, p. 3, 1990).

Constructivism examines the structures of knowledge and their role in the determination of action and states that all knowledge is indirect (Mackay, 1997). Knowledge is also complex, multi-levelled and indeterminate. An increase in knowledge is a deepening and greater understanding of complexity as the true nature of things cannot be known.

As Capra (1996, p 4) puts it when considering connections as a means of discovering complete understandings: "Science can never provide any complete and definitive understanding" and "No matter how many connections we take into account into our scientific descriptions of a phenomenon, we will always be forced to leave others out. Therefore, scientists can never deal with truth...in science we always deal with limited and approximate descriptions of reality".

Moreover meanings fluctuate and change across contexts. Since there is no final truth to lend meanings to our constructs, meaning making is an endless and reflexive process.

### 3.3.6 Who is the expert?

Neither post-modernism nor constructivist thinking allows for the notion of an objective observer or the so-called expert in human sciences. The observer is a participant in constructing what he observes (Efran & al., 1988). All descriptions of events and processes, provide more information about the observer than about the events or processes observed (Keeney, 1992).

As far as expertise is concerned, if the notion of a “neutral observation of reality” is rejected, and replaced by the notion of constructivism (Efran & al., 1988) then one construct is not necessarily more valid than another.

The social constructionist approach to science incorporates the interplay between the lay person and the academic’s understanding of reality (Bragg, 1996).

The relation of the subject to the known is constructive (MacKay, 1997). In the same way the relation of researcher to interviewee is constructive.

Perceptions are guided by the way in which we draw distinctions (Keeney, 1992). The implication is that neither can be an expert as both contribute to the creation of a perception.

### 3.3.7 Social constructionism and the concept of the self:

The concept of the self refers to the way in which a person defines or categorises himself or herself (Gergen, 1985). A constructionist “idea of the self is just that, a constructed idea, an image in the mind of the beholder - and even in the beholdee” (Ornstein, 1986, p. 149).

No-one is born with some “real” self awaiting discovery. We construct our ideas of ourselves from the different kinds of information that is available to us. Gergen (1991) proposes that as the concepts of truth, objectivity and knowledge change, the idea of an individual self - possessing mental qualities - is questioned. In fact, he goes as far as to say that the self is under siege!



We now realise that people's identities are social constructions that have implications for the way personality is formed (Smith, 1994). As the self cannot be divorced from the social context in which it is formed, it is assumed that our identities are situation dependent and will therefore change with different situations and circumstances (Ornstein, 1986).

A massive increase in social stimulation, brought about by the technological advances of this century, has resulted in radical changes in our experience of ourselves and others. Everything we believe in, which is based on consensus among homogeneous groups of affiliation, becomes questioned in the process of being continually exposed to multiple points of views or multiple realities. This bombardment of information, new social encounters and new role models, is tantamount to an overwhelming overload that serves to destabilise the self. The process is that of social saturation (Gergen, 1991).

The self cannot be divorced from the social context in which it is formed. Thus culture reflects a "collective self of society" (Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996, p.116). Social context provides a shared language, perspectives, norms and goals for negotiating the world. At the same time it is possible for the self to distance itself from society (Kroger, 1993).

Sampson's (1988) term "enssembled individualism" acknowledges the cultural character of a person and the interdependence within groups who are striving towards larger goals.

A more radical view of self proposes that people are merely "expressors of cultural affiliation", aping the words and ideas they have assimilated in order to have specific effects (Terre Blanche, 1999). Lin Yutang (1937), a Chinese philosopher, said that "consciously or unconsciously, we are all actors in this life playing to the audience in a part and style approved by them" (p.103).

Thus social constructionists view the self as a part of a wider system : a social and cultural system "with energy and information flowing across fluid

boundaries” (Bragg, 1996) opens new horizons for the self (Gergen, 1994).



opens new horizons for the

There is no longer the notion of the self as unified and enduring unchanged over time. Being oneself today implies being several selves. That self is elastic and has no firm boundaries. Identities are constantly in a state of flux and it follows that there can be no single self to which a person can be true (Gergen, 1991). This view of the “self in process” is seen as an adaptive response to our rapidly changing world (Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996; Freedman & Combs, 1996). The risk is that the individual self can become erased by the process of social saturation, as described by Gergen (1991), when one begins to experience the “vertigo of unlimited multiplicity”. Sampson (1985) refers to the self as a “decentralized nonequilibrium structure”. According to Baumgardner and Rappoport (1996), this multiplicity of the postmodern self can be experienced in three ways:

1. Sequentially, through shifting involvements with people, ideas and activities over time.
2. Simultaneously, as a plurality of self-images which may be contradicting.
3. Socially, through different environments.

As far as maladjustment is concerned, one can say that it is not the “real” social world but a person’s *construction* of his social world that plays a definitive role in the development of maladaptive behaviour.

In retrospect, the modernist notion of a self-contained individual is now seen as “a sociohistorical rather than a natural event” (Sampson, 1988), while more collectivist orientations remained the norm elsewhere (Smith, 1994). Both perspectives are constructions that are taken for granted by their respective adherents.

In short, it seems as if the end of modernism implies that the notion of self is



being redefined. As in previous times, the point of reference has become society again. However in a global world, with all the changes that are taking place in our society, the postmodern self reflects the characteristics of the emergent society, with its new values and uncertainties.

The self's relational world extends beyond his cultural group and community to include his physical surroundings. A postmodernist constructionist view includes the physical environment in this self system (Gergen, 1991). This consideration has resulted in studies that examined the environment's effect on a person's self-concept (Bragg, 1996; Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996). They found that one's environment can either facilitate or hinder self-concept relevant behaviour. When there is a harmonious relationship between the self and the environment, the self-concept can remain stable. But a disturbance in this relationship, such as relocation, is expected to result in self-concept change.

Environmental psychologists even speak of a *place identity* (Kaplan, 1983; Proshansky, 1983). Hence place becomes important in understanding identity (Bragg, 1996; Berlin, 1996).

### 3.3.8 Change and adjustment

Cecchin (1999) reminds us that change is normal and that we are all in a permanent state of change. Systems *need* to be able to change and *adapt* to the changing requirements of life on this planet in order to survive. Therapy is needed when ideas about problems result in maladaptive behaviour. Dysfunctional systems are created when fixed ideas and the ineffective behavioural patterns are pursued in response to new requirements.

Change takes place in the interpersonal domain. Gergen (1985) points out that interpretations change over time and are negotiated within relationships. As we have seen self-definitions change over time as social circumstances

are changed. Now “the self” is no longer situated in the head, but in social discourse.

If one accepts that the possibility of change lies in the social domain then it is important to consider the characteristics of that domain (Sampson, 1989). Individual adjustment becomes a function of the adjustment of the group that he belongs to. We will need to consider the nature of the interaction between the individual and his or her group to gain a greater understanding of adjustment. If one’s place of living changes constantly and the community outside is a foreign and unaccommodating one, it is adaptive to become more attached to the only “constant” in one’s life, the family system.

One result of post-modernism is that the traditional rites of passage that used to enable transitions, have fallen away. In its place is a different self who has to connect personal and social change through a continuous self-referential process, but often with the help of “experts”, such as psychotherapists (Smith, 1994). The author believes that psychology has to use its competencies to cope with humanity’s challenges as best it can, and not surrender to a nihilistic view of post-modernism.

Change and stability are two sides of the same coin. This has implications for research. A more balanced understanding of adjustment is only possible if both poles of this dynamic are considered when interpreting data.

In the adjustment process we search for and construct meanings that will result in a sense of security and continuity; and serve our goals (Berlin, 1996). Keeney (1992) stresses the need to provide a therapeutic context for change that allows a family to change in the way that *they* change without forfeiting their stable organisation. Stability cannot be separated from change in the cybernetic view of a family system.

From the point of adjustment, the question becomes how a family changes in order to remain stable? Relocating to a new country will require change that



respects stability before adaptation can take place. Adaptation results in a new relationship between change and stability.

### 3.3.9 Research

Given that we are essentially cultural products, both Gergen (1985) and Auerswald (1966) question the validity of a psychological inquiry in which cultural meanings are not taken into account when trying to achieve understanding of people.

If we say that all human undertakings are value-laden, we need to acknowledge the cultural, traditional and experiential origins of these values. Thus psychology, in its quest to understand human behaviour, needs to work within an interpretative, hermeneutic framework (Smith, 1994).

For the constructionist, the aim of research becomes that of trying to understand the world from the perspective of another person, rather than establishing objective truths. Thus the researcher is interested in the perceptions of his subject, which are seen as determining his actions.

Psychology should have as its aim the meaningful nature of human behaviour (Durrheim, 1997). It should aim to explain how certain views of the world become fixed and then believed to be the truth. We are encouraged to look at issues and topics as “socially shared constructions” rather than “essences which we strive to know”.

The utility of the researcher’s findings is the criterion of a successful model (Howard, 1991), rather than their replicability. Ultimately the utility of our constructions has more value than their accuracy or truth (Efran et al., 1988).

The following section introduces the narrative way of thinking as the third egg in the theoretical nest.

### 3.4 Narrative

Psychologists who study life from a narrative perspective, try to understand the meaning of life as it is related in stories (Widdershoven, 1993). We tell stories to make meaning of our experiences as we interact in a reciprocal meaning-making process (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Narrative theory implies that human experiences only become understandable by being storied (Anderson, 1997).

#### 3.4.1 Life as storytelling or story as knowing

At its most basic, a narrative is an account or a story (Collins dictionary, 1992). A story is a symbolised version of human actions, which has a temporal dimension. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. A story is generally held together by a plot that represents human problems and attempts at resolving them. This readiness to make use of a plot to give meaning to stories, is the narrative principle (Sarbin, 1986).

There is no single notion of narrative that encapsulates its many facets. Thus narrative, or story, is all of the following and more.

Narratives are functional. Neal (1996) describes a narrative as a frame of intelligibility that persons use to interpret reality. It is also the way in which we *make* ourselves intelligible in this world (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Narrative provides a solution to the problem of translating knowing into telling (White, 1980) and of making meaning of life (Widdershoven, 1993).

Narratives are not neutral. In fact, they are saturated by dominant cultural beliefs. Narratives do not speak for themselves but gain significance through subjective and inter-subjective interpretation (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993).

Narratives are also political, they can empower some persons or groups at the

expense of others; legitimize some ways of being whilst making others illegitimate; they can support certain practices of power whilst invalidating others (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999; White, 1996) .

Narrative is described as having power. It can form, and deform, the lives of the teller. Researchers who use narrative as a tool, do so for its power (Gergen, 1992).

A narrative orders events and interrelationships among events along a temporal dimension, and unifies these events around a meaningful plot. Time enters a narrative in more than one way. One example is that the teller incorporates the future and the past into a narrative using imagination for the future and memory for the past (Sarbin, 1986).

Narratives have a gendered nature. The qualitative differences between male and female stories have gone largely unnoticed in our culture. For instance, women seem to place a higher premium on affiliative aspects in their stories than men do. Male stories seem generally career oriented and reflect a single-minded focus on achieving goals, whereas female stories are more likely to be relationship oriented, digressive and complex (Gergen, M., 1992). And male plots are clearly defined whereas women construct plots along multiple dimensions (Lieblich, 1998). These differences need to be taken into account by the interpreter of data.

Differences are important not only when interpreting stories from different sexes, but also from different cultures and from minority groups. Different cultures and different groups have differing narratives. In each culture some narratives will endure over others and come to specify the *preferred* ways of believing and behaving. These dominant narratives are often imposed on minority groups (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Narrative is a way of organising experience; and humans like to impose structure on the flow of experience (Anderson, 1997: Sarbin, 1986). A good

story has a coherent plot which has implications for identity: in the telling of a story I make a claim about the coherence of my life. (Rosenwald, 1992).

Stories account for presumed causes of behaviour.

“Narratives allow for the inclusion of actors’ reasons for their actions, as well as the causes of happening” (Sarbin, 1986, p.9).

Narratives differ from the cybernetic metaphor of Keeney in that it uses experience, instead of information, as a primary variable. A second difference involves a shift away from relationships as the object of therapy to the *stories* people tell *about* relationships (Zimmerman & Dickenson, 1993).

### 3.4.2 Narrative and social constructionism

If constructionism describes the way in which we come to know things as post-modernists, then narrative says something about the form and content of our knowledge. Thus constructionism represents the “how” and Narrative the “what”. If human meaning making originates in socially shared constructions, then these constructions become the proper object of psychological focus and research (Durrheim, 1997).

“Using the metaphor of social constructionism, leads us to consider the ways in which every person’s social, interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other human beings and human institutions and to focus on the influence of social realities on the meaning of people’s lives “ (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p.1)

This definition allows for a focus that includes the flow of ideas in a larger culture, unlike the family systems metaphor in which mind is limited to an interpersonal phenomenon (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Bruner (1986) holds the view that “world making “ is a principal function of mind, both in science and in art. Stories are constructed in people’s heads,



they do not happen in the conventional thinking upside down, Howard (1991) puts forward the idea that thinking is an instance of story elaboration. Gergen and Gergen (1988) continue this line of thinking when saying that narratives are not products of life but constructions of life and could be rendered in a variety of ways. These social constructions change continuously to reflect changing interactions.

The link between narrative and culture is strong: Culture speaks through the actor, using the actor to reproduce itself. Sarbin (1986) even speaks of social behaviour as role enactment.

### 3.4.3 Narrative and post-modernism

Narrative therapists like Epston (1996) and Anderson (1997) adopt a post-modernist stance when they centre therapeutic interventions around client knowledge, thereby acknowledging the client as expert of his own life as opposed to the therapist-professional as expert. A narrative is only a window on the truth and a socially constructed one at that (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

The constructional aspect of life stories has relevance for both successful stories and stories of failures. The implication of this statement is that the client as a person is divorced from his problem and the solution is sought in a different type of story, one with a better outcome (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The positivist distinction between the professional observer and the observed other is rejected and replaced by a relationship of equality in which the person is seen as separate from the problem he/she experiences. Epston's (1996) dictum can be quoted here:

The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.

The vehicle of therapeutic change becomes that of externalising previously internalised problem discourses. The client becomes a partner, a co-



constructor of the language (Epston, 1996). The therapist brings forth “an awareness of either assumptions that narratives are built on or gaps and ambiguities in people’s narratives (so that) space opens for stories to shift as they are being told (Freedman & Combs, p. 56. 1996).

The notion of therapists acting in accordance with given or enduring truths is rejected on the grounds that there is more than one version of reality. The modernist belief that a professional person is the holder of the one and only reality can and has resulted in a misuse of power:

“Unfortunately, these “truths” acted to conceal and support our monopolistic ambitions to control information on what constitutes wrong and right, normal and abnormal” (Epston, 1996, p.128).

#### 3.4.4 Narrative and language

Our world is fundamentally constituted in language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Language does not reflect, mirror or describe reality. It *constructs* our experiential reality. It is in language that societies construct their views of reality. Every time we speak, a reality is expressed and legitimised by the distinctions that are made through the words we use (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Language acquires its meaning through its use in social practices (Wittgenstein in Gergen, 1994). The accurate use of a world, represents adherence to the rules of “culturally specific language games”. And so it is not the world as such that determines our word choices, but our relationships within that world (Gergen, 1994).

The basic unit of therapy too is language (Andersen, 1999). Psychologists try to understand the world of their clients through the medium of communication. Meaning is found through talking, as expression precedes thoughts. Meaning resides *in* words and not behind them or underneath them. Andersen (1999)



advocates listening to the people rather than imputing other meanings, invariably our own, to their words.

Language is seen as having a formative aspect. If what we see are our own creations then it follows that errors in objectivity arise in and out of language (Hoffman, 1992).

Gergen and Gergen (1988) conclude that using language is engaging in an inherently social act. Language is relational (Gergen, 1994). All social exchange is mediated through language (Hoffman, 1992) and change involves a change in language.

Language, including body language, may be the most common medium of communication but it is not the only one, as art and music also communicate (Funkenstein, 1993).

Language is generative, giving order and meaning to our lives and our world (Anderson, 1997). The form of theoretical description is largely determined by the conventions of narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

Lastly, language is important because of its practical implications. In the postmodern world, where visual media are overtaking the written world, a psychologist should be fully functional in a multimedia sense (Gergen, 1994).

### 3.4.5 Narrative and self

The self is socially constructed in language and maintained in narrative (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Similarly a narrative serves to uncover and construct a personal identity (Gergen 1988). Scheibe (1986) speaks of "identity as narrative". Narrative provides a way for the various aspects of the self to be woven into a coherent story, one that provides unity and purpose. This individually constructed and reconstructed narrative provides an answer to the existential question of who I am (Grotevant, 1993). And so we reveal



“Acting in the world involves and construes my identity continuously, and my identity is a narrative, my narrative” (Furkenstein, 1993, p.22).

Freedman and Combs (1996) draw a distinction between a true self and a preferred self. They say no self can be truer than another, but it is true that specific presentations of self are preferred by a person - almost as a habit. However, the preferred self is different from a true self. Our choices of how to be, are based on the sociocultural narratives at our disposal.

But the self, as narrator and protagonist, is not inclined to doubt the good intentions behind her actions (Zimmerman & Dickenson, 1993). A personal tale is woven to fit my self-image, as I would like to appear before others (Wyatt, 1986).

There is a reflexive relationship between narrative and life: If narrative imitates life, then life imitates narrative (Bruner, 1986). Widdershoven (1993) also describes the mutual relationship between experience and life as follows: Stories are based on life, and life is expressed and modified in stories. But experience does not automatically assume narrative form. It is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories (Robertson & Hawpe, 1986).

Tom Andersen (1999) says we do not do kind deeds because we are kind. Rather, we do kind deeds and become kind. This belief militates against pathologizing people by way of giving them psychiatric labels. The experience of the self exists in an ongoing interchange with others (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

In this reflexive manner the self is shaped and created by narratives (Bruner, 1986) and the development of identity becomes an issue of life-story construction (Howard, 1991), since stories tell us who we are (Widdershoven, 1993).





In keeping with post-modernist thought, a core personality with stable and enduring characteristics falls away (Andersen, 1999) and the individual self only exists in the world of relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). The self-narrative is characterised by its social embeddedness as the individual mind is a social composition (Anderson, 1997). A personal story is merely a version of a more general story of how life is lived in a specific culture (Keen, 1986).

Conversely, when the ability to narrate is taken away, identity is lost and human comprehension is at risk (Josselson & Liebich, 1993). The person who cannot recollect himself out of the past, is a nonentity. The painful search for roots is an example of the unease we feel when we do not have a coherent story of a personal past (Crites, 1986):

“In more stable times and for people who live out their lives in a clearly defined ethnic community, a sense of self is unproblematic because a life story is powerfully supported by the ethos and mythos of the community” (p. 162).

What is the effect of a new community or culture on the self? It violates my expectations, forcing me to change the plots whereby I live. This refiguring of plots gives life its growth and movement. It is the essence of being a conscious human being. Without an openness to this task, my consciousness becomes less adaptive and less human. The “new” gives my life fuel for growth (Keen, 1986).

#### 3.4.6 Narrative understanding and interpretation

Our capacity to construct a narrative, invests life with meaning (Funkenstein, 1993). Psychology is hermeneutic and tries to understand the story of life. This focus becomes the arena of therapeutic change. Problems are seen as stories which allow for possibilities (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

As narrative understanding implies an act of collaboration between therapist and client, with the client as expert on his own life story (Anderson, 1997), meaning remains somewhat indeterminate and is negotiated between speakers or between a text and a reader (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Therapy becomes a co-creational conversation whereby solutions are arrived at jointly. The client is seen as having resources and as needing to reactivate them in a novel way.

“Narrative meaning is a cognitive process, organizing human experience into temporally meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1).

When Polkinghorne (1988) uses the term narrative, he is referring to both a process and its results. He points out that the context of a narrative should clarify which meaning is intended. Narrative meaning is not a thing or a substance but an activity. The connections and relationships (the context) between events constitute meaning in the narrative. Thus narrative takes place in the non-material realm of thoughts and meanings.

The realm of meaning making is not static as it grows in response to new experiences that are continually processed and by its own reconstruction that takes place through reflection and recollection (Polkinghorne, 1988). The researcher is most interested in the individual's meaning making of the experience of discontinuity of physical context.

Sarbin (1986, p.11) expresses the post-modern world-view that places an emphasis on the context of behaviour as a metaphor of scientific and historic understanding:

“ Survival in a world of meaning is problematic without the talent to make up and to interpret stories about interweaving selves”.

#### 3.4.7 The application of narrative

Epston (1988) uses a client's story to restory a life. He says Erickson believed we have the ability to re-author our lives, actively and continually. Change involves a change in language (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Epston (1988) integrates all aspects, and reframes negatives into meaningful and necessary aspects of a whole, in an attempt to shift the focus from negative and self-defeating thought patterns to positive and self-confirming ways of thinking that facilitate the integration of difficult experiences and seemingly unacceptable facets of the self.

What about the therapist? The therapist's skill lies in weaving a story that is born of the person's own story but differs in its offer of new and possible avenues of thinking and action with better outcomes. Such stories do not support or sustain problems (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Zimmerman (1993) does not actively restory a life, but creates a space for a client to notice difference by herself. And therapy is defined as:

“A language system and a linguistic event in which people are engaged in a collaborative relationship and conversation - a mutual endeavour towards possibility” (Anderson, 1997, p.2).

#### 3.4.8 Narrative and research

By learning about people through their narratives, we return to studying people rather than variables (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). The narrative form contributes to psychological knowledge by increasing our collective knowledge of human experience, and by indicating its possibilities (Bakan, 1994).

Since there can be no standard set of procedures in narrative research, subject matter is approached from a diversity of disciplines and theoretical orientations. The behavioural scientist must continuously make interpretive judgments for which the criteria are conventional rather than objective



(Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

A researcher offers insight into a topic by drawing on his own ideas/constructions of how the narrative/interview bears on the teller, the phenomena described and the experiences that are related.

It is understood that all personal stories are selective. Selectiveness is explained as due to narrative strategy and repression of ego-alien memories. It is important to keep in mind that the items that are omitted in terms of narrative strategy can be as meaningful as the items that are included. Emphases and minimisations are equally meaningful.

Interpretations are presented comprehensively for others to assess in terms of plausibility, credibility and trustworthiness, whilst bearing in mind the possibility of other interpretations (Rosenwald & Ochsberg, 1992).

Research findings invite reaction and are open to being contradicted, confirmed or ignored. The publication of findings introduces change and novelty. It is this reaction that deepens the understanding of human behaviour (Sarbin, 1986).

There *is* a place for empirical research in postmodernist psychology provided research findings are seen

- to be applicable to a circumscribed community and only generalizable to communities that speak in similar ways;
- to invite consideration of the limitations of the local language and
- of the potentials inherent in alternative perspectives (Gergen, 1994).

Psychology is currently evolving its own approach to narrative research (Riessman, 1993). Mary and Kenneth Gergen (1986) propose an analytical design for narrative research in which stories are classified according to the change the protagonist undergoes in relation to a goal. There are three types of stories in this design. An individual life story typically incorporates all three



- the *stability narrative*: the protagonist remains relatively unchanged with respect to the goal
- the *progressive narrative*: advancement towards the goal takes place
- the *regressive narrative*: the protagonist ends up further removed from the goal.

There are several other models, many of which were developed by analysts of literature or historical narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993).

Strategies borrowed from literary analysis are based on a consideration of narrative typology, progression of the narrative and cohesiveness of the narrative to determine its value.

Polkinghorne (1988) describes the changing directions and goals of human action as the special subject matter of narrative. But he cautions against using a typology of plots as a researcher then runs the risk of extreme abstraction of the individual features of a story. However Scheibe (1986) believes that all life stories include a series of progressive and regressive periods repeating over time. This would suggest that Gergen's design may be more universal than Polkinghorne would have it. Nevertheless, Polkinghorne suggests the use of type as a first level attempt to describe the operational story.

#### 3.4.8.1 Narrative and organizations

It is now recognized that organizations too, have narratives that function to help members interpret the purpose of the organization and the role of its individual members. Polkinghorne (1988) speaks of typical organizational stories - also called myths or legends.

The first is a story that deals with the question of how much help an organization will give its members when they have to move often and the next

story deals with how the organization deals with obstacles. These stories have both positive and negative versions and express the tensions that arise between the organization's needs and the values of the individual employees. The tensions are due to equality versus inequality within the organization, security versus insecurity, and control versus lack of control. Organizational narratives provide continuity and are difficult to change. But the life story of an individual is open to editing and revision therefore to change (Polkinghorne, 1988).

A researcher has to be open to the functioning of underlying operational stories behind fragmented information so that the operative primary story informing practices and attitudes can be uncovered. Narrative analysis is a skill that requires patience and dedication. Lieblich et al (1998) describe the process involved in reaching a final way to go about a chosen procedure as a complex process involving many changes and even compromises. There seems to be nothing straightforward about narrative analysis.

#### 3.4.9 Summary and synthesis of theoretical basis of research

In keeping with postmodernist ideas, research needs to be comprehensive and holistic in its approach. Descriptions should

- recognise the complexity and diversity of systems
- recognise the role of context, external and internal
- display a lack of precision, clarity and coherence
- question and reconstruct
- include paradoxes and contradictions (Schrenk, 1999)

Moreover the independency of systems should be honoured. Research findings are seen as representations and remain open to other interpretations.

In order to understand a phenomenon we need to understand what things mean to the people we are studying (Bruner, 1987). As people actively construct their realities, knowledge too is a construction. The constructivist seeks the patterns that connect the past to the present, persons, objects,

interactions and beliefs in recurrent interactive loops (Keeney, 1992). The researcher as observer is a participant in constructing what he observes and perceptions are guided by the way in which distinctions are drawn. The aim of research is to understand the world from the perspective of another person and the usefulness of findings has more value than their accuracy or truth (Efran et al., 1988).

Important new ideas about the relational nature of the self lead to an awareness of the relevance of the social context and the physical environment in which the self is formed. Our choices of how to be are based on sociocultural narratives at our disposal. A personal story is an instance of a more general story of how life is lived in a specific culture.

Studying life from a narrative perspective, involves understanding the meaning of life as it is related in stories. When we reflect on experience, we construct narratives. A narrative is a frame of intelligibility that people use to interpret reality (Neal, 1996). It is a frame that is saturated by dominant cultural beliefs (Gergen, 1992). Thus narrative, as a representation of human meaning making, becomes the object of research.

The client remains the expert on his own life, whilst problems, such as maladjustment, are stories which allow for possibilities (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

I would like to end this chapter by quoting Gergen in saying: "required are accounts that generate the reality of relatedness" (1994, p.415) and Kenrick and Funder who propose that science best advances through "multiple and mutually critical attempts to understand the same problem" (1988).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A STORY ABOUT NARRATIVE RESEARCH: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD.

#### 4.1 Introduction - storied lives

Narrative research represents a break with the positivistic mould of modernist research in its naturalistic, ethnographic, phenomenological and subjective approach. (Polkinghorne, 1988). Relativism, rather than absolute truths, is at the core of this qualitative method. Furthermore, this method recognizes the existence of more than one reality, and /or truth, in line with social constructionist thinking.

Qualitative research methods do not presume to supersede the findings of quantitative research but can be seen as a complementary approach in the pursuit of a holistic view. This is an important point as the literature review in this study is largely based on findings from quantitative research. What remains unclear at this point is the way to integrate the findings from two different paradigms.

Not following a recipe-like approach, as narrative research does, has the advantage of not setting out "to prove" prior hypotheses as in traditional research and implies being more open to what this narrative conveyed. The disadvantage is that of having a mass of information that is often difficult to organise in the absence of set questions or hypotheses. Josselson (1993) acknowledges the considerable "breadth" of material that is generated in narrative research and notes that a narrative researcher has to struggle with the question of "how much one needs to know about someone else to feel one can understand something about them" (p xi). A further question concerns finding a way for a theoretical frame that manages to compact the



data whilst honouring complexity.

An additional complication concerns the choice of focus on form versus content. Lieblich (1998) believes that a dichotomous distinction is not really feasible. A content analysis cannot reach a meaningful conclusion if it disregards the form of the narrative or does not seek an understanding of the person's story as a whole.

In spite of these difficulties, Lieblich and Josselson, (1994) describe listening to the life stories of people as a new and powerful way to study people and to do psychological research. It is a way that is especially sensitive to the unique characteristics of human existence (Polkinghorne, 1988). But narrative is "subtle, complex and difficult to interpret" (Riessman, 1993). The multifaceted, evasive nature of truth contributes to the problem of interpretation. To further complicate interpretation, is the notion that reality and identity are constructions that take place on several levels, within a certain context and in a certain language.

Lieblich and Josselson (1994) are guided by the idea that there is always a core of consensus in terms of the number of facts, traits and processes about which different subjective accounts agree. This is an indication that the world is not entirely chaotic and means that we can, in fact, make some sense of it.

The common goal of social research is to create "novel observational experience from which new views about the social world can emerge" (Polkinghorne, 1988). The aim of narrative research is to come as close as possible to the meaning of subjective experience or as Riessman (1993) puts it: "what life means at the moment of telling" (p.52). This is in line with the aim of this thesis which seeks to explore the meaning given to the adjustment experience in a developing world context. Using narrative, we as social scientists, return to "studying people rather than variables" (Josselson, 1993). Insight follows on informal, exploratory, qualitative research (Polkinghorne,

1988).

In the final analysis, people live out the events and affairs of their lives in a storied way. We make sense of experience by casting it in narrative ( Bruner, 1990). We create plots from fragments of disordered experience and give reality a unity. We do this by moving away from nature and into the “intensely human realm of value” (Riessman, 1993).

It is not possible to separate living a life from telling or performing a story (Ochberg, 1994). In social science, this idea of life as storied in terms of the forces that shape human behaviour, is the core idea in the evolving field of narrative study. There are many approaches to the work of making sense of narrative material (Josselson, 1993) and few methodological resources available for narrative work within the social science research tradition.

Storytelling becomes the focus of research and the story itself is the object of investigation. The story metaphor implies that we “create order and construct texts in particular contexts” (Riessman, 1993).

To this end, a discursive framework of analysis has been proposed. Discourse includes conversation, meanings, narratives, accounts and anecdotes (Sampson, 1993). In practice, therapists work with narrative knowledge. Our concern is with the stories people tell and we use everyday stories to explain our own and others’ actions (Polkinghorne, 1988).

#### 4.2 Narrative - a research model

Taking the above into account, the question can be raised how narrative can be implemented as a scientific research model. From the previous section it can be seen that scientific narrative research has a “new” meaning, that is:

- 1) aims to study people by listening;



- 2) the act of listening implies sensitivity to the unique characteristics of human existence;
- 3) is guided by a core of consensus regarding facts, traits, and processes about which different subjective accounts agree;
- 4) aims towards novel observational experience, and
- 5) creates new views about man's social world.

How will the researcher now go about research?

Riessman (1993) proposes the following procedure, which forms part of a complex process, to act as a guide for the narrative researcher. She prescribes these steps to allow for the creation of order and for the construction of texts in particular contexts. The reason is, I believe, to prevent narrative research becoming vague and chaotic in its description and interpretation which can easily be the case.

Riessman (1993) argues that since we do not have direct access to the experience of another, representation remains ambiguous at best. Furthermore neutrality and objectivity cannot be expected when representing another to the world.

Even the current feminist attempt to give voice to the marginalised, is theoretically not possible. At best we can hear voices that we record and interpret (Riessman, 1993). It is therefore not possible to avoid representation of others' experience. In the process decisions are made and approximate representations occur at various points of the research process.

Riessman (1993) describes five levels of representation in narrative research. These levels are not absolute but have porous boundaries:

- Attending to experience
- Telling about experience

- Transcribing experience
- Analyzing experience
- Reading experience

In the following section these research procedures are defined and explained.

#### 4.3. Riessman's research procedures

##### 4.3.1 Attending to experience

Attending to experience presupposes an awareness of phenomena. At the thinking stage certain phenomena are made meaningful by being selected for consideration (Riessman, 1993). Reality is actively constructed to oneself by thinking.

This implies that the first step proper in a research process is connected to an awareness, on behalf of the researcher, that precedes thinking about phenomena. A certain preoccupation with observations is implied. These thoughts are translated into ideas and questions about the phenomena or situation. In turn these ideas shape the research question. Thus the researcher shapes and constructs the research according to her perception of reality.

This means that the researcher needs to be sensitive in her observations and interactions in order to consider meaningful phenomena for the construction of novel ideas and in the creation of new views.

##### 4.3.2 Telling about the experience

Once an awareness of a constructed reality has taken shape, a next stage is entered in which this awareness is translated into words and put forward as a story. The researcher formulates her awareness and sets the scene for others to formulate their own stories around the identified field of study.

The telling about an experience, becomes the performance of a personal narrative.

“ Events are re-presented, already ordered in a sense, to these listeners in a conversation, with all the opportunities and constraints the form of discourse entails” (Riessman, p.9, 1993).

A telling has certain characteristics:

- The description of an experience creates setting, characters, an unfolding plot, and an attempt at coherence.
- The reaction of the listener contributes to the creation of a joint narrative. In this way research becomes a reciprocal interactive process between person and reality, so each may serve as both subject and object.
- Time is collapsed as memory takes over to relate an experience as if one is reliving it for the other in the telling.
- In the telling, there is an inevitable gap between the experience as it was lived and any communication about it. This is because words cannot be the same as the ideas of the first level of representation. But without words, the experience would not exist. Finding meaning in experience and then expressing this meaning in words, enables the community to think about experience instead of merely living it. (Merleau-Ponty, in Polkinghorne, 1988). However, there is no authority invested with the meaning of life nor is there a meaning to life awaiting discovery. We ourselves create the meaning to our lives (Polkinghorne, 1988).
- Meaning shifts as a function of the process of interaction in significant ways. For instance, the teller’s narrative is a self-representation in which she seeks to persuade herself and others

that she is a good person. A person's perception of the audience will influence the telling. Thus the telling might have been presented differently to a different audience.

#### 4.3.3 Transcribing experience

This is the stage in the research process when a way needs to be found to record a conversation.

A taped recording provides almost complete recall of conversation as it includes pauses, inflections, emphases, unfinished sentences, fluency, tone of voice, wit and so forth. Even so, these aspects are hard, if not impossible, to capture in the written word. Thus transcribing narrative, like narrative itself, is also incomplete, partial and selective (Riessman, 1993).

Transforming spoken language into a written text, is taken seriously as we no longer assume the transparency of language (Riessman, 1993). Each inclusion as well as exclusion; even the arrangement and display of the text, have implications for how the reader will understand the narrative. Omissions provide the reader with an opportunity to supply his own interpretations.

The investigator needs to decide how much detail to put into the text. Here I found that I was guided by my sense of inclusiveness and holism, a need to include as much as possible to provide a full spectrum of experience. I transcribed each interview fully and included seemingly irrelevant bits such as digressions and even the parts that were "off the record".

The form of the transcript reflects the recorder's views and values. Thus the act of transcription is an interpretive practice and the decisions that are involved are theory based. The way in which a text is presented, provides a basis for arguments. Furthermore, different transcription conventions result in different interpretations and ideological possibilities. This implies that meaning can be

constituted in different ways with the possibility of alternative transcriptions of the same stretch of talk (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich, Tuval & Zilber., 1998).

#### 4.3.4 Analyzing experience

At the fourth level an investigator analyses the transcribed text or typically a number of texts. This started with an immersion in the texts which were read and reread. In truth, analysis started with listening and continued through the transcription process and was guided by each decision about inclusions versus exclusions.

“The challenge is to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation. An investigator sits with pages of tape recorded stories, snips away at the flow of talk to make it fit between the covers of a book, and tries to create sense and dramatic tension. There are decisions about form, ordering, style of representation, and how the fragments of lives that have been given in interviews will be housed. The anticipated response to the work inevitably shapes what gets included and excluded” (Riesmann, 1993, p.2).

The narrative analyst seeks to understand how interviewees “impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Riessman, 1993, p.2).

“This is accomplished by gathering examples of expressions of individuals and groups through self-reflection, interviews, and collections of artifacts; and by drawing conclusions from these data by using systematic principles of linguistic analysis and hermeneutic techniques” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p 10).

In the end, the analyst creates a metastory about what happened by telling what the interview narratives signify; editing and reshaping what was told; and turning

it into a hybrid story, a ‘false document’” (Riessman, 1993, p.13).

Language is the vehicle of analysis. Through language plots are uncovered and meanings understood. A plot is an expression of meaning. Narrative explains by clarifying the significance of events that have happened on the basis of the outcome that ensued (Polkinghorne, 1988). This turns the researcher into a kind of detective who is interested in unravelling the meaning of events to a person through the plots described and the language that is used. Narrative analysis is the configuring of past events into meaningful themes (Polkinghorne, 1988).

#### 4.3.5 Reading experience

Finally a reader is presented with a new written account and brings his own meaning to bear. Bruner (1986) speaks of collaboration that takes place between reader and text as the reader brings a new dimension to the work:

- A text has many voices, as it is open to many readings and many constructions.
- Moreover for the same reader, the same work can provoke different readings in different historical or political contexts (Riessman, 1993).

Riessman concludes her analysis of interpretation by saying that there can be no master narrative as all texts stand on moving ground. All findings are “meaningful to a specific interpretive community in limiting historical communities” (Clifford, 1988 cited in Riessman 1993). Findings are thus always relative and do not assume to represent a final nor incontrovertible truth.

#### 4.4 Validation of narrative.

Riessman discussed the issue of validation of findings under the headings of persuasiveness, coherence and pragmatic use. I will use the same headings to present both her ideas and those of other authors. Because of the difference



between modern and postmodern paradigms, it is not possible to apply traditional criteria such as validity, objectivity and reliability to narrative research. For example, different narrative researchers will arrive at different descriptions. This is not an illustration of low interrater validity but of the richness of the material and the belief that reality can be interpreted in a variety of ways (Lieblich et al., 1998).

As there is limited consensus at present about a specific set of criteria for validation, my choice of criteria is arbitrary.

#### 4.4.1 Validation

According to Josselson (1993), a good deal of thought on the part of researchers, and lessons learnt from the traditional case studies of clinical psychology, have contributed to the consideration of good narrative.

An evaluation should aim to be comprehensible, correct and complete as well as credible to partisans on all sides (Cronbach, in Mischler, 1986). Validation is not the same as verification - which is an impossibility since the past is always a selective reconstruction - but refers to the value of a narrative. This is difficult to determine as realist notions are not relevant for narrative analysis and narrative as a literary craft cannot be enough in terms of social science (Riessman, 1993). Lieblich et al. (1998) describe narrative analysis as a skill that can be “academically learnt, refined and improved” (p.170).

Other writers such as Josselson (1993) and Lieblich et al (1998) insist on the criterion of aesthetic appeal of presentation and of its explication, for good narrative. This is where narrative leaves the scientific arena and enters the domain of art.

“Good narrative analysis makes sense in intuitive, holistic ways. The knowing in such work includes but transcends the rational” (Josselson, pxii, 1993).

When the pieces fit together to take on an “aesthetic finality” and we decide that a certain experience has been portrayed to our satisfaction, we can speak of narrative truth (Mischler, 1986). A well constructed story has a kind of narrative truth that is real, immediate and believable (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Perhaps the reader should be guided by his or her own sense of whether a truth is being revealed or not.

However a work’s validity is based on its trustworthiness rather than truth. Looking at the issue of validity in this way, moves the process into the social world and out of the realist world of assumed objective truth (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998).

But knowing must be linked to a theoretical context or previous knowledge as story cannot stand alone. Moving to a conceptual level requires “insight and parsimony” and a “different level of interpretation allowing us to see things or organize data or to organize from this story or other stories to other people or other aspects of experience. Concepts, usefully applied, would create a bridge to other life experiences” (Josselson, 1993, pxii.).

#### 4.4.2 Persuasiveness

Work that is persuasive, contributes to its validity. This criterion refers to evaluation by a community of researchers (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Persuasiveness and plausibility go hand in hand. A persuasive argument is plausible even though one disagrees with the basic thesis. Persuasiveness is best when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from research data and when alternative interpretations are taken into account (Riessman, 1993).

Polkinghorne (1988) argues that there is a closer relationship between literary/historical narrative analysis and psychological narrative analysis than between

traditional scientific research requirements and narrative analysis. The criterion for historical explanation is its acceptability of intelligibility rather than its predictability, as should be the case for psychological narrative.

The critical issue is the assessment of relative plausibility of an interpretation when compared with alternative and plausible interpretations (Mischler, 1986). The researcher's argument presents the reasoning by which the conclusions were arrived at and does not produce certainty, only likelihood (Polkinghorne, 1988).

#### 4.4.3 Coherence

Coherence refers to the way in which the different parts of the story fit together to form a complete and meaningful picture (Josselson, 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998). Coherence can also be understood as talk about the same topic (Mischler, 1986). Riessman (1993) refers to coherence as taking place on three levels, namely global, local and themal.

- Global coherence refers to the overall goals a speaker is trying to accomplish by speaking.
- Themal coherence involves content and will reflect a few common themes within an interview that may be returned to again and again.
- Local coherence refers to the methods a speaker uses to make his points.

A good interpretation will include all three levels of coherence.

#### 4.4.4 Pragmatic use

This criterion of relevance refers to the usefulness of a study and the extent in which it could become the basis for the work of other researchers. Riessman (1993) advises that the following steps are taken to achieve maximum validation:

- 1) Describe how interpretations were produced;

- 2) make the process visible;
- 3) and make primary data available.

#### 4.4.5 Conclusion

Riessman concludes her discussion on validity as follows:

“There is no canonical approach in interpretative work, no recipes and formulas, and different validation procedures may be better suited to some research problems than others” (1993, p. 69).

Thus validation in interpretive work is a difficult and ongoing issue in narrative science. The criteria for evaluation are qualitative in nature and cannot be expressed in scales or numbers (Lieblich et al., 1998).

#### 4.5 Riessman’s procedures applied to the research : method.

##### 4.5.1 Attending to experience

In order to apply an “attending to the experience”, as defined in the previous section, the method which I followed was to come to terms with my own adjustment in FA missions over many years. The following is a brief overview of the process which led to the shaping of my mind to attend to experience “which presupposes an awareness of phenomena” (Riessman, 1993).

##### 4.5.1.1 Attending to the experience of adjustment

My own awareness of adjustment abroad as an experience that is out of the ordinary, has grown with each international move and became particularly evident during our last move to the South African embassy in the third world.

I decided to undertake this research as I already had an awareness of the kind of story that would emerge if I were to listen to diplomats living in difficult

contexts. I was also very aware of the difficulties experienced by fellow South Africans at our last mission.

So it came about that I decided to collect the stories of diplomatic families to understand how they cope with this experience and what kind of meaning they create to a life of discontinuity. I was aware of a life lived on the surface. Having acquaintances and representing one's country, seemed to foster inauthentic relationships. Do others have a problem with this kind of life?

I asked interviewees to tell of their experience of adjustment to life in a hardship country and left the content of the text to the discretion of the individual. As I see it, this did not include the personal experience of the most major adjustment required of everyone in the history of our country.

#### 4.5.1.2 Attending to the experience of adjusting within an organization

Apart from the individual stories, the organizational story intrudes one's life in a very real sense at a mission abroad. A state department has a specific mission and vision that is translated and interpreted by employees and as such have an effect on their dependents. Moreover each mission, so it seemed to me, has a particular culture that is shaped by the people who start it, who run it and who interpret the rules and regulations emanating from Head Office in Pretoria. This mission culture is mediated by the host culture in terms of what is possible and what is not.

There seems to be more direct control over decisions affecting one's personal life at a mission than at Head Office where no-one is told where to live, how much is to be paid in rental, how big a house one can live in, which telephone calls are paid for and which not, how often one is allowed to travel "home", how many cars can be owned, what constitutes a medical emergency requiring evacuation, and so forth. Mission spouses are expected to entertain guests, cater for functions and should be able to prepare special South African dishes.

This aspect of bureaucratic control over major areas of life constitutes an adjustment but is also an aspect of a specific organizational story. This is how I have perceived it over many years.

An organizational story also gives a certain unity to events in the organization. If there is more than one organizational story, the group will be without direction and the organization will operate in a conflicting way, making use of various stories drawn from the common stock of organizational stories (Polkinghorne, 1988).

The organizational story as a shaping influence in the mission culture has been a strong part of my awareness and I certainly had one ear open listening for the way in which it revealed itself.

#### 4.5.2 Telling about adjustment

For an interview to be successful, Riessman(1993) speaks of creating a facilitating context for a person in which to talk about important moments in his life. I believe part of such a context is created before the interview starts when requests are made for participants in the study. I wrote to the head of each mission in advance stating the purpose of my study and requested permission to interview members of staff. My request was accepted positively and in most embassies I was pressed to interview EVERY staff member and their families. I decided to do as many interviews as I could for the sake of completeness.

I felt that my position as a diplomat's spouse living in a hardship mission at the time, contributed to a sense of common experience and implicit understanding. I was aware of a sense of hope among interviewees that the telling of a story may bring about a change to difficult circumstances or at least to certain policies. I was allowed to undertake my study but it was not done at the request of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Hence I could give no-one a guarantee that my findings would be attended to.



On arrival at each mission I would brief the head of mission more fully about my research and request permission to address the staff members so that they could be informed about my study. I asked everyone to discuss the possibility of granting me an interview together with their spouses and adolescent children. I did not want to interview younger children as family is still a bigger influence in their lives than social context, unlike adolescents who typically use their social context as a frame of reference. As family remains a constant influence, I do not expect younger children to have particularly strong experiences of being exposed to a foreign context. I expect that adolescents will be more susceptible to the influences of their international school setting and wanted to know more about this process.

I soon discovered that I could not insist on a homogenous format due to conflicting schedules and personal agendas. Most interviewees had spent a considerable amount of time in the mission, excepting those persons who had been transferred between missions.

Some interviews took place inside the mission, some at homes. One interview was conducted over a meal and a glass of wine, overlooking the Mediterranean sea. That was what the interviewee wanted. Sometimes a spouse would come into the office for a joint interview and often children had schedules that were too difficult for a family interview given my own time constraints as well.

In some instances I interviewed the husband at the office and his wife at their home. At some interviews the entire family was present. Sometimes a baby's or even a toddler's needs foiled a few attempts and we'd need to reschedule.

In one instance one partner was on holiday outside the country. I discarded that interview as it seemed one-sided. In all the other interviews, except one, I had spoken to both partners, either together or separately.

The one I am referring to is an interview with only one partner of a couple which I retained because of their commuter status, a particular point of interest in the

study as it is such a new, yet increasingly common, phenomenon.

#### 4.5.2.1 Telling about experience

The basic source of information about narratives is the interview.

The question: "What was this experience of moving abroad like for you?" provides an opportunity for a narrative to be told.

The research question is framed to open up a topical discussion so that teller and interviewer can co-evolve an understanding in a way that casts light on the topic under investigation.

I provided an opportunity for each respondent to speak from his own view point and to say as much or as little as he wished. This is in accordance with Mischler's (1986) finding that we are more likely to find stories in studies using unstructured interviews where respondents are "invited to speak in their own voices" and are also allowed to control the flow of conversation. This approach represents a movement in the direction of lessening the asymmetry of power in interview research.

#### 4.5.2.2 "Telling" the research question

After the initial briefing in which I informed interviewees about the aims of my study, followed by a request for an interview with the family, I would typically return the following day and approach each employee individually for feedback. If they were agreeable, we would then schedule a meeting and I would be informed of who would attend the interview.

Here is a sample introduction to an interview:

"As I said yesterday. I really want to know your story, your experience of adjustment in the Foreign Service. How it came about that you took this



job. You know, start way back there.....and tell me what it was like to leave the country.....what it was like to get here.....talk about the adjustment experience. What you have had to adjust to. I am interested in how the family is affected by moving around. It is your story. Please tell it as you see it”.

The introduction combined with this loose format was sufficient for almost everyone. Only one person requested to have questions put to him, which he was happy to answer.

I had a few questions that I kept back till the end of the interview in case pertinent issues had been left unaddressed. I did not need these often. One specific question which I did use for everyone required the interviewee to give his opinion on what he would tell someone who was preparing to go to a hardship posting. The answers to this question were very insightful as they indicated firstly the worst aspect of the person’s own adjustment and secondly it gave me an indication of his own learning and kind of adjustment he has made. The other question concerned the characteristics of the posting that made it a hardship for the interviewee and/or his family.

#### 4.5.3 Transcribing experience

The process of reading and rereading and thinking and talking helped me to formulate the critical moments which helped to shape the bigger story.

Initially I tried several foci for analysis, starting by analysing each individual narrative. I analysed several narratives in a variety of ways but could not think of a way in which to link a variety of experiences and unique individual stories into an analysed whole. I became aware that every way of looking tended to produce similar results on the same material.

In the meantime I was producing more and more pages of analyses. I was torn



between wanting to preserve each individual's story and providing an aggregate or a summation. Eventually I had to face the realisation that the individual stories veered away from the central issue of adjustment due to the wealth of secondary information that they contain. This had the effect of sidetracking me into trying to present the texts as a series of stories, each with its own theme. However my work would have lacked coherence and cohesion, important criteria for judging the value of narrative research.

This process-oriented approach to narrative analysis corresponds with Lieblich et al.'s (1998) focus on independent perspectives informing the development of own tools for reading and analysis.

After time I gave up wanting to present each person fully and when I focused on the critical moments, the entire story seemed to appear as if by itself. Perhaps what I experienced as struggling to find a way to present the text is part of a process of "analytic induction" as Riessman (1993) calls it. She describes it as the process whereby the focus of analysis emerges from the text, almost like features of the narrative that jump out at you. Arranging and rearranging the interview text is a process of testing, clarifying and deepening our understanding of what is happening in the narrative (Mischler, 1986).

The investigator seeks to define critical moments in narratives that become the framework for the new narrative and determines what data is excluded. This new narrative is clearly quite different from the original oral accounts of experience. The features jumping out for me were the critical moments in relocation that provided a framework for my narrative in the form of shared punctuations in the story of each relocating family.

Each story had a before, an arrival, a hotel stay, a home to be found and a new lifestyle and culture to come to terms with. A few stories had repeated experience of this process and included a return to South Africa as well as the motivation for leaving. For some families this relocation would be a once in a

lifetime “chance” that influenced their experience of it.

After transcribing twenty eight interviews I had almost two thousand pages of transcripts. I had to face the question of how to approach “long stretches of talk” as Riessman (1993) puts it. The initial decisions taken in constructing the metastory are presented in chapter five. This section deals with the analytical process.

“There is a cumulative suppression of stories through the several stages of a typical study: interviewers cut off accounts that might develop into stories, they do not record them when they appear, and analysts either discard them as too difficult to interpret or select pieces that will fit their coding system” (Mischler, p.235, 1986).

But the process of listening and transcribing also brought the realization, that some of the interviewees’ experiences do not fit with the aim of the research. The following criteria for inclusion versus exclusion of interviews were developed during the experience of transcription.

When listening to all the recorded interviews, only interviews which complied with the following criteria were included:

- The interviewees had to follow and express their ideas and views regarding adjustment in the Foreign Service.
- Although the aims and boundaries for story telling were open, their consensus of ideas had to keep within the realm of adjustment and could include references to possible comparisons to a time before and their present situation as well as ideas and feelings about adjustment.
- The story, regardless of possible adjustment problems, had to convince the researcher of the interviewee’s intention of identifying with the South African Foreign Service and acceptance of her duty as an officer of FA.

A few stories were omitted which did not comply with the above criteria. These were omitted because:

- 1) The interviewee concentrated on personal matters, e.g. a forthcoming marriage.
- 2) Leaned strongly towards discussing other political themes, e.g. feminism, and authority issues.
- 3) The interview developed into a form of therapeutic intervention, pushing the researcher into the role of therapist.

With these, I allowed myself to be guided by my wish to provide a sample of the experience of diplomatic life abroad that would be representative of many stories rather than few. To this end, I also organized a selection of excerpts in terms of the various critical moments that are presented when a family has to uproot itself to relocate and settle in another country. The reaction to the news of a impending transfer or a family's arrival in a foreign county are examples of critical moments. This framework produces a categorical analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Once the family had settled into their home in the foreign country, a new narrative emerged in which home leave becomes a critical moment. However this new narrative is frequently centred around an attitude of how to survive the remainder of the term of duty. This basic theme runs like a thread through the narratives and is highlighted by the reaction to home leave. I became aware of it in the ways I was told how people had adjusted to what they did not have. It sounded like a regressive narrative to my ears even for those who embraced the experience fully.

This method produced a temporal ordering of events and experiences as well as a typical chronological continuity that is experienced by a person/family who is transferred to work abroad. This ordering allowed for a variety of narratives to be linked to the identified stages of the transfer experiences - the careful reader should be able to also follow each participant's particular "story" sequentially by

reading only that person's specific excerpts presented under each heading.

I have separated the stories of those families and persons on first postings from those who were on a subsequent posting. I wanted to see what difference that would make to the experience. The new narrative begins with the pre-transfer stage and ends with some projections on how the reentry may be experienced on the part of the new transferees as well as motivation for further postings abroad, if the issue arose spontaneously.

The discussions following each stage are based not only on the reported responses in the thesis, but on all the interview transcriptions.

This method allows the researcher to attend to a person's experience in terms of how it relates to the stories of others (Polkinghorne, 1988).

#### 4.5.4 Analysis of experience.

Lieblich et al.,(1998) describe four modes of analysis, namely holistic, categorical, content and form. The authors stress that the distinctions are not absolute and an analysis may contain aspects of all four foci.

- A content reading presents the work from the standpoint of the teller and describes what happened, who participated and why. The implicit content is analysed in terms of symbolic images, traits and motives and the meaning of the story.
- A reading guided by form focuses on the structure of the plot, sequence of events, the style of the narrative, complexity and coherence and feelings evoked. The aim being to manifest deeper layers of identity.
- A holistic way of reading focuses on a life story as a whole and may interpret particular sections in the context of other parts of the narrative.
- In a categorical interpretation the prime interest is a phenomenon

shared by a group of people.

Looking at the process I followed I realise that a switch took place from a holistic to a categorical description (Lieblich et al., 1998). But the distinction is not clear cut as the initial holistic intent is preserved by the way the material is integrated as opposed to discarded to arrive at the categories of the metanarrative.

The new narrative is presented in chapter five. A framework of critical moments, punctuated as distinctive categories emerging from the experience of adjustment, is used. The narrative could also have been organized in different ways allowing different conclusions to be drawn. In choosing excerpts the main areas of interest of the study were kept in mind throughout. The criterion for inclusion of a passage relates to the relevance of the passage to a stage of the transfer.

I discern the following cycle of stages or critical moments during a life in transit and I have linked each stage to the physical location of the family.

There is a pre-transfer stage when the family is still at Head Office in Pretoria. For some people this stage might begin when they leave a home town somewhere in South Africa to join the department of Foreign Affairs. This first stage refers to the period directly before a transfer takes place and has relevance since several interviewees referred to incidents and conclusions that had a bearing on their ultimate adjustment. Interviewees anchored their stories in this pre-departure stage, reflecting on those events that were linked to current experiences. In this section the boundary between the pre-transfer and arrival stage is blurred by this retrospectiveness.

What transpires during this period can determine the motivation of the official and family during their posting. A lack of information and too little time to prepare properly can impact negatively on the initial adjustment period. Mistakes are made in such hasty relocations. Sometimes these are costly mistakes.

The next stage starts with an arrival in a new country and a hotel stay. This is a temporary stage which lasts on average five to six months.

The substantive stage is linked to a move into a home. This stage marks the beginning of the sojourn in the sense that the family can start reestablishing a normal routine.

The departure and reentry stage occur when the family returns to Pretoria for a home posting. After a few years the cycle starts again. This is the procedure for Foreign Affairs families. Representatives from other government departments are generally transferred once only.

#### 4.5.4.1 Selection for inclusion

During the process of analysing the experiences recorded in 28 interviews, the transcribed experiences, after the selection process (as stated in 4.3.6.3) was conducted, a number of interviews had to be selected for inclusion in the thesis. It became clear that not all of these transcripts could be used. The criteria that were followed for inclusion were the following:

- 1) Experiences of interviewees which reflected similarities were weighed against one another. The ones that were most representative of the general experiences of adjustment, were included. At the end twenty five interviews were used for analysis.
- 2) In contrast to 1), the final selections of interviews that were included in the thesis, had to reflect a variety of experiences and reflect the make-up of the department of FA. Thus:
  - Black, coloured, Indian and white officials were selected.
  - Married couples without children.
  - Married couples with children.
  - Single officials.

- Couples in commuter relationships

The reason for this is that research based on a narrative approach tries to create a plot from fragments of all these, often disordered, experiences in order to lend a sense of reality to the varied experiences (Riessman, 1993).

The following section represents the names and missions (pseudonyms used in both) of all the transcribed experiences used in the analysis and selected according to the above.

#### 4.5.4.2 Interview information

##### Mission ABAB

Place: Interviews took place at hardship mission ABAB

Interviews: Three interviews were conducted with

- Eddy, a career diplomat, and
- Sharon, his wife.
- Elizabeth, a career diplomat and single woman.

##### Mission BOBO

Place: Two interviews, individually conducted, took place in Pretoria as the couple was on home leave.

Interviews:

- Stephen, a career diplomat, and
- Jenny, his wife.

##### Mission DADA

Place: The following interviews took place at hardship mission DADA

Interviews: 4 individual interviews were conducted with 2 married couples.

- Barney K, a career diplomat, and
- Vesna K, his wife.
- The K toddlers were not interviewed.



- Susan M, a career diplomat, and
- Johan M, a businessman.

#### Mission ZOZO

Place: Interviews were conducted at hardship mission ZOZO

Interviews: Three interviews were conducted with two married couples.  
Individual interviews were conducted with couple Z.

- Guy Z, a career diplomat and Head of Mission, and
  - Angelique Z, his wife.
- The Z children were not interviewed.
- Songo X, a career diplomat, and
  - Nongile X, his wife.

The X children were absent during the interview.

#### Mission FIFI

Place: Hardship mission FIFI

Interviews: One family interview and two interviews with married couples were conducted. The latter were conducted together too.

- Fred B, a career diplomat, and
  - Jo B, his wife (a nurse), together with
  - Don B and Anne B, their adolescent children.
  - John W, a technical expert, and
  - Amanda W, his wife, who is similarly qualified.
- The W toddler was not interviewed.
- Bennie K, a career diplomat and Head of Mission
  - and Stella K, his wife, a teacher.

#### Mission GOGO

Place: Hardship mission Gogo

Interview: One family interview was conducted, with the Schoombee family.

- Deon S, a career diplomat, and
- Sanette S, his wife, and



- their 3 adolescent children Jack, Elwin and Suzy.

#### Mission ZAZA

Place: Hardship mission ZAZA

Interviews: Four interviews were conducted: one with a married couple together, two with a married couple separately and lastly with a single person.

- Chris W, a diplomat on a once only posting
- and Lettie W, his wife.
- The W children were not interviewed.
- Oliver B, a career diplomat, and
- Joan B, his wife, a teacher.
- The B children were not interviewed.
- Henry J, a young adult living with his diplomat parents

#### Mission DIDI

Place: Hardship mission in DIDI

Interviews: Three interviews were conducted. One with a family, one with couple and one with an official whose wife and children live in South Africa.

- Jan B, a diplomat on a once only posting,
- and his wife, Magda, B, together with their adolescent children
- Anna, Boet and Ben.
- Louise F, a career diplomat
- and Bernhard F, her husband, a professional person.
- Mandla M, a career diplomat.

#### 4.5.5 Reading experience

After listening to my own reading of the interviewees' experiences, coming into contact with the interviewees' experiences, a meaning started to evolve, the

creation of a story or stories. A collaboration, as Bruner (1986) puts it, takes place between reader and text. The text allows voices to speak and to be heard. The readers of this research will become part of the meta-story.

## 4.6 Methods

In order to cope with the complexity and difficulties with narrative research (Riessman, 1993), the following methods were chosen, based on the essential ingredients for conducting narrative research and on Riessman's procedures.

### 4.6.1 Interviewing

It is clear from Riessman's procedures that the interview as method allows for a context where, in an open-ended way, the interviewee's world can be lived and experienced. As Olivier et al. put it:

"Researchers should not be guided by preconceived scientific ideas since these can lead only to a superficial knowledge about people, which does not offer a real understanding of human behaviour. Such an understanding can only be obtained by experiencing things as specific actors experience them, and by judging the problems which such people experience in their daily lives. First-hand detailed information has to be obtained about people's social reality. This reality has to be reconstructed by means of interpretive, unstructured or qualitative means " (1991, p 47).

### 4.6.2 The interviewer

In research of this kind, the interviewer is no longer seen as an "objective observer", but as an active participant in the research relationship (Keeney & Ross, 1992) . Keeney and Ross (1992) speak of a perspective moving from ".....emphasizing *observed* systems, to emphasizing *observing* systems...."

The presence and personality of the researcher are acknowledged as variables

in the research process (Skinner & Allen, 1991). In participant observation, the interviewer becomes the research “ tool”.

The interviewer’s role is to keep the conversation going; to remember which issues have been covered; and to probe deeper or more precisely where necessary (Skinner & Allen, 1991). Moreover, the interviewer has to know which questions to ask and how to ask them (Olivier et al, 1991).

#### 4.6.3 Sample selection

The number of interviews required in a study is determined by the degree in which the research question is answered satisfactorily (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Olivier et al. (1991) showed in their interview-based research that themes start repeating themselves by the twelfth interview. With regard to this narrative research, it means that the interviewee tells his story until the story has a moment where it becomes repetitive and/or where the interviewee terminates and concludes his story. The selection procedures for inclusion in the thesis were also explained in 4.5.4.1 and 4.5.4.2

#### 4.6.4 Delimiting the interview unit

Flexibility is required in the composition of the interview unit for practical, theoretical and psychological reasons. Flexibility during an interview allows for choice of content and degree of emotional involvement, and how, and where, the interview would be conducted. In other words, the interviewee could discuss with a spouse whether they were prepared to grant an interview and whether they would speak separately or together.

Parents may decide whether their children would be included in an interview. This provides interviewees with feelings of freedom and a degree of control over the interview situation. In this way the process was in keeping with the fuller and more flexible involvement of those from whom data would be collected, as is

required in qualitative research (Allen & Skinner, 1991).

A flexible approach was necessary in order to accommodate the various domestic, school, work and travel obligations of respondents. This meant that it was not practically possible to decide in advance on the participating members of interviews. For instance, it was not possible to know in advance whether a couple would prefer to be interviewed separately or together.

To prevent interviews from being too general in nature and not covering important or obvious issues, the researcher prepared a short introduction that was presented to officials in each mission visited and served two purposes:

- (a) to describe the motivation for the study and the aims of the research.
- (b) to allow for an independent decision as to whether to participate in the study or not.

The researcher conducted twenty-eight interviews in seven hardship missions in five countries over a period of ten months. These countries are listed in Addendum B. The eighth mission was not visited personally but an interview was conducted with one couple on home leave in Pretoria.

The respondents were all attached to South African missions and were mainly from the Department of Foreign Affairs.

#### 4.6.5 Magnetic tape recording and transcribing

Magnetic tape recordings were used to capture interviewees' stories. All the taped interviews are transcribed. A good transcript is necessary for an analysis that requires several repeated readings of the data. Potter and Wetherell (1987) refer to the act of transcription as a conventional but constructive activity. The researcher is confronted with minute decisions all along the way. How many times should one listen to an indistinct phrase before giving up? How does one

indicate the length of a pause? Many thoughts about the interviewing process and content occur spontaneously during this laborious process.

The conventional aspect refers to an acceptable end-product.

#### 4.7 Confidentiality and ethics

All participants were ensured about anonymity and if unsure about their participation in the research, were allowed to withdraw. The interviewees were assured about the anonymity of their names, their FA placement and the cities and countries where they were stationed. For this reason, hardship missions in the text do not identify one specific country or city of a FA mission.

Although I had permission for the research to be undertaken in missions abroad, no formal information was provided by FA, unless specified, and all references to FA, its functioning, rules, regulations and interpretations are based on the perceptions of the researcher. Any views expressed are not in any way a reflection of the views of FA or any governmental official in whatever capacity.

#### 4.8 Limitations of representation.

The very nature of representation have certain inherent qualities that limit its usefulness in a significant way.

- As we have no direct access to the experience of others, all forms of representation are “limited portraits” (Riessman, 1993).
- The narrative I construct of others is my worldly creation.
- Each interpreter allows different voices in the chorus to dominate in the final performance (Riessman, 1993).
- The study of meaning requires the use of linguistic data which lose informational content when dissected from context (Polkinghorne, 1988).
- Most importantly, meaning is fluid and contextual and not fixed or universal.



In the light of the foregoing, there is a new understanding of representation as being partial, selective and imperfect. An awareness of the limits of representation makes us more reflective in the claims we make (Riessman, 1993). But we still believe it is the best method for exploring meaning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### COLLAGE OF VIGNETTES

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### 5.1.1 A collage of vignettes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5.2 Pre transfer stage

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

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

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

### 5.2.1 First postings

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

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

**Eddy** says,

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

problem.

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

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

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



sense of shock. Is this an expected reaction?

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

#### 5.2.1.1 Discussion of experiences of first postings

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 5.2.2 Subsequent postings

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

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

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

problem adjusting.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



their children benefited from the opportunities at an international school.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 5.2.2.1 Discussion of experiences of subsequent findings

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

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

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



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

### 5.3 Arrival stage

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

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

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

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

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

#### 5.3.1 First impressions

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

There were masses of people about even though it was well

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

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

### **Sharon** on arrival

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

**Elizabeth’s arrival:**

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

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

5.3.1.1 Discussion of arrival stage: first impressions



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

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

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

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

Most couples report feeling stress and this stress is played out



within the relationship in the absence of a social support system. An awareness takes place of a need for new and different resources to cope with the strange situation.

#### 5.4 Hotel stage - a temporary "home".

The first part of the sojourn in another country generally corresponds with a period spent in a hotel. On average this stay lasts about five to six months. The length of this period normally depends on the availability of houses. During this period one is confronted with difference, but the reality of living in a new country cannot take shape yet. It is also a period marked by a sense of transience, of being neither here nor there.

##### **Jo:**

"You're here but you're also not quite here. You are not properly living in that you are staying in a 5\* hotel. The people you see are not the population as such".

Jo's statement implies that one cannot begin to adjust to life in the host country whilst in a hotel as it is not representative of life in the country.

##### **Nongile:**

"You know the hotel itself, it was refraining us from seeing all these things. Because we'll keep to ourselves. We are not going to go to the market. We are not going to do a thing. The minute the children come back from school, they don't want to go anywhere, they just want to stay in the

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hotel. But I had to go and get food, I had to go and do what”.

Here we get an inkling that the spouse is the one who seems to be the most exposed to the reality of daily life in a foreign city.

Any hotel stay that lasts longer than a month, is generally regarded as the worst part of the posting. While the hotel provides a sanctuary that protects a person from the reality of life on the streets of this new country, it remains an impersonal environment. Soon one longs for home with personal possessions and the freedom to pursue a more familiar lifestyle.

**Nongile:**

“It was exciting... Travelling.... The first month it was exciting staying in a hotel. The treatment. You get all these things free. Because, you know, all that attention. But, a month after that, hm, hm. Aikona”.

It took **Songo** and **Nongile** seven months to find a house and their two opposite sex teenagers had to share a bedroom.

**Susan** says their stay in the hotel was comfortable to start with, but then it became restricting and frustrating. When you start finding fault with everything, it becomes a priority to find your own place.

**Amanda** found the five month period in a hotel the most difficult and exasperating period. She was stuck in a room with a tiny baby and experienced utter isolation. No-one from the mission reached out to help her in any way and she was scared to trust foreigners





with her baby. Out on the streets everyone wanted to touch her baby and she lived in fear of her baby being infected or stolen. She found the lack of support from fellow South Africans incomprehensible and became depressed, thinking bleak thoughts of jumping out of the window. In retrospect she says, based on her experiences, she has learnt not to rely on South Africans. When she finally moved into a home and could employ a helper, her house helper had to show her around and teach her how to shop.

Their hotel stay was further marred by chronic stomach problems, and few alternative eating places. It was a very confined existence in a physically small space too. They had no access to their own things and did not know that they should have taken personal things like CD's with them.

Amanda's day started at 3.30 am when the muezzin across the road called the faithful to prayers. She says her biggest problem was getting through the day. Having a bath became a way of killing time. Walking a baby on the streets was not enjoyable due to the noise.

**Johan**, a non-working spouse, describes his experience of life in a hotel as difficult because it lasted so long. He was room-bound day in and day out without transport and not yet acclimatized to the extreme heat and humidity of a city like M----. He became bored and had little to do apart from visiting the gym.

This period can be used to find one's way about in a new city. This is generally done by taxi as acquiring a car also requires some

time, especially in the third world where all cars are fully imported. Waiting for one's personal effects can be frustrating as it seems to postpone the start of the settling down process.

As usual **Jaco** looks at the bright side of the period in a hotel spent without personal belongings: He welcomes the absence of an intrusive television set which takes the place of "chatting, laughing and interacting through its seductive power to entertain".

**Joan** recalls her stay in a hotel in T----- with a small baby many years ago:

"It is the job of Embassy people to call on you and invite you. And you know they are feeling very sorry for you, because it isn't easy. But after a visit, a tea or a coffee, you cannot say: 'When can I visit you again?' You've left. This is it. It's a visit and then you're left high and dry. And you're reluctant to phone the next day and say: pop over and see me, because you want it to appear that you can cope, which.....you.....are not. I wondered how I was going to cope."

The newcomer feels her well-being depends on the kindness of strangers and she dare not impose or tell anyone how scared she is of not coping.

**Eddy** describes the family upheavals that preceded their move:

"We lived in a hotel for a whole month and we had come out of an environment in South Africa, where we had our own



home. It was our house. We lived in it for six years. We had settled in the house. The house was sound, the physical structure had settled. It had its creaks and cracks patched up and I had to leave that and go to Pretoria. And in Pretoria we were unsettled because we were staying in temporary accommodation. We bought a house that we never stayed in. So this was a continuation of being unsettled and not having a house. And I also learnt how unsettling that in itself can be, if you've got no place that you can call home. You can drive through the streets and then you say, I'm going back to sleep but that is not home, it is a hotel".

And of the discomforts of hotel life, Eddy says:

"It's different in C---- to what I like and you don't have your own stuff".

Eddy's family moved to a guest house after a month and went through the ups and downs of house hunting. When they eventually found a suitable house, it was in the process of being renovated and this took much longer than expected. Thus it was to be five long months before the family could settle down. As Eddy says, this upheaval started when the family left their home in South Africa, to stay in Pretoria on a temporary basis and finally to settle down after two years.

#### 5.4.1 Hotel and children

"You can't run around in the halls of a 5\* hotel. It is just not done", says **Anne**, aged 13.

**Anna:** (14)

“The two months we spent in the hotel were the worst because I had nothing that was my *own*. Everything was so different”.

**Boet** (12) remembers the day the family left the hotel:

“One night my dad said we are going to our *new* home. We had our stuff packed in five seconds. He put the keys onto the counter and said: ‘We are checking out’. Then we left. It was like a miracle. It was the first nice thing to happen...”

The move into a home is associated with settling down, getting into a normal routine and getting on with one’s life. This is an important happening for the family but especially for the spouse who has to run the household as part of his or her daily routine. This is a task that requires learning the ropes of shopping and often using public transport.

“And then you move into your house and you get adjusted to buying your regular groceries, keeping house. The furniture was a big thing, it did not arrive.....until a year later”.

#### 5.4.2 Discussion of hotel stage - a temporary “home”.

Thus it seems that the initial adjustment can generally be linked to a period of some months in a hotel. This period is generally enjoyed during the first month but then everyone wants “the holiday” to end so that they can go home. However on average it

takes six months to find a suitable home and for personal effects to arrive from South Africa. After a while everyone looks forward to the move into a home and complains about hotel life, even if it is the best of hotels.

Spouses are often isolated in hotel rooms with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Days drag by and lives are on hold as a house is sought and nothing much can be started until a home is found. This period exacerbates a sense of temporariness and gives rise to questions of whether anything will seem normal again. Depressive reactions may begin here and typically by the room bound spouse.

It would seem that culture shock only really registers after moving into a home. Fortunately other positive factors come into play at the same time, such as being able to exert more control over your lifestyle and having familiar objects around you.

Whilst disliking the hotel stay, it also serves the purpose of habituating the family to their new environment in a safe and limited way. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of culture shock at this stage due to the cushioning effect in western style hotels. In fact the hotel stay is often referred to as the 'soft landing'.

Everyone spoke of this initial period in a hotel and the frustrations of house hunting in a foreign environment. Each family member happily anticipates moving into a house and regarded the move as signifying the actual beginning of adjustment.

Thus the hotel stay is seen as a gradual introduction to what will

be a new lifestyle incorporating elements of a previous life.

In summary, the hotel stage is

- enjoyed by everyone initially, and regarded as a safe haven and a soft landing
- but seen as an obstacle to adjustment after a month, due to:
- the unfamiliar routine, restricting lifestyle, inability to start socializing, an experience of temporariness, lack of activities, and
- an inhibiting effect on children's behaviour.

## 5.5 The substantive stage

The choice of a home is complicated by distances from the international school, departmental limitations and often the small number of suitable houses. Being provided with a home implies submitting to regulations that one does not experience as a home owner. It seems to be a mixed blessing. As a home owner you can have repairs done yourself when needed, but you pay yourself too. Now repairs are done according to set procedures and schedules. It is something to get used to.

Once a home is found and the family has moved in, the substantive stage of the family's adjustment takes place. Psychologically, everyone is ready to adjust to their new country. The many aspects to this experience are presented in this section.

### 5.5.1 House hunting and moving in

**John** had no problem finding a house, but it seemed that housing regulations could change as they were negotiating.

John describes house hunting as a process that he experienced as being hampered by an administrative officer's attitude and, what he calls, "wilful withholding of information". The first house he found he had to let go as it did not quite conform to regulations. The next house was too big in terms of the size he was allowed to have, even though the rental was within his allowance. He does not understand such logic and became so mad that he threatened to leave immediately if the house was not approved.

Then it was approved. He experienced this as being treated with a lack of respect for his and his family's needs.

**Amanda:**

"We started adjusting when we moved into our house and got a car and a cell phone. At least I could call my mother then. There was a waiting list of a year for a land line. Everything changed when we moved into our home, even though we had a further three month waiting period for our furniture. We could start making friends, invite someone over, even if it was to sit on a packing case".

**Angelique:**

"Because of the (hardship) problems, I think, I spent five months of my posting trying to do this house upstairs and downstairs".

It is difficult, if not impossible, to get the arrival of personal effects and the finding of a house to coincide. This results in further delays that add to frustration.

House hunting was a period of emotional ups and downs for **Jan's** family. The first house they were shown was utterly inappropriate, and the family thought all houses would be equally unacceptable. It looked dreadful, a black building with mold on the walls, says **Magda**. To soften the blow, **Jan** gave each child permission to call a friend at home in South Africa that night. Everyone loved the next house, but it was not ready for occupation. Eventually an appropriate home was found, and the family settled down happily.

**Johan** had to have furniture made in a foreign country and says that after two and a half years in their posting, everything is not finished yet.

**Nongile:**

“Sometimes there’s water shortage. You’re forever sitting on the telephone, complaining at the embassy. Please, this is broken again, please, that. It’s not easy”.

Eventually this house becomes home for the family. Once the family settles down and their immediate needs are met, the reality of living in a foreign environment begins to be felt.

**Chris and Lettie** had an almost similar experience to John and Amanda. It took them six months to find a home and the time spent





first in a hotel and then in a rented flat, was rendered difficult for various reasons, such as being cramped, not having their own possessions, experiencing transience for an extended period and having difficulty in accepting the situation.

The fact that the specific housing regulations were not spelled out led to many false starts and wasted time and energy.

Chris and Lettie mentioned the difficulties experienced when house hunting without your own transport in a strange city.

**Joan** recalls unpleasant house hunting excursions:

“Very, very hot weather. Hot and dry. No air conditioning in the cars. Most of the homes had eastern toilets. There was a hole in the floor and that was it. So I wondered how one could make a hole in the ground appear attractive. After we found a house, it took a long time before we were given approval to move in”.

**Stella**, an ambassador’s wife living in an official residence, describes the impact of having houses furnished from Pretoria:

“If you move from a smaller to a bigger house, you do not have enough furniture. When more furniture is ordered, approval has to be sought from Head Office before anything can be sent. This is a lengthy process”.

**Deon** had to open up a new mission and battled to find a home in the absence of any kind of infrastructure or official support system. It took him five months to find a house, a compromise as it had many shortcomings. The mission was based in the Middle East in



what seems like a prosperous state. The unexpected aspect of the poor infrastructure in this modern state, made his adjustment harder.

“Having to adapt to living within a third world city on the wrong side of the track.....”

#### 5.5.1.1 Discussion of the factors that contribute to house hunting

The house hunting process is difficult because of several factors:

- 1) The family is very keen to move out of a hotel after a month as they long for a normal family routine and home life.
- 2) In hardship posts there is often a shortage of suitable houses for diplomats, resulting in a prolonged hotel stay.
- 3) Bureaucratic rules and regulations are seen to impede rather than facilitate the process. For instance, a family gets excited about a house just to be told it is too big, too expensive or too far away.
- 4) Transport problems and not knowing one's way about a new city contribute to the frustration of house hunting.
- 5) Hotel life delays the eventual adjustment as a normal routine cannot be followed until the family has a home. This is in keeping with research quoted in the literature (Jones, 1973) which found that reestablishing a normal routine helps adjustment.

#### 5.5.2 Preparation

It is often after arrival at a mission that a family realizes what particular information would have helped them before their

departure from South Africa. This section represents these retrospective insights. Conceptually it might have fitted better under the pre-transfer stage but since these insights are based on later experiences I decided to place the section here.

**John** received no training before his transfer. He believes he would have found an inspection trip helpful as well as a preparatory course to prepare him for the mission and life in the foreign culture. He would have liked specific information about his role in the mission, as eventual role ambiguity caused him a great deal of stress.

John also commented on having had too little time to prepare themselves for the move. He believes that there is little departmental respect for organizing a transfer. He would have liked to have been provided with a list of things that his family was entitled to instead of having to find these things out through a process of trial and error.

Examples of the kind of information that would be appreciated in advance are: the resettlement allowance; size and rental ceilings for officials; and a list of the furniture that would be provided.

**Johan** realizes in retrospect that he and his wife looked forward to their experience with more eagerness than good sense. Unlike John he found plenty of books on their posting and books on culture shock, but the theoretical information could not tell him what it would be like, in reality, to live in the country. He says he would never go out again without a prior visit to a country. Yet,

**Songo**, who did pay a short visit in advance, said it was a tourist experience that did not prepare him for life in the country. **Barney** went on a prior visit and came to the same conclusion as Songo.

**Jan** prepared himself rather thoroughly by insisting on an information gathering visit as little was known in South Africa about “conditions on the ground”. He returned home with a video he had made for his family and a positive attitude about the family’s ability to live in D----- . He arranged for places in the international school for his children before the family departed.

Most people complained of not having enough time to prepare for their posting. A few weeks sound like a short period in which to cover the basics. These experiences resonate with the findings of Fisher and Shaw (1994) who emphasize the need for prior information whilst stating that a short visit is not comparable to living in a country.

For instance, judging by reactions it seems that no spouse registered fully that he/she would not be allowed to be gainfully employed. And yet that is exactly what happens when on posting, except that it is the foreign government that determines whether it is possible to work or not, and not the South African government.

**Stella** discovered that she had been given the wrong information about clothing regulations and was quite upset that she had brought the wrong clothes. It is not easy to replace what you do not have in a hardship posting.

**Mandla** was in for a surprise upon arrival in D-----due to a lack of schooling information prior to his departure:

“There is one international school which has English. And the terms are not the same as in South Africa so when we arrived in January, it was mid-year. So it meant the children would have to stay and start school in September. So that’s where I thought, no, all these kids will be bored, if they can stay here for a long, long period like that”.

As there was no place at this school for at least nine months, **Mandla** sent his two older children back to South Africa.

“We thought things would work out like in South Africa. In South Africa children belonging to all diplomats, they are admitted in all schools irrespective of when they arrive”.

“So that was the *first* difficult part - to part with the two of them, so they had to stay with relatives”.

“It was quite devastating for them. The children were crying and going ....but we had *no other* alternative than to send them there. Well, they were not happy, as such”.

“We tried to motivate them. Tried to keep in touch.

Telephone. At that time I spent around \$US 300 a month just for communication, because it is so expensive. So it was quite hectic. But we got used to it”.

Then it became clear to **Mandla** and his wife **Sara**, that their third daughter, at age seven, needed placement in a special school that was not available. When their youngest daughter started suffering



from repeated malaria attacks, the parents decided that Sara would return to South Africa to stay with all four children, leaving Mandla behind to do his job. Sara spends short periods visiting Mandla in or as he puts it:

“She runs between the two places”.

Needless to say, this turn of events was totally unexpected for the family. But Mandla simply could not subject his four year old daughter to recurrent attacks of malaria as the risk of dying from the disease is so high at that age.

**Mandla's** ended by saying:

“Well, I have nothing to add other than saying, *really*, people need to investigate a lot before they go out. They need to investigate so that you prepare yourself thoroughly. Even ourselves, if we knew that there would be no schools and all these problems, it would have affected our decision to come”.

**Barney** felt unprepared for the work experience. In spite of his training, he felt as though he had been “thrown into the deep end” and had to cope without support, either from within the mission or from Head Office. He experienced considerable anxiety due to the nature of his work.

Sometimes he had cause to go against the Head of Mission (HOM), but felt he lacked the authority to do so. When he tried to assert his authority, conflict resulted that caused stress. He took



his problems home at night and spent many a sleepless night. There was no mechanism in place for addressing interpersonal problems in the mission, nor for work related problems. After much soul searching Barney eventually requested an intermission transfer. This time he visited the next (hardship) posting he was offered and at his own expense, in an effort to avoid another mistake.

As we have seen, Barney left Pretoria with feelings of ambivalence about his posting. It was not what he wanted, and he did not know whether he or his family would cope. It would be too easy to say that his failure was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

He did try hard to do what he thought was expected of him, and more though he found his role in the mission fraught with ambiguity. Notably, his area of authority was not clearly demarcated and open to be overridden by the HOM.

I cannot imagine that he would be prepared to go out on another mission after two hardship postings, both of which he qualified to himself as failures.

#### 5.5.2.1 Discussion of experiences of being unprepared

With few exceptions the need to be better prepared for a posting seems to be a lesson learnt in retrospect by everyone. Mistakes are made, due to a lack of information or even misinformation, and contribute to the initial adjustment problems and in some cases enduring problems. So it seems necessary if not imperative to address this issue.



The foregoing comments reflect the need for specific information from the mission, before and after arrival as well as from Head Office before departure.

It seems that several factors contribute to the perception of inadequate preparation:

- a lack of time before departure
- a focus on relocation logistics
- individual differences in terms of what constitutes necessary information
- an impossibility to “know” in advance what it is like to live in a place other than by living in it.

### 5.5.3 Difficult choices

We have seen that it is difficult to form realistic perceptions of life in a foreign country in advance. In the same way it is difficult to know in advance what the emotional impact will be of the decisions that are made in order to undertake the posting abroad.

This corresponds partly with the findings of Benjamin and Eagles (1991) - chapter 2.5.4 - who described the actual move as one that occupies the family logistically at the expense of emotional needs.

**Stephen and Jenny** realized that it was difficult to be supportive parents for a student daughter at a university in South Africa with an immense ocean between them. It was a wrench leaving her behind and the parents felt that they had left her in the lurch,



especially when she developed health problems.

Chris and Lettie also left two sons behind when they were transferred on a first posting. The younger one was about to write his school leaving exams. It was an emotionally taxing experience for the parents to leave two boys aged 18 and 20 with the sudden responsibilities of running their smallholding.

**Oliver's** decision to take up a posting by himself so that **Joan** could remain with her sons, almost cost them their marriage as it became too difficult to fulfil each other's needs at such a great distance.

Oliver says:

"To take him out of matric would have been a *disaster*. He would have lost two years and psychologically it would have scarred him for life. So we had to make a *terrible* decision".  
"Do you take **John** with you, let him suffer for two years but he is with you? Or you let him live alone at home, but at least he will get his matric. So we had .....terrible decisions to take and it made us sick. It made us ill. Blood pressure, the lot".

Clearly the first son's "failure" has made the parents hyper-vigilant, in trying to prevent the same fate for their second son.

Apart from this consideration, it would not have been feasible for a western woman to survive in a fundamentalist society.

Because of the decision that Joan would stay behind, Oliver experienced great loneliness and coped by burying himself in his

work. Apart from work, there was nothing for him to do in this extreme hardship posting.

He arranged frequent family visits and then finally convinced the department reduce his contract from four to two years. At the time of the interview, the couple was together again. Both felt they had to endure loneliness and hardship and this stood between them.

**Deon** went ahead of his family so that his children could finish their school year before they joined him. In retrospect the family says this five month period had quite an effect on their eventual adjustment. It also meant that **Sanette**, had the responsibilities of a single parent while working full time and preparing for their departure.

“It definitely had an effect on relationships. Deon came here and experienced things for the first time on his own. And then, when we came along we experienced different things as a group. It changed, I don’t know, I still find it made a difference to our perspectives”.

But **Jack** (17) their elder son says it actually helped them that their father had some familiarity with the country when they arrived as he paved the way for them. He also knew where places were. In this very individualistic family, Deon did seem to have a peripheral place. However, his demanding job at a one man mission contributed to this situation.



### 5.5.3.1 Discussion of experiences of difficult choices

It would seem inevitable that difficult choices will have to be made when families relocate abroad especially when

- children grow older and their needs become more relevant
- children have specific needs like special schools
- a wife has a career
- a hardship posting does not meet with the family's needs

Families who have to separate because of these circumstances expend emotional energy and other resources to maintain the family's integrity with varying degrees of success. Some parents battle to come to terms with the guilt feelings they have towards their children who were exposed to difficult situations because of

### 5.5.4 Mission culture

I became very aware of inter-mission differences as I visited a number of missions in different countries within a limited time frame. The way in which experiences of adjustment were linked to behaviour of officials and their families within the mission, prompted me to start thinking of a specific mission culture.

**John** says:

“There is a feeling that each administrative officer has an individual interpretation of the rules and regulations and each officer is at the mercy of that individual”.

**Stella** commented on the differences in how rules are interpreted by various members of the administrative personnel. What is



denied by one administrative official, is suddenly allowed by the next person. She says the former's attitude can make one's life miserable, while the latter makes life easier.

If there is only one person in a mission representing a specific department, it can happen easily that such a person does not know how to fit in with the rest of the mission. And the mission *per se* is not aware that it has to create a "space" for an outsider. Such a person may experience a lack of Head Office support and understanding quite acutely. This point was raised by a few people who were the sole representatives from their respective departments.

Missions often acquire bad names. Ubiquitous infighting and internal politics seem to be par for the course according to **Jaco's** perceptions.

Even so a mission can play a highly supportive role in facilitating the adjustment of newcomers and especially for persons on a first posting. **Lettie** said she thought the mission could have been more supportive, yet she realizes that the mission cannot replace the intimate relationships of home and a church community that was left behind.

**Bonnie** advises against falling into a groove of cultivating friendships exclusively with fellow South Africans.

#### 5.5.4.1 Pervasive negativity as a deterrent to adjustment.

**Jaco** advises that it is easy to fall into the trap of joining in when South Africans get together and start griping about life in the foreign culture. **Amanda** says you need positive inputs when you are battling to adjust yourself. She felt contaminated by the negativity of others.

**Barney:**

“But you must also understand this environment that we are in. We have this old moaning and groaning environment. Some time or the other somebody is down and then they are always holding onto you and pulling you down too. And then it’s your turn and then it is someone else’s turn.....and it goes on. Life at a mission is an up and down thing. It is very very unstable. Today you feel like the world is the best and you are going on a boat trip. Tomorrow you come back to earth and you feel like you want to die and you want to go home. It’s just the way it is. You have to accept it. I have never felt this way in South Africa”.

“It’s for *you* to make the posting. We have a negative outlook on the city. And it’s been created because everyone else is negative about it. The bottom line is that it is not easy. You want to do something, but there is limited stuff that you can do”.

“This place is a good old moan, because it’s a terrible place.

**Vesna**, speaking of a supportive mission:

“Although, we visit quite often, and you always end up complaining. Not that it’s always good, but after that you’re



happy. You've said what you wanted to and it's out".

Let us listen to **Sharon**;

" I do find that some people are extremely negative and I think that is a lot of people's downfall. A lot of it influences you especially in the beginning, if you are going to take people's advice and not see for yourself what's there. You are going to fall into that trap as well, which almost happened to me. It started where people will say, you know, *this* and *this*, is bad. And one morning, I just woke up and said to myself, listen, you are either going to listen to them or you are going to decide on your own. And I said, *this is it*. I'll do what I think is best and do the best with being away from home".

#### 5.5.4.2 Discussion of experience of mission culture and negativity

A mission culture is shaped by the individuals who live and work there. Certain characteristics of such a culture emerge, namely:

- The quality of leeway that administrative officials accord themselves in their interpretation of rules, can cause feelings of resentment or satisfaction. These feelings arise in response to whether a person's needs are met or otherwise. Not being able to predict how one's needs will be met contributes to a loss of control and/or personal agency.
- A mission culture that does not accommodate a single representative from a state department other than Foreign Affairs, is seen as non-supportive.
- Some missions are characterised by a high level of internal

strife.

- There is an expressed need for support for families and an appreciation of such support within supportive missions.
- There is an awareness that over-dependence on the mission families, to the exclusion of other relationships, can destabilise the family.

On the constructive side, people have the capacity to turn their negative feelings into a more productive attitude which can strengthen their ability to cope in extreme situations.

In these passages we see that a hardship environment can lend itself to complaints simply because it offers so little, or according to Kaplan's framework because of a poor person-environment fit. Thus everyone is initially aware of the poor fit and needs to complain about it but there is a risk of remaining stuck in this negative perception, as some people do. It is interesting to note that one person could recognise the negative perception as being constructed by the people in the mission but he justifies it as realistic and unavoidable. Another person, does not like the effect of the negativity and opts to distance herself from such conversations.

Part of adjustment represents a process of moving one's focus away from the negative aspects of the environment and to take responsibility for one's attitude, that is, a more positive attitude. Sharon's decision "to do the best with being away from home" indicates an important shift in her attitude but also reveals that adjustment is at best a compromise and that the non-fulfilling



environment remains a given.

Barney realizes that it is up to him to enjoy his posting but he finds the environmental limitations overwhelming and describes elsewhere how easy it is to simply stop venturing outside the safe cocoon of your home and remain indoors all weekend.

Barney reveals just as much when he says his life has an “up and down” quality that he never experienced in South Africa. This indicates a level of engagement in life that is erratic due to the sporadic nature of activities or social engagement with others. What he hints at, is that life at home has a more even quality due to a more continuous involvement with others and the ability to engage in ordinary yet usual activities.

In short those who adjust best manage to distance themselves from negative talk as they begin to understand that a negative attitude impedes their own adjustment. A certain amount of realistic resignation is at work here too.

#### 5.5.4.3 A supportive mission:

Some missions manage to offer effective support.

**Sharon:**

“There wasn’t a day when, in the first month that we arrived, that there wasn’t someone who called to find out if I was OK. And they’d pick me up, I’d spend the day with them. Even now, if there is a problem, everyone gets together and sorts



it out. It really makes you feel that you are part of a family. It's become home. Hopefully I won't miss it too much when I go back!"

**Jaco** remembers that he was brought "a starting kit of cleaning materials, a bag of goodies and a bunch of flowers" on the day they moved into their home. He says it made a tremendous impact on him.

**Vesna** describes a supportive mission:

"I think we are a more close-knit family than any other mission, where there is always bickering..... So it's good to have that extended family, the office people, out there".

Good relationships with the mission, which Jaco and Bonnie originally experience, help adjustment. Assistance as required are given by a mission which makes the official's attitudes more positive (Angelique).

#### 5.5.4.4 A non-supportive mission

**Jaco and Bonnie** spent two nights in a hotel after which the family moved into a house in Amman. There he found himself cut off without transport and did not know where to find a taxi rank. He had to find out for himself where the shops were and how to get about. He remembers an embassy driver who was helpful at the beginning, but no-one else.

His experience echoes that of **Amanda's** in the same mission.

**Amanda** ascribes her initial depression to the contact she lacked

with “a normal person, a non-foreigner and someone like herself”.

Both Jaco and Bonnie worked hard at maintaining good relationships within the mission in their first two postings. In their third post, they found the mission culture disappointingly non-supportive and they took a conscious decision not to form friendships within the mission.

The size of mission seems to play a role. Jaco believes a mission can be too small for healthy relationships. He says it leaves too much room for gossip as “everyone knows everyone else’s business”.

**Elizabeth** learnt a hard lesson in an earlier mission where her confidence was betrayed. She has since kept her distance from the mission staff, thus unwittingly contributing to a non-supportive environment.

**Angelique**, expressed disappointment at the lack of help she received when she arrived at the mission in F---. She had to set up the residence and had never done such a thing before. She thought the spouses who had prior experience would come forward and offer their help as she did not want to make mistakes. Eventually she learnt that everyone was happy to help and contribute when *asked*.

She is proud of the degree of participation and cooperation that exists currently within the mission. But if she had not changed her approach she may have concluded that the mission was inherently

non-supportive.

**Amanda and John** seemed to experience a complete lack of support in a mission that had started off with a few independent-minded employees, according to **Fred**. These individuals were followed by people who were on consecutive postings and who interpreted the mission as a non-cooperative one and consequently decided to keep to themselves. They had the necessary skills to do so.

**Fred:**

“Once a habit is established after two years or so, it’s established. So new people came into the embassy and it’s like, well, we managed OK, so carry on”.

For these newcomers this complete lack of support had disastrous consequences. As we saw, **Amanda** suffered from depression and **John** is angry with the way in which his family had to suffer unnecessarily. He attributes a lot of their hardship to bad management, and unhelpful administrative personnel. Amanda says if they had been completely detached from the mission, their adjustment would have been easier as they would have known not to expect anything.

#### 5.5.4.5 Discussion of supportive versus non-supportive missions

It seems clear that some missions tend to be non-supportive and that this failure to reach out has far reaching effects on personnel. I heard descriptions of people “getting burnt” and withdrawing from



all contact. On a first mission this could have negative consequences as no-one is more dependent on others than newcomers in hardship missions. No-one is perhaps more impressionable, or even vulnerable, to the quality of their reception, than families on first postings who are acutely aware of what happens around them during the initial state of acute arousal.

Spouses are more dependent on supportive missions as their lives lack the kind of structure provided by employment within a mission. This is evident in the gratitude expressed about a bag of cleaning materials. It is probably difficult to understand this sentiment in a South African context where it is so easy to get into a car, drive to the nearest shop and buy what you need. In a new and foreign country none of the above is as self-evident. Firstly you do not arrive with a car, do not know your way around and may not have your foreign currency sorted out for a long time. Getting hold of cleaning materials becomes a very real need at the beginning.

Emotional support makes a tremendous difference to initial and ongoing adjustment, as a mission temporarily takes the place of family back home.

It seems easy for people to learn from their own experiences and act towards others as they had been treated, thus perpetuating non-caring missions where many are miserable. Perhaps guidelines could be set up for welcoming newcomers to neutralise these intense reactions.

#### 5.5.4.6 Mission as a family?

I asked **Bonnie and Jaco** to describe their mission as a family. Without hesitation this couple offered words such as weird, divided and dysfunctional.

**Jo** also reacted negatively. **Jaco** said he would run away from such a family. **Bonnie** ventured that the ambassador “does not stand up for his children and his wife treats one and all like stepchildren”.

I would like to include some impressions of the embassies I visited: I looked at missions as interdependent systems and comment on the functioning.

The HOM in country F — was a man with a vision both for the Embassy and for South Africa’s role in F---. His positive and enthusiastic attitude contributed towards a well functioning mission. His example was mentioned by officials as being inspiring.

In Country C-----I found a supportive HOM and the small South African mission had very close and supportive relationships.

Country E----- had a supportive mission but there seemed to be a lack of open communication within the mission.

**Eddy:**

“It’s the first time for me where my colleagues are also my friends. And that’s out of necessity. We are so busy and so I spend more time with them and develop strong bonds and

strong relationships. That is the major focus of our social life.

From a family's perspective, you find, that the South African kids play together a lot. The little one is always at someone else's house. The older is at the stage where she has formed her own social set".

Country A----, seemed to have a highly divided and poorly functioning mission. The HOM seemed well liked but ineffective at improving the poor atmosphere. It was a case of "each man for himself".

Country X----- has a long established mission that ran relatively smoothly, with some exceptions. Though, internal communications seemed to be ineffective.

In Country Z-----, the mission seemed to be marked by internal division largely, it seemed, due to the HOM's interpersonal style of interaction. Good support existed amongst members of staff outside the mission, in spite of constant friction at work.

"The people have a small group that they started and they sort of leaned on each other. The wives were closely knit. They were together."

"We had social gatherings at the mission maybe twice a year and that was *forced* for other people in the mission. Otherwise we would never have come together".

This behaviour is indicative of a split within the mission.

#### 5.5.4.7 Mission as a source of information

Many of the interviewees complained about a lack of information from the embassy personnel in advance - information that would have smoothed their way enormously and prevented many initial adjustment hurdles.

As **Jaco** says: “there is simply so much to learn!”

**Chris and Lettie** would have liked information about the British school before arrival as it would have helped them in placing their children more quickly. They believe that a lack of information about country specific practices result in an initial period of making unnecessary mistakes. The school holiday period coincided with their pre-departure period and contributed to the difficulties in getting needed information.

**Elizabeth** had too much information:

“The Embassy was really nice and put together a whole lot of literature which I sat and read on my first day. In that was an article on the harassment of women. It needn't have been in that package of literature as far as I am concerned. I think it does more harm than good. It came from a point of view that was negative.

You *have* to adapt here. OK, don't give up your standards but respect all people, whether it's from a religious or cultural viewpoint. Maybe you have to dress more modestly”.



#### 5.5.4.8 Further discussion of mission experiences

Elizabeth alerts us to the need to be sensitive in preparing a person for life in a different culture. Too literal a focus on negative aspects can inhibit a person and make her fearful instead of simply realistic.

Thus, like all families, missions are either functional or dysfunctional and members are either loyal or break away to form alliances or to function independently.

This section has highlighted the role of the mission as either a buffer between the person and his foreign environment or as an impediment. Of course a supportive mission in a difficult environment can result in a closed system where no-one ventures outside the cocoon and does not experience much of the foreign culture which remains a foreign entity as they depart four years later.

#### 5.5.5 An international social support system

Apart from a mission support system, the international community provides a ready-made, albeit transient, support base.

In a small country the international community tends to be small tedium can set in. **Stella** says if you attend three functions a night and you see the same people at each function, it can become quite tiresome. This is more often the plight of the more senior personnel who are expected to socialize extensively.



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One HOM complained of a lack of privacy in a city with a population of 12-15 million people! However the circle within which he moved was just small.

**Elwin** (17) describes the international community as a “sort of in between community” that provides one with a ready-made community and acts as a buffer against the host country.

“It’s isolated from the local people a bit”.

“It helps because I don’t really feel comfortable among the local people. It means that all the new people who come here, just stick together. They don’t blend into the local society”.

Establishing one’s own circle of friends, is a great help in settling down. **Jaco** was lucky to meet a fellow house husband after a month and the two became good friends. He stresses the importance of starting to entertain new friends as soon as possible as adjustment follows suit.

He and **Bonnie** have worked out a system for socializing. She meets people through her work and he invites them for dinner parties. He also does the catering.

After several postings, Bonnie and Jaco concluded that the basis of friendship for them has become that of befriending people who are in the same boat as themselves, in other words expatriates and other diplomats.

Thus forging a place for oneself in a community can help the adjustment process along.

**Bonnie** says she experiences “a sense of floundering” at the beginning of a posting when “you miss everything you do not have”. According to her, the human need to fit in and to get on with life impels a person to make friends, but you can make mistakes by inadvertently befriending the wrong people. This is true regardless of age and place.

**Johan** and his wife have made good friends among the international community. However they were already taking leave of their best friends who were due to return to their home country.

Starting a new circle of friends is not equally easy for everyone, as **Mandla**, a natural introvert has found:

“Well, social life has changed quite a lot, because making new friends is not quite an easy task. Because with friends we have started....for instance if you are used to a certain type of friends ..then it means if you go to another place, you have to more or less try and associate yourself with that type of friends. People who have got the same taste, and the same living style. It becomes much more difficult for introverts.....like myself. My wife is an extrovert, she can talk to anybody”.

#### 5.5.5.1 Church affiliation



Church affiliation can provide an instant support group with like-minded people. It also provides a stabilizing influence for families whose lives are in flux. It helps adjustment if a person can slot into a church community from the start.

**Don** (15) knows that he will find his church in most foreign countries.

“For me the thing is, I’ve got a support group in South Africa and I’ve got one here. And even if I move to a foreign country, there would probably be a church there and I’ll find friends here. So as far as moving for me, I generally have a support group wherever I go”.

**Jo:**

“You’ve got a basis from which to evaluate things and to evaluate yourself. You are not always wondering who am I in this big world with all these strange inputs”.

But in country X-----it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a Christian community. **Chris and Lettie** have had to resort to starting a home church to address this lack.

**Songo’s** family was happy to find a Methodist church, which though not the same, was close enough to their own church. They enjoy attending services and have made friends there.

#### 5.5.5.2 Discussion of experiences of friendship

For Mandla adjustment means having to become a different person, by changing his preferred way of being. Merely making friends implies changing and results in eventual loss when friends leave.

Diplomats can choose their friends from within the mission, if they can find like-minded South Africans, or turn to the international community for friendship. Being in a similar situation and context is often the basis for a supportive friendship and the international community is seen as having more in common with the transferred diplomat and his family than the host country.

A church affiliation, can have a highly adaptive function as it provides a ready made community of people who honour similar values and beliefs. This would lessen feelings of foreignness.

#### 5.5.6 Down days as part of initial adjustment

An experience of difficult days and even depression is not uncommon.

**Sharon:**

“You do get the odd one or two days where you feel: listen, I’ve just had enough. All I want to do is just pack up and I want to go home.

You get those days because there is nobody for you to.....there’s no real family for you to fall back on, besides your immediate family”.

And later:

“But, hm, I just make it happen. I go out and do things. I’ve made a lot of friends, some very good friends. I find that if I’m having a problem at all, I can talk to somebody, like a mother type of thing, somebody who will just listen. I find that helps a lot. You have a good cry and maybe a little wine (whine?) or something. And then you come back home again and you are fine again. But you just got to realize that you need it before you get yourself worked up into a real state”.

**Bonnie** explains that the low hits you once the initial excitement has subsided after about two months. This is when reality sets in and you have to “start living this new thing”. She says that part is definitely less exciting.

**Amanda** says she often found herself on the verge of returning home during the beginning stage. There was nothing to stay for. She bought herself a one way ticket home, thinking that having the possibility to return home in her hand, would make it possible for her to stay - however many problems going home may have caused in turn. In a sense this ticket became a coping mechanism for her.

**John** eventually realized that things would work out for them and decided “to hang in there”. He asked **Amanda** to stay on with him. In this painful way the two arrived at the point where they were staying on by choice.

#### 5.5.6.1 Discussion of experience of adjustment as a low point.

There are days when an accumulation of things cannot but get you down. These things can relate to the reality of the new lifestyle; missing old and effective coping mechanisms; people close to you; or can simply be due to a sense of being surrounded by strangers on a continual basis. It seems as if these experiences are inevitable but that they probably become less intense or frequent as adjustment deepens.

One wonders if it would it not have been better for Amanda and John if they could have made an informed choice before leaving for their posting. Would it not have saved them much unhappiness. This couple believe they have had to make their posting work for themselves without any support and they bear a grudge against their fellow South Africans at the mission. Amanda says the rejection that she experienced gave her an inkling of what the discrimination under apartheid must have been like for people of colour.

In spite of these extremely negative perceptions, Amanda managed to devise a creative way to make it possible for her to stay and to cope with the negative aspect of her adjustment.

#### 5.5.7 Home leave as a punctuation

Hardship posts are ranked according to degree of hardship. Generally the worse the ranking, the more often the official and his family can go on home leave. In some postings home leave of a



few days is granted every two months. In a regular posting in the First World, home leave would be granted once every two years.

Many people report a perception that they cannot tolerate anything in their new country in the period immediately before their leave is due, whether this is two monthly or two yearly. Suddenly all the carefully acquired tolerance falls away.

Home leave, if it occurs after a long period, is another marker of feeling settled or not. It is only upon returning to your new home, that you can feel that you are “going home”.

**Vesna:**

“And when we come back, although we moan and groan, it’s still.....this is home. You made it your home. So coming back is nice. Then you are all revitalised”.

Frequent trips home can have the opposite effect too when they turn out to add to a feeling of being unsettled. Returning from home requires readjustment each time, especially after two or six monthly trips. Home leaves that are a year or two years apart are easier in terms of this adjustment.

But **Barney** describes their two monthly trips to South Africa as a blessing. It was an opportunity for him to escape an untenable office situation and to buy basic goods. He believes that knowing they only had to last two months helped them cope with the newness of their situation.

**Songo** decided it is better to stay in one place than to travel too often:

"Now we are settled. You can say we are settled. But the more you go holiday again and then come back, the more you go back to square one. Because to adjust.....it's better that....we've realised that, maybe you mustn't go away from F--- . Maybe I mustn't go home ...after six months. Maybe I must just stay here, so that we can be more settled".

**Oliver**, whose marriage was stretched to its limits during a first hardship posting, has the following to say:

"Your home leave is the big dangerous time.....where the divorce can take place. You know she's back with her parents and with her sisters. She says why the hell should I go back? It's lovely in Cape Town. You spend a month there and suddenly you have to go back to some joint!"

#### 5.5.7.1 Discussion of effect of home leave on adjustment

A visit home denotes a punctuation of being relatively settled for most people who return with renewed strength and hope to last their stay. Others find it adds to their experience of being unsettled when they return as the effect of getting used to one's surroundings wears off when you leave, resulting in a new adjustment process.

### 5.5.8 Thoughts on adjustment

The best part of a year will have passed before the family can feel settled again. Eventually everyone gets used to the local conditions. They might not accept it, but at least they get used to “difference” and overcome initial shocked reactions.

It is difficult to pinpoint this stage chronologically as it is different for everyone. Some experience a gradual process with ups and downs and others wake up one day and decide that they are OK. Some keep on expanding their comfort zones while others recreate a safe and small comfort zone for themselves, not moving outside a supportive mission or their homes.

I asked interviewees whether they thought there were stages to the adjustment process. This is what was said.

In **Oliver’s** words:

“Your middle stage is where you should start to understand the language, know your way around.....and it stabilises. By the time you get to home leave, you should be OK.”

**Eddy:**

“And the next stage is addressing the demands of the different culture and the various differences encountered. And then the following stage is maybe addressing it wrongly by trying to bring about change. And then finally, a compromise and conforming stage where you realize that

you are not gonna win or get anywhere by trying to change the place or change the people. Where you then accept that in certain instances you have to make certain compromises or conform in some way. And, unfortunately, being South African, being human.....you try and conform as little as possible”.

Many people continue to find certain things unacceptable even when they are used to them.

**Johan** started to adjust when he decided “to deal with the situation and experiences” he was exposed to.

**Sharon** thinks back to her arrival and remembers a period of three months to adjust.

“Now I am strong, I am enjoying it. I look past the dirt. I look past the animal abuse which is something that was very traumatic at first. I think I have come a long way. I get up and do things. I’ve settled down”.

**Jaco** received many visitors in their new posting and acting like a tourist guide helped him to get to know his new surroundings.

The middle stage of a posting is then generally a time when a new lifestyle, a circle of friends, and new routines are established. Provided there are no ongoing and unresolved issues, a period of relative enjoyment of a life abroad follows. Most people are now used to the conditions, have lost their initial anxiety about the various threats and can open up slowly to what is on offer in their

host country.

There is much individual variation in how this way of life is experienced. At one end of a continuum, some families will restrict their lifestyle, protecting themselves from the foreign context and count the days until they can go home. At the other end, you may find a few people who identify so fully with their foreign environment that they unwittingly give up their South African identity.

**Johan**, describes the last phase as one during which he had become blunted to the reality outside. He has not learnt to accept it, but rather to ignore the things he dislikes. He has eventually learnt to live with a system but without getting used to it. He says “knowing what is coming” helps him not to give in to emotional outbursts of anger. He calls this the “dealing with difference” stage.

**Jaco** says it is not possible to get used to certain hardship issues, like high levels of dirt and noise pollution.

**Stephen** does not believe that there can be an end stage to adjustment as it goes on indefinitely. But for **Oliver** the last year is the happiest, “because you’ve saved a bit of money. You can go back with a new car.....and it’s time to go home”. **Johan** says the last stage is when your return is in the foreseeable future and you pray for time to pass.

**Susan**, believes that adjustment is synonymous with finding a balance between change and stability. She had to differentiate

between preconceived ideas and behaviours that were functional in her new environment and those that were not. Then she had to learn new behaviours that were more effective, whilst retaining what is valid from her past learning.

It is very important to Susan to cope in all aspects of her life. She needed to prove to herself how well she could manage. Moreover she felt she had to earn the right to have a baby as a working woman and worked twice as hard before the baby's birth so that she would not have to feel guilty for taking long leave afterwards.

Susan is an example of an independently functioning woman who determines her own criteria for success and likes to retain control over her own destiny.

**Bonnie** believes you have adjusted when you no longer consider local brands of consumer goods as inferior to what is found in South Africa.

.....when you no longer feel impelled to import sugar from South Africa because it is cheaper or whiter than local sugar.

.....when you stop speaking of "these ..... foreigners".

.....when you remember that you are a visitor in their country and start respecting their rules and ways of doing things, even if you disagree with them.

.....when you stop trying to change them.

#### 5.5.8.1 Summary of experience of adjustment

It is difficult to present a generalised idea of adjustment as the ideas presented in this section are rather diverging. The idea of change and stability seems to be central however and certainly it is the individual who changes and not his environment. A crucial aspect of change seems to be the amount that can be tolerated by each individual and conversely how much should remain stable so that a person is not destabilised.

It seems too that certain aspects of the foreign environment remain objectionable but that one can opt not to pay attention to those aspects.

The time scale is a constant factor as each posting is time limited. When the contract nears its end, it is perhaps easier to be “adjusted” and tolerant.

#### 5.5.9 A different relationship with Head Office

When people relocate, especially if relocation is part of a job description, it means that the employee’s relationship with the employer shifts or changes. Bureaucratic procedures are seen to impact on a person’s life when abroad due to being subject to specific rules and regulations and not completely independent as when living in South Africa. Bureaucracy is often seen as being synonymous with administration.

**Bernhard** describes dealing with bureaucracy as

“wrestling with a wall of mud. It’s tough, impenetrable and

non transparent at all”.

There is a perception among personnel abroad that anyone visiting a mission from Head Office will fail to appreciate the hidden hardship aspects. Grading hardship posts remain a problem due in large measure to the highly subjective nature of the experiences of employees and their families.

**Barney** experienced no support from Head Office when he had ongoing conflict with the HOM, other than finally being offered an intermission transfer.

“You always had this..... “war” going on. You’d be *alone* and you fight alone. You really fight alone”.

“You can’t just pick up the phone and call someone at Head Office and get information or something. There was nothing. No support. You just made do with whatever you had”.

“And I don’t know what he wanted from me. He could have sat down and at least discussed the problems. I tried to do my best. I really did things above my normal duty”.

Eventually:

“I’d be getting ready for work and I’d come downstairs and sit down in front of the TV and wonder: Should I actually go to work today? It was coming to that. I would just *hate* to go to work”.

Barney requested and accepted an intermission transfer.





By contrast, **Songo** enjoyed good support from the desk at Head Office and is satisfied that he gets the help he needs.

Not **Susan**. She discovered that her issues were ignored at Head Office and she finally gave up even trying to communicate. She concludes that it is you and you alone when you are en poste. For her, the department has no human face and an officer is sent abroad with an implicit message of sink or swim. She is referring to technical skills, not even emotional support. Her understanding of the non-supportive culture that exists in missions is that it seems to stem from a non-supportive culture at Head Office.

#### 5.5.9.1 Discussion of a changed relationship

Upon relocating abroad, the official enters a relationship of greater dependence on his department and consequently greater vulnerability. Yet at the same time an official is expected to function more independently.

If Head Office is seen to ignore management or personal problems, stress results. This is seen as due to lack of timely responsiveness with regard to problems. Only one person reported that he received adequate support from Head Office to function effectively. Most respondents have a negative perception of the kind of support they are given.

#### 5.5.10 Head Office rules and regulations within a different context.

Several employees commented on an unexpected administrative aspect of adjustment caused by having to function in a different cultural context.

**Susan** found the different working environment stimulating and dynamic, unlike working at Head Office. But because of the difference between the culture in South Africa and the culture in country Z-----, she had to learn to adjust her functioning in order to be effective and to survive. She realized that she was coming from a different world and could not expect to apply her ideas and training as before.

**Stephen** discovered that you cannot adhere to the letter of the rule as you would not survive in a community that functions so differently.

“You have to go a little bit with the flow of things”.

#### 5.5.10.1 Discussion of experience of different context

In order to be effective one has to learn to compromise between the two systems, namely Head Office rules and the foreign context, and interpret rules in a more flexible manner.

#### 5.5.11 Mission cooperation

As we have seen in paragraph 5.5.4.4, the Heads of Mission play a vital role in the functioning of a mission. This section considers the individual's experience.

**Bonnie** describes working relationships in her mission as goal oriented and good.

**John**, as the sole representative from his section in the same mission, had to carve a place out for himself whilst experiencing negativity towards him. He was stressed and angered by this experience.

Colleagues can cause unhappiness, says **Louise**. One way of dealing with this unhappiness is “to project it onto the country and simply to say you hate the country you are in, regardless of what the country itself is like”.

It is difficult to be an administrative officer as you cannot give everyone everything they need:

“They feel, no, what the hell is he giving us a hard time for?  
They feel that it is a personal thing.”

**Barney** experienced constant conflict with his HOM (HOM). He felt that he had to be at the beck and call of the HOM. His problems, usually infra structural, had to be dealt with on an immediate basis, regardless of whether it was day or night. Barney believes he was expected to put his family's needs on hold and felt he received abuse rather than thanks for his efforts. He began to believe that the HOM resented the fact that he was not black.

#### 5.5.11.1 Discussion of experiences of mission cooperation

From these excerpts we can deduce firstly that a single representative from a particular department can have a hard time finding a niche for himself in a mission.

Secondly even the administrative officer is aware that by the very nature of his job, he cannot make everyone happy and that he encounters negativity as a result. This is an experience that can be hard to live with especially in a small mission.

Louise says that a hardship post can easily become the scapegoat for various problems regardless of their origin. This makes intuitive sense and reflects an underlying sense of lack of control over frustrating aspects of life in a mission.

The overall impression is one of unresolved issues, that arise in the absence of mechanisms for addressing them. Furthermore, in a hierarchical system, it is up to the HOM to address problems, as no-one else is seen to have the necessary authority. If the HOM is remiss in this task, festering situations contribute to an experience of personal hardship.

#### 5.5.12 A new culture: a head on collision?

Learning to get by and to understand life in a very different foreign culture is an ongoing process. It seems that one can never really plumb the depths of a foreign culture completely. A four year posting is not long enough and at best, diplomats live on the fringe of their host society. They rarely integrate with the host community

and enjoy some social support within a foreign diplomatic community.

The initial shock of encountering a foreign environment is followed by a later shock when people begin to realize slowly how differently people behave and think. Getting used to function within a foreign culture seems to be the second aspect, after the climate and the physical environment, to come to terms with during adjustment.

**Eddy** says:

“The initial shock is followed by the shock phase of the different culture and the various differences”.

**Stephen** explains this process succinctly:

“The deeper you go, there seems to be *another* layer. You think at a certain level you know, and then you go a little deeper, then you say it’s more complex again. *Another* layer. So you have to sort *that* one out. The more you know about things, the more complex it becomes”.

Similarly **Johan**, describes the first eighteen months as

“a series of shocking discoveries - as soon as you think you have seen it all, a new thing crops up to shock you again”.

**Eddy** was confronted with an armed police presence on the streets, an experience that unnerved him immensely. He found it

intimidating.

“You think if I ask them the time of day, they might apprehend me”.

With time he realized that the people of C----- enjoy a sense of security and a low crime rate. He also learnt of the historical reasons for this pervasive security presence and then only could he relax.

**John:**

“But eventually you come to terms with another culture and then you stop saying negative things about the host country. When that happens you will drop the friends who are still complaining as you see them as stuck. Otherwise it becomes hard to get on with your life in the country”.

**Sharon** refers to the unending cultural surprises as fun.

“It’s like a story book for me. When you think the story has ended and you turn the page, looking for ‘they lived happily ever after’, the story starts again!”

Living in a highly dissimilar foreign culture can result in a sense of cultural deprivation for some. **Susan** says she needs something that stimulates her culturally, be it music, books, or film. She also needs to be able to speak to people who are like minded.

#### 5.5.12.1 Life in a different culture

Living within a different culture seems to have a distinct impact on people. Some people become more aware of the different layers of in another culture as time goes on. Others react by dissociating themselves completely from the foreign culture and only cultivating friendships within the international community.

**Stephen:**

“You seem to be going through different stages and it comes in waves, the cultural shock we experienced. First shock, and then all of a sudden, you realize, but you can manage. And no, you can do it. And you feel quite at home. And all of a sudden the second wave of culture shock arrives”.

“In four years one does not become an expert in a country like Indonesia. The more you know about things, the more complex it becomes”.

**John** describes culture shock as

“the negative interpretation of everything you hear, see and experience, because you do not understand where the other person is coming from”.

Intentions are misread in this way. According to **John**, an Arab man could make a lewd remark to a western woman in the hopes of getting some reaction. If you interpret his behaviour as attention seeking, and consequently ignore the remark, you will not be harassed. He will understand in turn that you are not available for his attentions.

John believes that culture shock can be worsened “by lending your ears out to other people in the mission.” He advises that one should “shed what others tell you about the local people and do your own reality check”.

It took him a good two years before he realized that the local people are mostly friendly!

**Eddy** describes an incident that happened to him early on in his posting which perhaps illustrates an overreaction to a different culture....

His brand new car was damaged by a careless driver who had driven away. Bystanders tried futilely to convince him that this was the fate of the gods. He says:

“I freaked out.....”

I use the word overreaction on purpose as a small incident gives rise to an exaggerated outburst that says more about a build up of frustrations in a new environment than the specific event.

**Barney** is still not comfortable in a different culture with different practices:

“I feel very tense outside because you’re a diplomat. They look up to you, everybody, all of the locals, the workers at the mission, the drivers. They see me go to the garage and I get in my car and I drive with my wife in front of it. The rest of the diplomats they got drivers. They look and stare and say: There’s something wrong with these people. They’re carrying



their shopping bags!

Barney is aware of a specific code of behaviour that is expected of diplomats. This awareness causes him discomfort.

**Fred and Jo** spoke of a similar dilemma in A-----where they wanted to teach their children the value of a work ethic and found that they were censored for wanting to teach their children to do menial work in a society in which anyone of a certain social standing left such tasks for people of a lower rank.

“One mistake that I made.....I had the kids wash the car in front of the hotel. Clearly this was an embarrassment to them because the children of people of status do not wash cars. Whereas to me, I have a work ethic. Work is an honourable thing. Whether it is high work or low work, it makes no difference.

**Fred** reminds one of the necessity to be sensitive to local customs as it is easy to offend unintentionally.

**Nongile’s** experience of bumping up against a different culture is one of frustration:

“ I mean you are so used to go to a furniture shop at home and you get what you want. Here you’ve got to go through catalogues, try and make the shop assistant understand what you want. And of course, he’ll always be making you believe that he understands. At the end of the day he brings

something that you...., you know, they take chances. Sometimes you didn't even ask for this chair, but because it is the stock that has been lying in his shop for months on end, then he'll take a chance. And if you are sympathetic, you lose out. So you ...you land up to be hard, which is not good for your health and for your being as a person. You learn to be hard, you learn to be aggressive”.

Nongile feels she loses out constantly because of a communication barrier even when she takes a tough stance.

### On anger

**Eddy** feels that the difference between the Eastern and Western culture results in an unequal relationship where typical Western tolerance and slowness to anger is taken advantage of. He feels that his tolerance is not respected and that he is sometimes pushed to a point of no return. That is when he experiences anger.

Eddy feels the attributes he values in his culture are counterproductive in a foreign culture and causes him such frustration that he experiences anger. If he wants to lower his frustration level he would have to forego values that he holds dearly. This causes conflict for him.

**Johan** describes a common problem that I shall call the “unreliable workmanship ethic”. I heard many versions of this problem across the continents I visited. Apparently one should not expect things to be done or produced according to the same standards that we are used to in South Africa, nor according to the same time scale. In

fact a “seeing is believing” attitude is far more helpful than believing that tomorrow at ten o’clock sharp means exactly that.

Johan learnt that such a promise shows little more than a fine intention and is open to other realities that intervene to thwart good intentions.

**Barney:**

“Nothing works properly here. Nobody does things properly. They don’t make stuff properly”.

**Sharon** feels that she is misunderstood when she makes jokes or says something that is peculiarly South African.

“You find that they do not know how to respond or they’ll just not respond. There’s one lady at the embassy who has been to other places. She is open and friendly and you can say anything to her”.

**Joan** remembers her embarrassment when she offered cool drinks to the packers who brought her furniture.

“They looked tired and thirsty and dusty, so I offered them something to drink. This was very wrong. I was a foreign woman and I was being too friendly. They made themselves at home and would not leave. They misinterpreted my kind gesture, so I had to call someone from the Embassy to ask them to leave. I learnt, you cannot be polite”.

“This is all about adjusting to the new place and trying not to

take things too personally”.

**Elizabeth** had experiences of harassment. She says all women go through it in C----

“There are certain things that weigh you down, like the constant comments when you walk past. The noises, krr .....from the throat and the.....it’s vulgar. It’s not a flattering attention. It weighs you down. It’s like an invasion of your space”.

Her reactions:

“You feel encroachment of your space and the lack of freedom”.

“I.....I became close to wanting to hit someone”.

“I have never sworn so much as I have sworn here! Either under my breath or at the person. Now I don’t look people in the eye, I don’t notice anything when I walk”.

Eventually she learnt to deal with it psychologically. As she says:

“By the sixth month I woke up one morning and everything was OK”.

Heads of Mission seem to be least affected by culture shock as their lives are not touched by many of the adjustment issues that are related by staff members. For instance, having a chauffeur removes the necessity to learn to cope with local driving practices. They are generally kept too busy to miss a lack of recreation. One

ambassador was aware of the need to keep his staff motivated and would have liked them to have a recreational facility such as older and more established countries offer their employees.

House help is generally affordable in hardship posts. In fact one is expected to employ someone. This provides more opportunity for cross cultural contact and differences to crop up:

“These people are very, very different. You send your cook and when he comes back, you find they cheat you.

The domestic system in B----- seems to be baffling at first.

**Angelique:**

“The cook only cooks, but cannot wash dishes. The cleaner can clean, but cannot touch anything in the kitchen. So you have to control people who do not even meet. It can drive you very, very crazy. Because they will leave cups just like that. Nobody will come and pick them up, they just pass them. And you are the lady of the house!”

**Elizabeth:**

“And another thing that really got to me then, but now I can deal with it, was being cheated all the time. The people are just like.....all they want from me is my money”.

When confronted with difference people become guarded, sometimes because of bad experiences and often because of an inability to comprehend the ways of another culture. Some persons learn to deal with a different attitude and others become tougher.

This toughness creates the next barrier that makes understanding impossible and integration unlikely.

#### 5.5.12.2 Closed and open cultures

In some countries the culture is closed to foreigners.

“One almost never gets invited to a home, says **Bernhard**. It is experienced as a great honour on the rare occasion when it happens. Bernhard felt he had achieved something difficult when he received some invitations to homes.

And **Sharon**:

“You find, the local people.....I haven't really met any of them .....where you can be really friends. Except for the embassy staff, hm, that we befriended. They don't, they very seldom come and visit you. If they come to your place they won't eat, unless they bring food that is local. They look at us as different. That I feel”.

The result is that one lives on the edge of society, says **Jaco**.

**Fred**, a member of staff at the same mission who clearly drew on different experiences, has a completely different view: He disapproved of every local person's behaviour in general and remained frustrated because of his inability to get people to change. He is appalled at the level of fatalism, the lack of respect for the laws of cause and effect; and deplores a general incompetence.



The African culture is not experienced as closed:

**Mandla:**

“It’s quite open. In fact, when you are used to African cultures, they don’t differ that much. It’s just a question of languages”.

Heads of missions have a different experience probably since they mingle with the sophisticated echelons of society. One ambassador described the nationals of his country of accreditation as hospitable, sociable, friendly and kind.

Cultures differ in their acceptance of strangers. Individuals differ in how they react to foreign cultures. Many seem to generalise from a few instances of being misunderstood, or cheated to a condemnation of an entire country as being all the same. An African in Africa has only a new language to contend with and feels otherwise accepted. Elsewhere we saw that South Africans of F---n descent do not feel comfortable in F---, nor South Africans who bear a physical resemblance to the host nationals. This seems to be because they are treated as local people who act as though they are ignorant of the country’s ways and languages.

5.5.12.3 Looking deeper

**Jaco and Bonnie** maintain that what may repel one person can be attractive to another. Both of them like the authenticity of the Muslim world. They are attracted by values of non-consumerism and non-



materialism. Aspects such as oldness and dirt do not put them off.

**Sanette** is aware of the relevance of their city's past for most of mankind in a religious sense.

"The past of this place, forms part of the common ancestry of a whole lot of people worldwide, whether they are Christians, Muslims or Jews. It is enriching. It is also depressing to see what they make of it in terms of local politics.

**Elizabeth** was keen to explore the city and its old mosques and buildings. She had to find a way to deal with the harassment of women before she could venture out. This took her six months.

" The thought of going out there and having people whistle, because you are foreign, put me off for a long time. I'd stay home in stead. I would stay the whole Friday here. It's much easier than having to put up with.....

I think it was mainly: you've got to *brave* that. I've got to get into a taxi and get out and then start walking".

**Susan** says her main motivation for accepting a foreign posting is her interest in other cultures. She sees her life abroad as offering her an opportunity to grow and to come to terms with herself away from the South African context. She is deeply convinced that she can learn something from another culture if she were to look deeper than the superficial things that put everyone else off. She believes she will learn something that may be of enduring value to her.



It is clear that some people are interested in different cultures and different ways of looking at life. They change as they expose themselves to these cultures and incorporate certain aspects into their own world views. Who is that person? The one who overcomes resistance to difference within and opens himself up to alternative meanings? This does not happen immediately and for some it never happens. At best it is a selective process as one cannot plumb the depths of another culture in a few years, nor come to terms with every aspect of it.

Furthermore it is not expected of a diplomat to become integrated, merely to be able to function well and with limited frustration.

#### 5.5.12.4 Language and meaning

**Eddy** is confronted with the realisation that few people speak English and for him it remains “a battle” to be understood.

“The *language* is the biggest problem. In anyone’s existence, communication plays a big part in his day to day life and if you *cannot* communicate, you will then know how a dumb person feels”.

The department offers elementary language courses, but Eddy says:

“A crash course does not help for anything as this language is too different from English”.

Eddy's comments in this regard seems to suggest that it is not possible to imagine a world in which the majority of people speak a language that is foreign, before you experience the effect for yourself.

**Mandla:**

“When we arrived here, we really experienced the cultural shock. Like the language....although I had undertaken a crash course in this language. I noticed that when you actually speak the language, it is not like the grammar you had been exposed to. It had all these new ...where you have to learn new words which were not there when you where going across”.

No matter how well you prepare yourself, you will inevitably find that you cannot cover all ground.

**Deon :**

“One thing that I experienced here for the first time ever is to feel totally illiterate. To feel you cannot read and you get that twice. Once you get a bit of one language under the belt, you're confronted with the other official language and vice versa. But, it's worse than an illiterate person in another country. Not only can you not read, you can also not understand what people tell you. That was a difficult thing to adapt to. You cannot even take time to - what you cannot understand verbally and orally - to figure it out in writing”.

Some countries have a new language and a different script, making

it twice as hard to get around.

Similar customs may have different meanings as **Stephen** had to find out. He says in his understanding guards are employed in order to stay awake at night. Not so in the C---- where “guards do not guard”. Their mere presence is seen as a deterrent and the home is respected as one that respects local customs, by providing work for local people. It is frowned upon to embarrass a sleeping guard by stealing from that house. This is a cultural difference that took a while to understand, says Stephen.

This section points to two aspects of language, namely language as a code for mutual understanding and secondly language is the vehicle for expressing cultural differences. In this latter case the same words or ideas have different meanings attached to them.

#### 5.5.12.5 Different concept of time

Everything happens more slowly in the developing world than we are used to. Everyone seems to be late for appointments and no-one is expected to become agitated.

“No problem, nobody gets cross, nobody gets excited”.

This seems to be in sharp contrast to the western way of “time is money” or of time which is also described as costly.

**Stephen** has learnt to become more flexible in this posting in the East. But **Johan** is still highly irritated by this difference:



“Time means nothing. Someone will look you in the eye and promise to be back in fifteen minutes, only to arrive the next day. It is so impractical!

He says he cannot get used to it, but he is learning to live with it. He has reached the point where he understands that what he interprets as a blatant lie is not meant as such in a different culture. Even though he still gets furious, he no longer explodes! Understanding it helps him to deal with it in a slightly better way. He did rant and rave initially until he realized he could not change an entire culture.

**Eddy's** family experienced the impact of a culture that will not be rushed when they had to wait a long time before their accommodation was ready.

This different attitude to time can cause irritation and frustration until a person comes to terms with it as a cultural given and not as a personal slight.

#### 5.5.12.6 Coming to terms with difference

According to **Eddy** it is simply human to arrive in a new country and to wish to help them to improve their conditions. Everyone in their mission has expressed similar sentiments:

“You sense that urge when you come to a place like C-----.  
You want to go on a crusade and clean the streets and get the rabid dogs off. You want to paint the place and get the

butchers to work”

But realism sets in eventually:

“When you realize that these guys have probably lived like this all their lives and they are comfortable. It’s their country and you are just a guest here. So for you to be comfortable and happy, you need to find your niche amongst all what’s going on”.

**Barney** says the difference between J----- and South Africa is so enormous that he does not know if it is possible to adjust to it.

“You get used to it. I don’t know if you adjust to it. You always get frustrated in this bloody country. It is such a big difference, you cannot even imagine the difference”.

Eddy came to terms with difference when he accepted his foreign status and resisted the impulse to change an entire culture. Barney on the other hand always experiences frustration even though he professes to be used to difference. He is overwhelmed by and rejecting of the other culture and does not try to find a niche for himself within the greater picture as Eddy did. This should not be seen as a direct comparison as the two men reside in different countries with different contexts. It may say something about the contexts but also about their personalities. In a way Barney, like Johan, has come to terms with expecting frustration but being used to it at the same time.

#### 5.5.12.7 Positive aspect of difference



There is often a lot to see and do in foreign countries. Some countries offer a lot, whilst being hardship postings. Each country has something positive to offer, says Bernhard.

“Our place is full of stuff and memories and all the positive things that we garner from places,” says **Bernhard**.

Living in a different culture and opening your mind to its hidden treasures “brings a spark into your mind”. Becoming aware of the ancient history of the people of the country, through their monuments and buildings, is an enriching experience, according to an **Ambassador**.

Certain countries in the Middle East are exceptionally rich in archeology.

“They reckon there are probably in the region of .....10,000 sites in this little country”.

Some countries have high levels of security which is appreciated by South Africans. In G-----,

“You can stroll on that beach at three in the morning, No-one will touch you”.

Ironically though a bomb may go off in a bus or a building due to political instability.

In A----- it is safe to enough to leave your doors open.

The ambassador in J:

“The other beautiful thing is the colourful people you see in the streets, in different attires and speaking different languages. You taste different food in restaurants and everything is different. So there is something in the mists of this, which makes you say: thank God, I came here. So it’s a hardship post, but where on earth will I get all this bonus”?

The ambassador in S----- appreciates the opportunity to be exposed to another culture and to have the possibility of observing events in South Africa from the outside. He describes a learning process that occurs in interaction with ambassadors from other countries.

It is perhaps noteworthy that none of the positive comments came from persons on a first posting, but from ambassadors and persons on subsequent postings. Typically ambassadors are invited to special ceremonies unlike the rest of the embassy staff. It also indicates that one can learn to appreciate life in a different culture with time, whereas the first posting can be simply overwhelming.

#### 5.5.13 Relationship with host country

Some people go to trouble to find out how the other culture functions and as a result, their adjustment is easier.

You have to learn how the other person thinks if you want to cope in another culture, says **Stephen**.

“In some countries people do not say no. They say yes to please you”. So you need to pose your question in a way that

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will give you the answer you need. An exhausting process”!

Both **Amanda and John** feel they have nothing in common with the local people and this incompatibility makes it difficult for them to relate to them. They do not necessarily dislike them, but simply find they have nothing to say to them. This lack of a relationship is seen as something that will neither enhance or impoverish their lives.

**Sharon** has decided to defy local tradition by sticking to her preferred wardrobe and simply ignoring the reactions. She has found that if she ignores whistles and such, the reactions generally dry up. As she says:

“When I go out, if I want to wear a pair of shorts, I’ll wear it”.

Personal relationships with the host culture tend to remain superficial, though there is much individual variation.

**Fred:**

Yes, it’s hard to really become friendly because they’ve got the culture with them and unfortunately I’m at the point now where I don’t want to offend them by telling them what I really think”.

**Johan:**

“I have formed a real friendship with an elderly J... gentleman. I can tell him how I experience life here and he laughs with me about my frustrations. It kind of takes the edge off it for me. He understands. Sometimes you feel that



you are the only one who is bugged by these things and who notices them. But then he'll say that is how it is .....and he'll laugh".

On the whole Johan seems to dislike the rest of the community. This old gentleman serves to affirm Johan as he seems to agree with Johan's interpretation of the idiosyncracies of his fellow countrymen.

**Barney:**

"I have made a few friends, but we are on a different wavelength. I just don't speak the same language and not just in the language sense".

The language barrier and different customs remain a barrier for Barney.

**Nongile** does not feel welcome in the host country:

"It's not a friendly place... Go to their schools or colleges, you feel so *left out*. They don't *welcome* you".

"I'd say you don't get about in the foreign community. You must know that if she says hi to you, she....she wants to benefit from you. Something huge. You cannot just be a friend".

"Here you live in pretense. You feel it after.....say you go on holiday and then you come back. You even hear the children say.....*what*. But then, life has to go on. Next day there is nothing in the fridge, you have to go to the market where you

are pushed and shoved”.

Nongile feels that friendship based on equality cannot exist in J---- as she always feels that she is seen as a have and is surrounded by ‘have nots’ who want something from her. In this section she gives the impression that she would prefer to be able to shield herself against the outside community. However necessity forces her to expose herself to something inherently unpleasant time after time.

Her words: “you live in pretense” denote a certain quality of inauthenticity to her life, shared by her children. I wonder if she does not mean too that her life is incomplete as she cannot expect to relate to those around her as she is wont to. Her adjustment then is seen as a situation in which there is a loss of certain aspects to her life that are irreplaceable the foreign community.

#### 5.5.13.1 Discrimination

**Eddy** and his family were disappointed at a less than warm reception at the airport, on arrival, where the family was mistaken for local nationals at first in spite of documentation to the contrary. Not only did they experience what it is like to be a foreigner in a different country, but they also had to deal with mistrustful officials who insisted on speaking the local language to them.

After a lifetime of painful discrimination based on skin colour, this was certainly the last thing this family expected to have to cope with.

**Sharon:**

“At first I was harassed for being.....my colour. They just take me for a native of this country, in fact, my whole family. They wouldn’t speak English to us for about six months. They thought we were pretending not to understand and were starting to be nasty. We kept on saying we were from South Africa. The little one started getting aggressive and before she says anything, she’d say: ‘And I am not local’”.

In spite of this keenly felt experience of discrimination - which seemed only to have occurred during the first six months - Eddy tells me that a lifetime of suffering in South Africa has made them more resilient and adaptable.

“What we experienced here was different, but the bottom line was still a form of suffering”.

After six months the family learnt to cope with this perceived discrimination that had its origins in their own history and behaved in a way that elicited a different reaction. They had to change as their environment stayed the same.

**Barney**, even though of similar descent, found he had nothing in common with the people of J-----.

“I’m J-----too but they are *totally* different. It doesn’t work for me. You are obviously an in between in the sense that you feel a little bit for them. The fact that they have to live in these conditions. Some of them, especially the rich people, don’t want to associate with you. Some people do and some

people don't. They like to be in the diplomatic circle. It's a social crowd. And they like to unfortunately **associate** with the white people who are here. Because it's the social thing to do".

**Vesna** agrees with her husband:

"You know we were discriminated against in our country, but not as bad as here. Why should we still be discriminated against? It doesn't matter what you are here, as long as you are white".

She relates an incident where her husband wanted to take their daughter to the swimming pool but they were not allowed in as the pool was only for foreigners. The pool attendant refused to step outside to see his diplomatic car number plates and **Barney** had to drive all the way home to get his passport as proof that he is a foreigner.

"Small things like that but each time it grows onto you and then at times you wonder: Is it worth going to this party, especially if you know there will be lots of local people. It is discrimination in a different way. Because you are the same as them, they don't want to recognize you".

**Barney** and **Vesna** experienced ongoing and painful discrimination within the diplomatic circles where they move and on the street where they continuously have to prove that they are foreigners. I heard a similar story from another South African J---- family living in the same country. It is possible that each individual had different

experiences of discrimination in the past, that would have a bearing on their reactions.

What is important is to be aware of this aspect of adjustment so that the Department of Foreign Affairs could warn people that discrimination may exist in most countries, regardless of colour.

Our particular circumstances in South Africa have not prepared people for discriminatory behaviour that can occur in countries abroad.

**Elwin** (15) in X----- where the family lives in one sector of society:

“They think there’s only B-----s and then there is Y-----s. They can see we are not B-----s so then they like give it to us. I mean, stones thrown at you and stuff like that. It’s pretty hard fitting in and being accepted.....it would be nicer if the people did not hate us”.

Local people too may reject outsiders and show it through their behaviour. Looking different makes one an easy prey for all sorts of political, religious and racial attitudes and sometimes discriminatory actions.

**Suzy** (12) adds:

“We are like the rich kids and we don’t talk to them. We are blond and we are foreigners and we are too good for them. That’s what they *think*”.

Suzy describes how painful it is to be branded by a stereotype that she feels is undeserved and that she feels powerless to change.



## Elizabeth:

“In that first month I was just so rebellious and anti. You see opulence and self righteousness combined with a total disregard for others. The poor who don’t matter”.

“It’s how you behave and how you dress that classifies you immediately. You’ve got to look good. These local people all look down on each other and it got to me. There’s the upper class, then the small middle class which battles along and then a huge lower class. Coming from South Africa which is free and everyone was like keen to get on with it.....that’s how I felt here. There was concern for one’s fellow man. I know it sounds idealistic, but that’s what I like about going home.”

From the above sections, representing people from all ethnic groups in South Africa, it seems that discrimination is based on difference and can be explained in terms of the us-them dichotomy.

### 5.5.14 A hardship post

Kaplan (1983) could be speaking about a hardship post in his conceptualization of person environment incompatibility, as “an example of an environment that is illegible, confusing and tending to undermine almost any plan one had in mind” (p.316).

Hardship posts differ from one another and people differ in how they experience life in these countries. I found that people had difficulties in describing the actual hardship elements in their posting. The next section describes some of the physical aspects of the countries where diplomats have to get used to coping with

conditions that are worse than what they are accustomed to. These are the elements that contribute towards a limited and frustrated life style, as seen in the last paragraph of this section.

Note that not every criterion applies to all hardship posts. For instance D----- in Africa may have infra structural problems but it does not have the pollution levels, population pressure or traffic congestions of x-----. The absence of these problems contributes to a freer lifestyle.

**Susan's** description comes close to Kaplan's definition as stated above. She says a hardship post is one where you do not have what you are used to and when you try to engage in the kind of activity that you are used to, the results are traumatic instead of pleasurable. She cites the pleasurable example of walking on the tree lined streets of Pretoria compared to the highly unpleasant experience of walking on the streets of M-----.

**Barney** found the work environment in his second hardship posting far better than the first one, but the living conditions were much worse. In their first posting his wife had the freedom of driving around. In M----- one needs a driver which is an added expense.

“Here she has the flat life basically. She stays in the flat and she takes care of the child”.

Let me add that this flat where the family lives is almost on the top floor of a high rise building, surrounded by other high rise buildings, with a high level of noise pollution from constant traffic and nowhere to go.





**Sharon:**

“I would say a hardship post is a place where you basically cannot get everything, where you have to have everything shipped in”.

Sometimes certain products would be available but not continually.

“So you buy it when you see it”.

The characteristics of a hardship post result in specific and ongoing frustrations.

“We always have conflict situations. I think it is because people are having such a hard time living in the country, that people are finding it difficult.

**Sanette and Deon** and their family had a drop in their living standards from their home in Pretoria to the one in A---- which had no garage, garden nor enough space for the family's needs. But the hardship for them was in living “on the wrong side of the track” in a city that was politically divided. An added aspect was that Head Office did not seem to be concerned with the living conditions on the ground and there seems to be no mechanism whereby they could enlighten Head Office of their difficulties.

**Elwin**, Deon's son of fifteen:

“We go to school in the West and there's no problems. There are shopping malls where we go, and all that. But there is a huge change between East and West. You come home to the East and you walk down the street and you have to walk

through trash. You get thrown rocks at by the kids who live here. And you know, you're blond, so. It's true".

"Here there is nothing. There's not even shops on this side. Even if there were, I wouldn't go, because it would be terrible. No movies, nothing. Seriously nothing. So we have to go to the West side".

"I come here to sleep. When I come here I stay inside the house".

Deon's daughter, **Suzy** (12) has this to say of her life:

"I have some friends who live in Z----- and you always have to cross checkpoints and go through all that stuff. It's really a hassle, if you just want to be normal and go and hang out. It's a lot different from any other country".

For **Deon** and his family the hardship is constituted in living in two irreconciled worlds.

**Eddy** describes part of the adjustment to life in a hardship post as:

"A process of coming to terms with all these oddities and differences to what you are accustomed to back in South Africa . What you do, is you compromise. You find that you look for a 'close to' to what you have in South Africa. It won't be exactly, but it will be close to. Then the item becomes acceptable and the sooner you get into that sort of a pattern, the sooner you settle in....."

The hardship element in B-----:

"It's the culture, but it doesn't come straightaway. It's

hidden”.

**Bennie** describes A----- as having features of both the first and the third world. He repeats the idea of a culture that continuously exposes its layers of difference to foreigners the longer they stay.

From the foregoing contributions it seems that one of the most difficult aspects of the adjustment process for newcomers is the shock of getting less and living with less than they were used to in South Africa. Bigger allowances do not seem to compensate for deprivations as money cannot buy what is needed in a hardship post.

**Elizabeth** says the hardship is not of a material nature.

“It is more the things that South Africans take for granted: like being able to play sport, to walk out. Here it costs a fortune. It can upset what you regard as your normal lifestyle”.

**Oliver** has lived in the first world as well as in a variety of hardship posts. When he compares posts, it becomes clear that certain first world posts have problems that are compensated for in third world posts and vice versa. Furthermore it seems that there are differences among hardship posts too. Each has its own problems and some are worse than others. He had been in an extremely difficult post and moved to a relatively easy one, which he appreciated unlike other South Africans, who went straight there. It may be important to keep in mind that one’s frame of reference

plays a role in someone's perception of hardship.

**Susan** maintains that we still have a choice about attitude towards hardship realities. We can choose whether to focus on the positive or the negative aspects. She accepts that some things are hard to ignore but one can try to ignore it. One must make peace with the things one cannot change. She is convinced that one can get used to anything.

It seems that some people have a harder time to cultivate a pragmatic and tolerant attitude than others.

#### 5.5.14.1 Political instability

Even though **Deon's** family has friendships in the international community, strong political divisions between religious groups cannot but affect the family. Due to individual experiences and perceptions, the family has become split with father and one son supporting one side, while the younger son supports the other.

#### 5.5.14.2 The ongoing frustrations of infra-structural problems.

Power fluctuations can damage sensitive equipment. Power and water cuts take place without warning in many parts of the developing world. In R----- **Deon** has not got enough electricity to use a kettle and on Fridays there is none at all.

Because this problem was unexpected, no departmental provision was made for generators.

**Sanette:**

“We have no garbage collection. Every time I walk down the street, I walk through garbage. You don’t get used to that. It’s always dirty. You cannot wear sandals outside. You get your feet dirty. It’s really in everything you do, you’re conscious of the fact that this is a strange place”.

The quality of local produce and clothing is seen as inferior in Z----

“Workmanship is bad. Everything breaks. Maintenance is very high”.

Medical services are generally much poorer than in South Africa and can contribute to a sense of anxiety should something go wrong with a family member. Several people mentioned examples of problems.

For instance, **Susan** had the added anxiety of being flown to South Africa for a medical procedure that could have been less traumatic if she did not have the added stress of time spent travelling and being without her husband at a time when one needs support.

But the initial anxiety about catching every passing germ soon subsides when you realize that no-one dies from the odd stomach infection, says **Susan**.

Susan implies that much anxiety is caused initially by the thought that there may be health problems that cannot be adequately addressed. Eventually the anxiety subsides when people see that they do recover from ailments that are due to poor hygiene.

#### 5.5.14.3 Difference of population pressure:

Cities with a high population density, requires a different way of thinking to cope with a lack of privacy. Sometimes this lack of privacy can be due to a cultural practice of staring at strangers.

“And here we come from Pretoria with very few people, and there you arrive in J---- with 15 million people. So you lack privacy”.

After a few years in M-----, where the entire population of 15 million people are squeezed into apartments on a relatively small area, both **Johan and Susan** now seek to escape cities and people as much as they can!

But Johan says that no matter what you do, you cannot escape the reality of life in M-----. It is always hot; you are always surrounded by lots of people; travel is never a pleasure and you cannot avoid dealing with the local people. The only escape is one's apartment as it is the only place where you can be by yourself.

Home becomes a sanctuary and protection against the outside environment. I was certainly struck by the high level of homeboundness South African diplomats experience in overcrowded countries. In general African countries allow for more freedom of movement.

#### 5.5.14.4 Effect of overwhelming poverty



In most of the developing world, there is an enormous gap between rich and poor. There are furthermore very few rich people. A middle class as we know it hardly exists. One is continually confronted with the reality of this difference. Our diplomats mention a sense of being targeted due to being seen as haves. This is an impediment to natural or equal relationships with the host country nationals as motives are always suspect.

**Susan** speaks of the long time it takes to build up relationships built on trust and personal contact.

**Nongile** found it hard to cope with highly visible poverty and begging. This is obviously an aspect of the new environment that one has to find a way to cope with. It is not an easy process as the reaction is on an emotional level. No cognitive decision can be tough enough to withstand the emotional impact of the poor and suffering.

She says:

“I told myself I am not going to feel pity about them. When I learnt that the Embassy belongs to Charity Organizations, it was easier. I was told, of course, I should never ever give to beggars. But the minute you turn around and look to the other side, you just see another beggar. Sometimes, you even get to the robot, you wish the driver could just move on”.

**Stephen** says in a poor country like I---, foreigners are perceived as haves and considered as saviours who should be coerced into

helping the poverty stricken. Desperate measures can be employed to relieve poverty, such as throwing oneself in front of a car to get money as compensation for injuries suffered. Driving a car is therefor discouraged by the mission.

**Fred** describes a cultural difference that grates on him:

“If they discover that you are willing to give something small, in the mind the floodgates are now open and they ask for more and more and more until we get angry. But there is no concept of I’ve imposed on this person enough already. The more you impose on them, the more it gives you licence to continue”.

This may sound like a discriminatory statement, but for someone coming from a culture where the rules are different, it takes some time getting used to a new set of behaviours.

**Barney :**

“If a guy is born into riches, all he does is he gets up in the morning. That’s a hard enough effort for him.

There is no hope for the poor. At least we can see in South Africa a poor man can come out of poverty and do something with his life, and maybe get an opportunity. There is no opportunity here”.

On the caste system:

“If you were born in the streets, your grandchildren will live in the streets. If your father was a tailor, you’ll be a tailor. They don’t question it, they just accept it”.



#### 5.5.14.5 Different climate

Arriving in a different climate can be a shocking experience if you are not expecting it:

“The greatest shock was when we arrived in M----- from South Africa. It was winter in South Africa, so you are so well dressed and suddenly you hit 41 degree C.”

“Beautiful houses, beautiful gardens, but you can very seldom sit in a garden like this, because it is too hot. It’s 35 degrees and the mosquitoes eat you up. So you live much more indoors .....unfortunately”

Adjusting to a radically different climate takes a while. This aspect has its biggest impact at the beginning of a transfer. **Johan** says he did not anticipate the effect of the heat and humidity at all. Venturing outside an air-conditioned hotel room, required overcoming resistance to exposure to that heat.

#### **Mandla:**

“At least, we are coping now. Initially we couldn’t even cope with the heat. When you come out of the plane you feel very hot, as if you are going to die *right now*”.

A climate of extremes requires a physical adjustment and one that can lead to an indoor type of lifestyle, something South Africans are not used to.

#### 5.5.14.6 Pollution levels

High pollution levels are linked to health hazards, causing anxiety both for individuals and parents of children.

“ J---- is so polluted, you don't have flowers growing” .

“D----- has .....what I would regard as subhygienic standards compared to South Africa. Even compared to X.. in South Africa where I grew up, my kids could play in the streets, barefoot. They could run outside”.

“We live on bottled water, from morning to evening, brushing your teeth, drinking tea, doing everything. You cannot use the water here. You get D----- belly, stomach problems. But the body is funny, it adjusts. We have made up our mind, we'll have to stay here for four years”.

In M-----:

“Everything is polluted: the beaches, the air, the water. I mean there is nothing that is really good in this country” .

#### Different water

In spite of reassurances by your landlord, the likelihood is great that the water is not drinkable. One entire family contracted amoebic dysentery in A----- and had to cancel a planned holiday. They switched to bottled water.

**Eddy** describes a long process of trial and error to find out which brand of bottled water suited his family's constitution.

#### Rubbish removal

This is definitely not as efficient as in the first world, if it exists at all.

**Eddy:**

“Back home you can complain if the municipality has not come to collect it. But here, the dirt in the street is just par for the course. They don't complain about it. They live in and amongst it. And you hope you don't get sick”.

5.5.14.7 Shopping realities:

“Shopping here is an occupation in itself. You spend long hours in markets, buying low quality produce and negotiating prices for everything”.

There are no supermarkets and you have to go from one place to the next to find what you need. The same was said of B-----.

**Nongile** in the markets of D----:

“And you are not even sure if that is the right price, because he looks at you and he gives you any price. *It* is not written down anywhere. You must keep on at the bargaining part. That kills me. It's so much strain. Because you mustn't take his prices. The other day I was buying ice cream. I knew it was 60 rupees but he was writing 80. So when I said: Since when did it go up, he said, sorry madam, sorry, it was a mistake”.

In D-----:

“We were totally confused because we had never seen shops like these. We don't have them at home. Even in

rural areas, you know a shop you will see is a shop. It was a different case. First of all we had to bargain when you buy. Something we are not used to”.

In expensive A---- with its few shops, **Amanda** has to suppress her shopping urges, but then she indulges in “pent up sprees” whenever the opportunity arises. I heard a similar statement in M---- by **Barney and Vesna** who regard weekend shopping as recreational and found they could not do so.

“We South Africans, we enjoy shopping so much. It’s in our blood almost. For a weekend, we can shop the whole weekend and say we enjoyed the weekend. So these people don’t understand that”.

“It’s noisy, smoky, people are hooting and there is general chaos”.

“You can’t really buy meat here because it is really unhygienic. The stuff just lies on the floor - it’s unbelievable. Very dirty. We bring our meat from South Africa”.

Not being able to speak the language means Barney gets “robbed” when he attempts to do the shopping and that puts him off even more.

“I get nailed because I cannot speak the language”.

Different local conditions require a change in lifestyle, generally a more restricted one.

#### 5.5.14.8 Difference in driving practices

I include this category as so many South African men had so much to say about the various driving practices.

Traffic congestion is very high in cities with high density populations.

In B----- there are no stop signs and this contributes to driving confusion. Everyone seems to go wherever he pleases. At the same time there is tolerance for each person's actions. Stephen appreciates this positive attitude and believes we can imitate it to our own benefit. In my experience each country has a workable system and the biggest problem arises when you reject their system and insist on thinking the system you are used to is the only correct one.

**Fred** would disagree with me.

He says:

“You expect the driving to be bad, but then after a while it gets to you. Because you live here. When you have the tourist mentality, you can accept that things are different. After you've lived here for a year or two, it's not a different place. It's home! And it's not acceptable that people at home behave like this. Of course, you forget that you are the foreigner”.

And before you get too irritated by the noise of many klaxons: Fred adds:

“Hooting is a big thing in the Middle East. But it is not in anger, it is more to say: I'm here.”

**Eddy**, another male commentator:

“The traffic was horrendous. It was horrendous. It took me close to two or three months to start driving in B---- itself. For the uninitiated it is very scary. They say they have a traffic order, but I am reluctant to believe that. How do you explain their haphazard driving?”

Eddy laughed when I asked him why he used the past tense when describing the traffic as horrendous and admitted that the traffic had not changed but that he had.

“I’ve compromised from my driving norm to a B---- driving norm”.

Eddy also provides a blueprint for driving in such traffic. He used taxi’s initially and observed the driving practices from the passenger’s seat as if in preparation for the day when he would drive his own car.

Driving in M----:

“If you want to take a drive, then someone will probably scratch your car .....or you can’t handle the traffic any more. Sometimes you drive along the road and you just stop in the middle of it and you say: just go past me please. They drive sideways and it is really disorganized”.

Driving in S----? That’s strictly for the brave, says **Songo** who employs a driver.

Due to a lack of facilities one's lifestyle needs to change radically in the third world. The obstacles are many, not least of which are financial. Where clubs exist, they are geared at the elite and priced accordingly. When you have to gird the loins and motivate yourself to brave the multitudes out there for the sake of an outing, it is often easier to stay home.

As **Barney** says:

“ We actually don't get out at all over weekends. We tried to. I told my wife recently, we can't do this any more, sitting in the house. We're getting depressed. It's becoming very difficult for us to handle the weekends. Just to get out a bit. What do you do? Besides eating out, that's it. We just watch TV all the time. The whole weekend. If you walk outside, all these people are looking at you. You feel so uncomfortable, they are always staring”.

**Stephen:**

“With the hectic lifestyle, work, traffic stress, social life afterwards, the entertaining.....one needs actually to get out of B---- more than we do”.

A hectic program and workload present a problem for a HOM who wants to keep his staff motivated, but cannot offer them the necessary facilities for relaxation. He believes that would be one way of keeping morale up.

The lack of entertainment facilities is mentioned by most people I interviewed. It costs a fortune to play golf in M----- and it is not pleasant to go to local cinemas, says **Johan**. There is no way to

escape from the city.

**Eddy:**

“Firstly as a South African, it’s common knowledge and it’s a fact that most South Africans are outdoor orientated and we all have pattern of life where we try to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. It is not easy, not is it cheap to get out of B-----”.

**B-----:**

“We have nowhere to play. We have nothing. Recreation clubs are expensive, very expensive. I don’t have that kind of money. In South Africa we are used to recreation that is free and it keeps the mind and body healthy. The people are in the house the whole time. Children spend hours in front of TV sets as they cannot go anywhere”.

Costs are often an enormous impediment to recreation. Susan says your recuperation package determines which aspect of your recreation needs you can replace. This brings one to the important question of how much money is needed to compensate for hardships endured? When will one feel - on an emotional level - that you are being compensated for your hardships on a financial level? Is it possible to compensate for an emotional need in financial terms?

Boredom is a problem, says **John**, as your options are so limited.

**Sharon** regards herself as a very sporty person and finds C----- limited as far as opportunities are concerned. She has bought a





home gym that gives her some kind of satisfaction.

**Eddy:**

“Recreation is a big, big problem. For me it is a very big problem. Our whole family is ultra sporty, at professional level. I performed poorly after my first year here and did not know it was due to the physical adjustment to local conditions until I was told by a sports professional. I thought I had failed. I performed better the following year”.

“In M----, we are staying in a high class suburb. We just live inside and we are outdoor people. It’s a very new lifestyle, what with air conditioners and heaters.

B----- is a small landlocked country offering few places to visit. So there is little chance to escape a small society. Life is expensive in B----- - but otherwise there is little hardship other than the cultural difference. The availability of satellite television provides a means of recreation.

**Oliver** mentioned the fact that no alcohol is available in a fundamentalist religious country - not even for diplomats. This is a further hardship as one is deprived of an escape mechanism! In B-----, diplomats describe themselves as quite obsessed with getting hold of alcohol!

But one “advantage” of a hardship post is that there is often nothing to spend money on. However the more extreme posts offer a two monthly trip to a nearby resort for rest and recreation. But life there is so expensive that all those savings are then taken care of.

No-one seems to be able to envisage what it will be like in advance.

**Mandla:**

“We thought we would understand the lifestyle (in D----) because we were used to rural areas at homes where there are no facilities. Even then, it’s not like here. There you could drink rain water. Here no water is safe”.

5.5.14.9.1 Teenagers

**Anne** (18) who lives in Z-----, where there is no nightlife;

“What we do, we have lots of friends at church and we have youth group meetings and we get together. We have sleep overs and we go roller-skating together. I also play musical instruments.

But her mother, **Jo**, says:

“It is difficult for a teenaged girl. She is limited in where she can go in a strict religious society.”

“She can’t just go out on her own. She would certainly be sending a message that she is loose. It would give her an ugly name. She could go in a group, but only in certain parts of town. There are only men on the streets”.

**Don** (16)

“My recreation fun is through friends. I have lots of American friends from school and church. I get invited to the American

Embassy often where they have a big recreation centre. And...I can spend hours playing on the computer”.

**Jo** likes walking but dislikes the unasked attention out on a street.

“You feel very much noticed when you are out walking on your own.”

This is a reality in many strict religious countries where women generally stay indoors.

**Deon’s** teenaged children in B---- say that there are no sports facilities. Their lives are not particularly active:

“We either basically go to friends’ houses and hang out or we go to the movies. There’s not much else to do. The B----’s play basketball and the D---’s play basketball and softball. I wouldn’t feel comfortable going to either’s clubs. And I don’t play basketball either”.

Teenagers are also limited in what they can do by a lack of recreational facilities. They do not seem to mind too much. All their friends are in the same boat and so they manage to amuse themselves as best they can.

#### 5.5.15 Marriage

Diplomatic marriages have always been described as ‘make or break’ relationships and a particularly high divorce rate testifies to this. Why does it happen?

The strain of the initial upheavals certainly impacts on a marriage:

**Eddy:**

“During that period, we had a lot of arguments, but not irretractable stuff. It was stuff we could sort out. Misunderstandings. Minor stuff”.

**Lettie** says the initial tension experienced when they first arrived created tension between husband and wife. This was an unexpected aspect for her.

**Susan** describes the adjustment stress as having a tremendous impact on her marriage. The partners tried to analyze each other and concluded that she was flexible enough to adjust whereas he was not. She decided that if their marriage could withstand this test of living in this difficult country, it would stand the test of time too. This attitude resulted in her seeing her marriage as if it were on trial

She experienced so much marital stress that she had to expand her coping mechanisms. Her solution for dealing with her stress caused the next problem as her husband disapproved of her doing yoga, as he considered yoga an eastern religion not compatible with Christian values.

For **Oliver**, the working partner, who remembers how his marriage nearly floundered after the first year in an extremely difficult hardship posting, the first year was a critical “make or break stage” in his marriage. This is the time when a spouse either decides “to hang around or she decides to hell with this and she buggers off home”.



Support is expected when unresolved work problems endure:

“You go home and talk to your wife. I have that habit of taking my problems home with me, because she provides that support. I came home every night and moaned and groaned.... and .....telling nothing good. It was difficult for my wife and I couldn't take it any more”.

**Barney** was always irritated. But **Vesna** says she and Barney have a solid friendship and they have always provided support for each other. At the stage when he could not handle his situation any longer, Vesna's mother was visiting and he switched to talk to her. That was when Vesna realized that the situation had to change.

#### 5.5.15.1 A stronger marriage - interdependence

**John and Amanda**, a couple who seemed to have received no support from anyone in the mission, had to become each other's sole support. Being pushed together has made their relationship stronger. The two took a conscious decision to be supportive and not to get angry at each other. Having a baby helped their relationship. Otherwise Amanda says she would have returned home or jumped out of the window.

One can see how this would lead to the kind of relationship that **Bonnie and Jaco** describe as taking place after ten years of marriage where they describe their nuclear family as a closed and interdependent system.

**Fred** describes his relationship with his wife as very supportive and that is what enables them to lead this kind of life.

“My hobby is my wife. On average we would probably have a conversation for about two hours a day”.

The family has tea together on a daily basis and uses the time to discuss everything that happens to them.

It seems to me that a posting could represent a radical change in the couple's roles and achieving a good working relationship can weather the potential storms. Conversely, if one partner does not succeed in finding an acceptable equilibrium, the marriage could be placed at risk simply because there is no where else for tension to be channeled to.

#### 5.5.15.2 One spouse is fulfilled

One partner can be fulfilled whilst the other is not. In **Barney's** case he could not resolve his office problems and requested an intermission transfer. But his wife was very happy in their first posting and less so in the next, more restricting posting. She says that they will never know whether they did the right thing by leaving.

“I had a group of friends, we played bridge, you know, my daughter was at school and we had coffee mornings”.

**Oliver** says he loved the challenge of a hardship post in which he had to learn many things, but his wife was lonely and hated the experience.

**Amanda** got married, fell pregnant, gave up working and left South Africa to accompany her husband to A----- where there was literally nothing for her to do initially. She says she had to cope with so many things that were completely out of the ordinary for her in the space of eighteen months.

Office stress is taken home and a working husband does not want to hear about his wife's problems. **Stephen** believes one has to work even harder at a marriage in the third world than in the first world. He ascribes it to the fact that the spouse has a harder time simply getting around without a driver, not having colleagues to support her, having to deal with people who do not speak English, having to cope with different and difficult shopping practices. It is even harder when the husband *knows* she is battling and he cannot afford to buy her transport.

**Jan** appreciates his work fully. He wanted the challenge and has enjoyed the experience to the hilt. He was intensively busy, stimulated and involved in his work. He describes the satisfaction of feeling adequate to his task. His wife says she found plenty to do but little mental stimulation.

**Angelique**, a non-working spouse:

“When I leave J--- here, I don't know what I am going to call myself. At the end of the day, by the time I'm old, I've got no pension. He has got pension, he's working for his own work file. I'm supporting him.....this man is going up. I wish the Department of Foreign Affairs can employ and use spouses. Also promote *their* interests”.



And: "At the end of the day it is so fascinating to be on posting, but when you go back.....you are nowhere. That's what we discuss, the spouses, because you never know the future. I mean, you can be thrown away any time".

A precarious position for a woman. Angelique is raising an important issue here. The accompanying wife is completely dependent on a husband. If the marriage should fail, she has little to fall back on.

An interrupted career:

**Sanette** thought she would be able to work every time the family lived in South Africa. It did not work out that way for various reasons. It was to be eleven years before she could go back to work.

"And it was extremely difficult, not only for myself, but for the whole family. The children had grown up with me always being at home the whole day. There wasn't a time of being able to work at home for a bit or being able to work part-time. But this was my opportunity for going back to work. It's really been something that I've missed a lot all the time.....not being able to work. It took me about six months to find something. Still, I was actually lucky to find something. Doing odd jobs does not fill out your CV after four years I learnt a lot from my diplomatic experiences and you go back and people think you are on the same level as someone who had two or three years' experience of work".



The woman who fulfills a supportive role and tries to work when the family is in South Africa has the added problem of finding a job and of subjecting her children to a next adjustment.

#### 5.5.15.3 A non-equal relationship

The inequality between spouses may exist before departure already. **Johan** realized in retrospect that his wife had a better idea of what to expect than he did. She underwent training that prepared her for her job. He lacked relevant and specific information about the parameters that exist for a non working spouse, which contributed to his difficult adjustment. He battled to accept that doors would not open for him; that results would not justify effort. All he knew was that he'd be living abroad for four years and he thought he could be the same entrepreneur that he had been in Pretoria. The inequality in the marriage relates to the fact that his wife could pursue a career whereas he was unprepared for the reality that he would not be able to do anything productive.

The second aspect of inequality for Johan refers to the difference in lifestyle between the two spouses. **Susan** would go to work on a daily basis where she'd be dealing with "competent" people in a stimulating office environment. She also had continued contact with South Africa. Johan would have nothing to do, in a hotel room and eventually in an apartment. He dealt with the larger, non-westernized sector of the population. As a male spouse he was not aware of other males in the international community who might have been in a similar position. Johan was resentful of the fact that Susan's work was so important in her life and hence he felt unimportant to her (Note the reversal of traditional complaints).



degree of connectedness with one's family of origin.

**Eddy** believes his childhood spent away from home prepared him for leaving home and living in different places.

“But **Sharon** comes from a very different environment. She comes from a very fine, close-knit family and they are getting along with each other and that. And she had to make the bigger sacrifice”.

It seems clear from the above that adjustment is different for each couple and unless the two can define a mutually supportive relationship, the marriage will be negatively affected.

#### 5.5.15.4 A commuter relationship

**Oliver** does not think a spouse should accompany her husband to an extreme hardship post such as T----. Should they decide to take it and split up, he advises a maximum number of visits for the family, “even if it is out of one's own pocket”. For him, from a man's perspective, a commuter relationship is riskier early on in a marriage.

His wife, **Joan**, found that not having her husband with her, rendered her vulnerable to the attentions of another person. She became lonely and needed help in bringing up her sons.

“It was a dangerous split. Although one can phone each other just so often, you lose touch with that person. There

were times when I would say to my husband: I feel I don't know you any more. And he used to say the same".

Oliver would advise a newly married couple not to accept an extreme hardship posting such as T---- or K-----. Still, it is equally important to consider all circumstances before taking a decision.

**Mandla** admits that a commuter relationship could have its pitfalls:

"Well, it may be dangerous. It depends on that particular person. When you told yourself that this is what I want and nothing else, then you go that route".

His wife shuttles between Johannesburg and D----; now to be with her husband and then to be with their four children.

I asked Mandla what it was like for his wife to live in two places. She was away at the time of the interview.

"Ah well, she is the one *most* affected. Because she is doing nothing.... apart from social gatherings with other women. So when she's not doing that, there's nothing. There's that spare time when she starts thinking about the kids and all. So that's what makes us prefer that she goes to them quite often".

"It was quite a big problem. But all the same, we have adjusted to it. We told ourselves, well, it's like this, then let us just continue".

Mandla describes a woman who must be torn between her two roles

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.

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.

## 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.





## 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.

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## Addendum A

An original letter from DFA in which permission is granted to the researcher to visit missions abroad is included.



**DEPARTMENT: FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**  
Private Bag X152, Pretoria, 0001 Tel: (012) 351 1000

7 May 2001

Professor D Beyers  
Head of the Department of Psychology  
University of Pretoria

Dear Professor Beyers

**DOCTORAL THESIS : MS ANETA SHAW**

Ms Shaw is studying towards a Doctorate in Psychology. The title of her proposed research is the Discontinuous lives: listening to the stories of South African Diplomatic Families in the Third World.

Permission was granted to Ms Shaw on 18 September 1997 to visit and interview officials of the Department and their families, who were living at hardship missions. The information gathered in this way may be used for the completion of her studies.

Your co-operation is appreciated.

  
**THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL**

Enquire : Ms AS van den Berg (Route: HAA207)  
Telephone : (012) 351-1219



## Addendum B

I visited missions in the following countries, not necessarily in the same order, during the latter half of the nineties.

Egypt

Jordan

Israel

India

Tanzania

One interview was conducted in Pretoria with a couple living in Indonesia.

## ADDENDUM C: CONSENT FORM

- 1 I authorize Aneta Shaw, a doctoral student at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, to gather information from me and my family about our experience of leaving South Africa and settling down in another country. I understand that we will be answering interview questions relating to the adjustment process of myself and my family.  
I give permission for Aneta to record our discussions.  
I have consented to participate in this study voluntarily.  
A complete couple interview should not last longer than either a morning or afternoon. I understand that if it should take longer than one session to provide Aneta with all the information she needs, we may schedule more sessions. This will be done in a way that will not disrupt my schedule.
- 2 I understand that Aneta will use the information I give her in a thesis which will be printed and stored at the University of Pretoria.  
I understand that she may use her final findings in training programmes for cadets. I accept that Aneta undertakes to use pseudonyms and to scramble data (such as name of posting, biographical particulars, etc) to make identification difficult. I understand that some people may recognize that I provided information even though Aneta does not identify me as the source. I give my permission to Aneta to use the information I give her in this way.
- 3 I understand that sources of information will not be named in the text of the thesis and postings will be referred to as countries in a larger geographical area.
- 4 I understand that I or any of my family members may discontinue our participation in this study at any time.  
I or any of my family members may also refuse to discuss any subject that any of us feels uncomfortable talking about. I or any of my family members am not required to provide any information that we do not feel free to discuss.
- 5 I understand that as an employee of the Department of Foreign Affairs,



department in any way.

- 6 I understand that if participating in this study causes any negative effects for me or any of my family members, Aneta will be available for a short time after our interviews to provide us with an opportunity for discussion.
- 7 This form has been explained clearly to me by Aneta and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and convey this information to every participating member of my family, before signing this consent form.

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Respondent's signature

Date

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Researcher's signature