



Executive Master in Intercultural Communication  
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# Turning Strain into Strength: Developing Intercultural Resilience in times of Cultural Adversity

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de  
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*Fall seven times, stand up eight.*

Japanese Proverb

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## **Preface: How it all started**

There is a saying that “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”. I failed to follow that recommendation. For three years I lived and worked in the Eternal city and in retrospect it felt like I fell into every expat trap there was. I got easily frustrated, stressed and angry over various elements in the Italian culture. I considered things to be poorly organized with most things left at chance. Every bus strike, electricity cut or news report about the social downfall of the Italian society became fuel to my fire that this place was not good enough. I was more occupied in noticing the downsides rather than appreciating the beauty and atmosphere in which I actually lived. I cursed every driver who had the courage to ignore me when I wanted to cross the street (they obviously did the same against me because of my slightly headless tactics of crossing the street before the cars had come to a full stop). I laughed and mocked Italian TV for being sexist and stereotypical and I kept making a number of how expensive things were, be it housing or groceries. I didn't see the forest for the trees. I was, in retrospect, interculturally incompetent. I was caught in a constant comparison between the Italian and the Norwegian culture, and the latter almost always won. Food and climate would always come to the Italian rescue, but on those points there was no point in comparing anyway. I was letting frustration, stress and alienation get the better of me rather than acknowledging that I was living in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. And I lived well. It took me a reverse culture shock and a broken intercultural relationship to realize that so often in life, you don't miss the water until the well is dry.

After my period in Rome, I moved back to Norway and worked in Oslo for about one year. During this time, I started to develop unease about my home culture and the context in which I was living. I didn't feel a sense of belonging and took a distance to the Norwegian culture. I felt out of place. I became increasingly irritated over Norwegian eating habits, I was more interested in foreign issues than national and local news and I preferred spending weekends abroad rather than indulging in local activities. I began praising everything that was different. This also affected my relationship with people around me. I was, ironically, having much of the same frustration that I had while living in Italy, only this time the table had turned. I didn't want to adapt because I missed what I had left and I felt hostile to what I had returned to. Looking back on all of this, I realize today that I was going through all the classic symptoms of a reverse culture shock. I consequently began to develop an interest in understanding why I had reacted in the ways that I did and how I could put these reactions into a line of thought. I started gathering material and found that the resilience concept indeed serves as an excellent approach to the challenges in succeeding with intercultural adaptation. I realized that resilience thinking – the capacity to deal with change and to continue to develop – is indeed what intercultural adaptation is all about, as we try to make sense of a new culture with the cultural luggage we bring with us.

### **About this paper: Target group and concept clearing**

Why is it that somewhere between 5-40 % of international assignments end up in failure? Why do expats return to their homes prematurely or fail to achieve preset expectations? Living abroad, sometimes far away from friends and family, with new rules, a different language and new approaches to life, can be an extremely difficult challenge. It can bring out the worst in you. But crises and challenges can also have an opposite effect. It can also bring out the best in you. Never underestimate your capacity to deal with adversity. As I will argue later in this paper, facing strain and stress is not necessarily just negative but can be considered to be a stimulator for growth in difficult times. It is like Albert Camus said, "In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer". Adapting to a new culture is not easy, it requires a lot of effort. Failure to adapt often comes down to the individual inability and unwillingness to accept the rules, values and perspectives of the host culture. It requires the willingness to make room for new approaches to life, acknowledging that your way is not necessarily the only way, and consider the expatriation as an enrichment of your own cultural identity.

This paper is written by an expat to other expats. It is written to help and prepare individuals and families who are about to embark on a period abroad. This paper aims to present a concept thinking that can help expats coping with intercultural challenges. Life as an expat includes a high level of uncertainty compared to life at home. This paper will show how resilience thinking can be used to explain the different processes individuals and families face before, during and after their relocation to a new destination. It aims to show how resilience thinking can envelope what is psychologically required in order to succeed. What character traits are necessary to turn an international assignment into a successful one, both professionally as well as personally? What risks and emotional challenges await expats, and how can they best overcome them? With resilience thinking as its point of departure, this paper will introduce theories of adaptation, outline important intercultural communication skills and discuss ways of coping with intercultural stress in the best possible manner.

Most people manage to adapt to a new culture, but the time and manner in which it happens may vary. There is, unfortunately, no textbook way of doing it. Studies on intercultural/cross-cultural adaptation have been conducted from several perspectives and is today a fairly transdisciplinary field of research. Consequently, the literature on the subject is extensive and it is extremely difficult to grasp all of the different approaches taken. This paper will cover key areas of intercultural adaptation studies, but using resilience thinking as a platform for it all. As much as there is no textbook way to become interculturally resilient, this paper will attempt to provide transferees with a helping hand in their quest for a successful stay in a new destination.

I will use Young Yun Kim's book "Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: An Integrative theory" (1988) as an important theoretic basis together with interesting input from 20 expats between the age of 25 and 60 who were asked to share their moments of difficulties while abroad and to describe how they worked their way out of it. This was done through online questionnaires (see Appendix) or telephone interview. Furthermore, I asked them to come up with important advice on how persons soon to embark on their own expat experience should focus on in order to make sure the period abroad becomes as successful and rewarding as possible. Their experiences will be used throughout the paper.

Before diving into the many aspects of intercultural adaptation and fellow expat experiences, it might be useful to explain certain key terms used in this paper. There is a multitude terms that has been used when referring to the adaptation process: assimilation, amalgamation ('going native'), acculturation (partial acquirement of host culture values) and integration. I will use the term adaptation and specifically Kim's definition which states that adaptation is "the process of change over time that takes place within individuals who have completed their primary socialization process in one culture and then come into continuous, pro-longed first-hand contact with a new and unfamiliar culture" (Kim, 1988, p. 38).

As I focus on international adaptation, I will consequently exclude individuals who move from one region or subculture to another. I will target individuals who move from one country to another because of professional reasons, be it as an employee assigned to a time-limited project in another destination or a family member accompanying this employee.

Let the journey begin.

# Chapter One: Introducing intercultural resilience

*Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.*

Confucius

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Life is full of surprises. Even more so, it is full of changes and unpredictable turnings. Moving to a new country, with all that its accompanying challenges, is indeed a change that can have deep personal consequences, be it positive or negative. Living in an environment different than your own requires you to cope with situations where previous experiences do not apply. This causes uncertainty and stress, in addition to a frequent feeling of inadequacy and frustration. Some manage to deal with the challenges that arise, others bow under and prematurely return home. The term intercultural resilience refers to an individual's dynamic capacity to adapt to cultural changes and continue to develop as an individual. At the very heart of resilience thinking lays the fairly simple acknowledgement that things change, that we are forced to adapt to these changes and optimize our growth from it. Resilience comes from the Latin word "resalire" (to rise up again) and refers to the ability to bounce back or cope successfully despite substantial adversity (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). In other words, the ability to cope with changes and challenges and to "bounce back" during difficult times. Consider this testament of human resilience:

*At the age of five, he saw his younger brother drown. The same year, he got glaucoma and his family was too poor to afford the medical help that could have saved his sight. In his teens, both his parents died and he was sent to a state institution for the blind. At the time, his Afro-American background stopped him from getting access to a wide range of activities and social facilities, including music. All odds were against him.*

The person in question was Ray Charles who grew up to become one of the most renowned musicians in the world (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004).

## **Crisis is opportunity**

Resilient individuals are considered better equipped to resist stress and adversity, to cope with change and uncertainty, and to recover faster and more completely from stress or traumatic events than others (Well? Issue 10: Spring/Summer 2007). They manage to focus on strengths rather than deficits (Ahern, Kiehl, Sole, Byers, 2006) and search for a healthy development in spite of risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). If we choose to resist to changes, we risk increasing our vulnerability and miss out on opportunities. Resilience is consequently a journey through change and development, it is about finding solutions to challenges that come our way, to give strains and difficulties a constructive meaning. It is, according to Froma Walsh, an active process of endurance, self-righting and growth in response to crisis and challenge (Walsh, 2006, p. 4). This process requires openness to experiences and interdependence

with others (ibid. p.5). Resilience should not be confused with invulnerability and in-born strength. Resilience can only develop through times of adversity and not despite it. There is not necessarily any correlation between ruggedness and resilience. On the contrary. Very few individuals manage to maintain a consistent state of normal functioning and emotional stability through times of adversity. Vulnerability towards changes must therefore be acknowledged to be just as important as the ability to overcome the same changes. Furthermore, the ability to move on and continue to develop after difficult times should not be confused with the somehow inhuman capacity of painlessly breezing through a crisis as if nothing had happened. The Chinese symbol for the word “crisis” consists of the symbols for “danger” and “opportunity”. Resilience means confronting the hard times, taking up the fight, experiencing both suffering and courage and effectively working through the difficulties both internally and interpersonally (ibid. p. 6).

Being resilient means confronting change by acknowledging it and using it as a spur for continuing development. It means dealing effectively with mistakes, considering them as “experiences for learning and growth” (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004, p. 17). A resilient person is, according to Froma Walsh, a person who develops an easygoing temperament and possessing high self-esteem and self-efficiency. A resilient person is someone who possesses a strong sense of control or influence over his or her own experiences, who has the ability to consider challenges as a source of further development and who are sufficiently committed to the activities he or she is involved in. Resilience should also be put in relation to social determinants surrounding an individual (Ungar, 2008). Resilience growth is a combination of positive, personal assets that reside within the individual as well as positive external resources such as social networking support. “The degree of resilience displayed by a person in a certain context may be said to be related to the extent to which that context has elements that nurture this resilience” (Gilligan, in Ungar, 2008, p. 221). Resilience can thus be seen as the fit between the solutions an individual try and how well these solutions resolve the challenges posed by each tension, within the norms of each community. All this contributes to an individual’s experience of resilience (Ungar, 2008). Another thing to consider is that resilience may be content – or context-specific (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). This means that an individual may be resilient when facing one type of risk or challenge but may be unable to overcome others.

When identifying human resilience skills, we see that there is also an aspect of courage to all of this, courage to adapt to new situations and remain open for the personal growth that comes with it. Werner (in Walsh, 2008), argues that the core component in effective coping is mastering the feeling that the odds can be surmounted, that obstacles can be overcome and that control over the situation can be obtained. There is also an element of optimism in all of this, the conviction that things will turn out for the better in the end, that challenges can be mastered successfully. Once more, this leads us back to the core of



resilience thinking – that facing adversity could also present itself as an opportunity to grow, individually as well as interpersonally. As Young Yun Kim states, resilience facilitates a person’s capacity to adapt to the host culture (Kim, 1988, p. 134). A resilient individual has the ability to empathize with others while at the same time believe in oneself. Without openness and resilience, Kim states, an individual is less capable of “absorbing culture shocks and withstanding challenges of the adaptation process, just as a building (...) will easily collapse in a storm” (ibid. p. 135). Resilience thinking is also applicable to the challenges family members as a unit faces during the adaptation process. Family resilience is about how a family together confronts and manages the stress of the new situation and how it together adapts to the changes and eventually continues to develop as a family unit.

## **Chapter Two: Expecting the unexpected: The significance of stress, vulnerability and unpredictability**

*In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.*

Albert Einstein

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Not everything in life goes as planned, and living abroad is, for good and for bad, not necessarily what you first thought it would be. It can turn out to be more difficult than what you first thought, but it can also represent one of the most significant experiences of your life. Personal development during the stay can often take a different turn. Adaptation is, not just about confronting the unknown, it is also about confronting one self. It is a complex and often unpredictable process that sidelines much of the stability and predictability experienced and developed in the home culture.

When confronted with a new and different culture, your identity, behaviour and value systems are questioned and challenged. As Kim states, “intercultural encounters provide such situations of deviation from the familiar, assumed and taken-for-granted, as individuals are faced with things that do not follow their unconscious cultural program” (Kim, 1988, p. 52). Acculturating into the new host culture is far more difficult than that of childhood enculturation because the host culture can represent something that directly opposes their original values and beliefs. This confrontation occurs in situations that are similar to daily routines conducted in the home culture, be it doing the grocery shopping, sending the kids to the new kindergarten or calling a plumber, the difference is the cultural context in which it is done, as described by a 34 year old British expat living in Sweden:

*There are daily frustrations that alone are not important, but taken together can become frustrating – simple things like communicating properly when you go to the doctor, deal with the government*

*paperwork or visit the bank, can all be problematic at times. Even when I want to fix something up around the flat, all the fixtures and fittings are different, and I'm not sure where to buy things or what they are called. Little things like these can piss me off.*

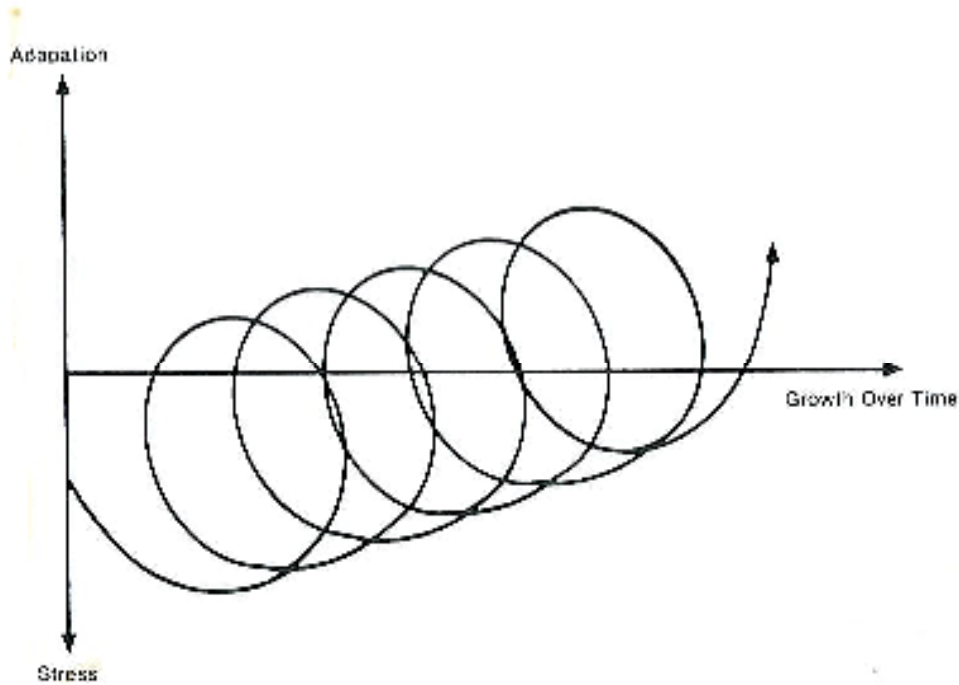
Provided that there is willingness, there is a way, and for most transferees the acculturation-deculturation process eventually leads to an elaboration of cultural patterns in which home culture values and beliefs are accompanied (if not replaced) by those of the host culture. But the road of transformation can be bumpy.

### **Turning strain into strength**

Humans are, by nature homeostatic, searching for an equilibrium and order in their lives. When confronted with situations that disrupt this equilibrium, they experience the opposite, and stress occurs. So is the case in the acculturation-deculturation process mentioned above. The familiar world of the home culture is confronted with the unfamiliar world of the host culture. And the bigger the difference is between the two worlds, the higher level of stress that can occur.

When situations of stress occur, individuals seek to restore an inner balance and stability, mostly by referring to experiences and feelings they can already relate to. They do not attempt to rationally trying to find solutions to the problems, but rather search to protect their own feelings. This may be expressed through hostility towards the host culture, often done through criticism of values, food, climate, the people and so on. The stress and frustration leads them to search for people and places they are comfortable with and contexts in which they are in control over their feelings and reactions. It may ultimately lead to a face of denial where they try to ignore similar stress-provoking situations in the future. However, this is of course difficult in the long run and it does not provide room for learning and host culture adaptation. Sooner or later the protective behaviour must make way to a more open attitude towards the host culture. This process of opening oneself to the host culture is indeed a strenuous process because you remove your imbedded and familiar 'cultural safety net', leaving yourself vulnerable to the unfamiliar and unpredictable world of the host culture. However, it is also an emotional and physical indication that your body and mind are confronting the difficulties and requirements of the host culture. It is the uncomfortable invitation to change perspectives. As Kim points out, "stress is responsible not only for suffering, frustration and anxiety, but also for providing the impetus for adaptive personal transformation and growth – the learning and creative responses to manage new cultural circumstances" (Kim, 1988, p. 56). Thus stress, despite all of its negative connotations, is part of something bigger, a dynamic process that eventually leads to adaptation and growth. This non-linear process is by Kim described as similar to the movement of a wheel where each stressful experience leads to a setback which

in turn generates an adaptive energy to help you reorganize and “leap forward” (ibid. p. 56, see figure 1 below).



*Stress-Adaptation-Growth dynamics of adaptive transformation (from Kim, 1988. p. 56)*

This model involves the processing of various negative-positive emotions that in most cases eventually lead to a mindset that is more open to the host culture and its requirements. Perceiving stress and unpredictability as something entirely negative is linked to what Brooks & Goldstein (2004) call “negative scripts”, which refer to counterproductive behaviour that eventually obstruct a resilient mindset. If you don’t dedicate room for changes and different perspectives, you prevent yourself from growing an intercultural resilience. It is self-defeating: “To be resilient is to recognize that if you are dissatisfied with certain aspects of your life, or if you find yourself continually engaging in thoughts or behaviours that lead to frustration, anger, and unhappiness, then it is your responsibility to take the initiative to rewrite the negative scripts that maintain these problems” (ibid. p. 23). Don’t insist on others to change first, take the first step yourself!

Models within resilience development have explained how different levels of risk and stress exposure are related to the outcome of the challenge. The Challenge model presented by Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) suggests that exposure to low levels or high levels of a risk are associated with failure to develop resilience. A moderate level of risk exposure is related to less negative or positive outcomes. In other words, individuals exposed to a moderate level of risk are confronted with enough of the risk to learn how

to overcome it but are not exposed to it to the extent that it's too much to handle. Linguistic challenges are a typical example where a sufficient level of exposure is key to the development of intercultural resilience. If the confrontation is too easy it represents no challenge. Equally, if it is too difficult, it may lead to hopelessness and distress. The key is to take things step by step and create grounds for development.

### **Expecting the unexpected**

If we understand intercultural adaptation as a process in which the individual acculturates with a new environment, we can not automatically presume that this is a linear and predictable process. This is because the individual is confronted with a host culture that is new and relatively unknown. Whereas the home culture is associated with balance and stability, the new host culture can, at least at first, represent the very opposite, a carrier of unpredictable and non-linear events. It takes a bit of an effort to overcome such a challenge. Things that are unpredictable and non-linear can have associations with chaos, and chaos is the antithesis of linearity and stability (Haslberger, 2005). A non-chaotic system provides information that accurately predicts the future. A chaotic system does not. Furthermore, chaos forces the individual to confront this instability by acknowledging a new reality where the merger between the home culture and host culture requires a more complex thinking in which the unpredictable occupies a far more significant role than previously thought. With chaos and complexity follows a number of concepts that have relevance to intercultural adaptation. One example is bifurcation, which is central to social-ecological resilience research. It refers to the change in a system's characteristic behaviour as its variables change. Haslberger (2005) uses the example of an ecosystem that is put under pressure by external variables such as change in average temperature. This pressure can cause an imbalance in the ecosystem where each change causes the system to transit into another state. Each transition to a new state is called a bifurcation and renders the system increasingly vulnerable to new changes, making it unpredictable to future system directions. These bifurcations can ultimately push the system to a tipping point state, an edge of chaos with a point of no return towards breakdown. Similarly, intercultural adaptation can take different directions depending on how the variables facilitate or hinder the adaptation process.

As an expat you are subject to a range of challenges and each of these challenges can cause changes or deviations of the expected linear adaptation process. In worst cases, the number of challenges, be it linguistic difficulties when doing grocery shopping or coping with a period of particularly bad weather, can change your "adaptation filter" so that future challenges are approached with negativity and resignation rather than the opposite. This can ultimately increase the stress level to the extent that you experience a breakdown of some sort that forces you to react. Such a reaction can be the decision to return home prematurely, to withdraw from the host culture environment or somehow disengage yourself from further adaptation (ibid.). A similar approach to this is the so-called butterfly effect, where small

variations in the initial stage of the adaptation process may produce larger variations in the long term. Chaos theory can help us understand better how intercultural adaptation is filled with unpredictable incidences that can affect the whole process. Living in a new and different culture is challenging preconceived linear and stable perspectives and forces the individual to reconsider their approaches to life.

We all strive towards stability, but we must also try to be more conscious about the role unpredictable incidents play in the shaping of our lives. Chaos is, as Haslberger puts it, “a space of creativity, innovation and change” (ibid. p. 168). It forces us to find solutions to difficult situations. If we acknowledge the positive force of change and stress, we are more likely to achieve a higher degree of dynamic stability. But it can rightfully be considered to be an overwhelming task, because the adaptation process can never guarantee a predictable road to successful adaption. But by expecting the unexpected, we make room for the unpredictable, thus predicting that we will experience the unpredicted. Knowledge about this can help the expat in building up an intercultural resilience. Chaos theory can help us better understand the meaning behind stress reactions, and render them useful.

## **Chapter Three: Identity and the Constant Comparison**

*From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were – I have not seen  
As others saw – I could not bring  
My passion from a common spring*

Edgar Allen Poe, “Alone”

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It's a warm 2008 summer day in Milan. A national train strike has hit Italy and frustrated commuters and tourists try to figure out alternative ways to arrive at their destination. One of them is 24 year old Mexican medical student, Jorge. Embarking on a trip through Italy, he is bewildered over the fact that the entire train network in a European country can be paralyzed like this. “This would never have happened in Mexico”, he says, presenting his own unofficial ‘State of the Nation’ what train strikes regards.

The statement of a frustrated Mexican medical student travelling in Italy shows in its own humble way how we all compare ourselves with others in order to develop, confirm and project our own identity. It can show how a person, in the heat of a frustrating moment, resolves to comparisons between the home and the host culture. Comparing our own culture with others can often be used to confirm the impeccable status of ourselves.

### **Ethnocentrism versus ethnorelativism**

The behaviour associated with ethnocentrism is the willingness to prefer working with and having relations with members of your own group rather than the consequent absence of relations with members outside the group. Ethnocentrism is further reflected in attitudes in which our own group is considered superior and virtuous as opposed to exterior groups considered the very opposite (Axelrod & Hammond, 2003). Consequently, we may prefer the likes of ourselves, culturally, socially and practically. We all carry a cultural luggage that may affect the perception of our surroundings. We are born into a culture with accompanying norms and values which may affect the perception of our surroundings. Being accustomed to a birth culture may cause difficulties seeing a different culture from that viewpoint rather than from one's own. As Homi K. Bhabha claims, "the difference of other cultures is other than the excess of signification or the trajectory of desire. These are theoretical strategies that are necessary to combat 'ethnocentrism' but they cannot, themselves, unreconstructed, represent that otherness" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 100). The risk running is thus that an ethnocentric person will see a different culture as not only different but also wrong to some degree. An ethnocentric person will resist or refuse the diversity of thought and meaning because such diversity is considered less desirable than those of the birth culture. Are there traces of cultural hegemony in all of this? Can difficulties accepting cultural diversity be seen as a tool to create a power game where dominance is the ultimate motivation? As stated previously, comparing and consequently projecting bad qualities onto another person can also be a power game, where the claimer seeks to project superiority towards someone else. The question is whether this is an attempt to elevate rather than dominate.

### **The creation of 'us' through the perception of others**

Projecting others as different to oneself is a key factor in the creation of cultural identity. We see in others who we are or who we are not. Furthermore, sense is made out of differences. As described by a 32-year old woman from Spain during her experiences in Denmark and later Germany:

*I guess that in the beginning, the most difficult thing to deal with was myself. When I left Spain I was already 27 and had a well-organized life there. Moving abroad meant a fresh start for many reasons but it also meant to be without the things I took for granted in my daily life. I come from a country where things are more chaotic, and to deal with a society like the Danish, where "there is a place for everything, and everything is in its place" was very confusing and even frustrating. The lack of spontaneity and the severe cold weather were definitely not helping. After two years, I had become depressed to the point that I had to leave Denmark. I decided to move to Berlin where it was easier to adapt. But maybe that's because Berlin is much more chaotic than Denmark or other regions in Germany for that matter.*

Without cultural differences, we would have difficulties comparing and classifying our surroundings. According to Stuart Hall, perceiving others as different to ourselves is the basis for the creation of culture. It is through the perception that others are different to ourselves we develop our own identity and thus making sense of what happens around us. Making sense of ourselves is done through the comparison with others, a somewhat 'us' vs. 'them' where the others are necessary opponents in the process of identifying differences and similarities. However, there is also a potentially strong negative connotation to all of this. We pull ourselves up by tearing others down. The risk running is comparing by negatively and ambivalently stereotyping. According to Stuart Hall, stereotyping means we "get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity." (Hall 1997, p. 258). So we generalize.

### **Cultural fringe living: Intercultural hybridity vs. cultural marginalization**

The French singer Jacques Brel once said that "we all need roots under our shoes", yet those roots are not as deep for all of us. Globalization brings with it a constant exposure (and consequent comparison) to different cultures, identities and values. This contact can create a strong sense of ethnocentrism, but it can also create a 'hybrid' way of living where mixed ideas, values and identities can create an alternative state of perceptions. It may also create instability, insecurity and a sense of 'in-betweenness' (Dirlik in Loomba, 2005) where the original identity is challenged, as described by a 33-year old Italian expat living in Norway:

*My passion for the Nordic culture drew me to Norway, but it simultaneously pushed me further away from my own Italian background. I adapted to the Norwegian culture, I learned the language, and I found a job and created a social network. But as much as I created grounds for a good life in Norway, I was drifting away from my Italian origins. Adapting is strenuous and it forces you to take directions in life. For me it pushed me towards a sense of marginalization to the extent that I felt I belonged neither to the Norwegian nor the Italian culture. I was driven by a strong desire to adapt but the same determination left me stranded. Once I had managed to learn the language, find a job and create a network, a sense of emptiness sneaked up on me. I started to feel lonely and invincible to the extent that I was questioning the purpose of living in Norway. Added to that, I didn't feel at home in Italy anymore. I lived on the fringes of two cultures.*

We see how the adaptation process can often be an unforgiving task: you can do everything right yet it may not be enough. But perhaps we are getting it wrong. Adaptation is not a process that has a start and a defined end, it is an ongoing journey where you are put to the test and exposed to situations that challenge to the host and home culture. What makes you more open and interculturally competent is eventually how

you cope and react in these situations. Our Italian friend made a wholehearted effort to adapt to the Norwegian culture, and eventually succeeded, however it also made her reflect on the significant differences between her Italian home culture and that of the Norwegian/Scandinavian host culture.

*Italy has a cultural heritage that is much stronger and more dominant compared to that of the Scandinavian cultures. Scandinavian cultures appear more open and easier to adapt to because effectively you can live and work there for 20 years without fully entering and integrating socially. You can get away with speaking English much of the time. Italy has a far more traditionalist culture that somehow forces you to adapt, learn the language and interact with the community. In Norway, for instance, you can easily function on a practical level without integrating and adapting properly.*

### **Culture shock**

Identity is thus closely linked to our habitus, the traits of properties that create the basis for how we think, how we project ourselves and how we perceive ourselves and others. The application of a somewhat binary conceptual thinking of 'us' vs. 'them' or a 'good' vs. 'bad' is contributing to the creation of identity. One of the most frequently referred to examples of first-encounter stress reactions is what has been termed culture shock. Culture shock can be defined as "the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Osberg, 1960, p. 177). This anxiety can, according to Taft (in Kim, 1988, p. 23) be identified through reactions such as irritability, insomnia, rejection of the new culture/environment, lack of confidence and self-perceived inability to deal with a new environment. Others have used descriptions such as confusion, disgust and indignation to describe emotions that arouse during the culture shock phase (Haslberger, 2005).

As a 26-year old woman from Mexico experienced when moving to Stockholm:

*When I moved to Stockholm it was autumn and I was shocked when I went to the metro and the silence was eary. "Maybe the King died or something", I remember thinking. After two years I understood: the Swedes have double personality, one for spring and summer, another for autumn and winter. People here tell you that November is the worst month because it makes you think there are still four months to but I think its February. By then I'm so tired of carrying half my weight in clothes, being hungry all the time and not seeing the sun at all. I could just hibernate until April!*

According to Kealey, MacDonald & Volpe (2004), almost all expats experience some degree of culture shock during their stay in a new culture. Different theories have tried to describe the different stages of emotions expats go through during and after the stay abroad. Initial theories identified an initial stage of elation (honeymoon) which was followed by a period of depression and strain (culture shock) and finally a more stable period of satisfaction. This theory was named the "U" curve theory but was later replaced



by the “W” curve theory, which gave a more realistic and elaborated picture of the expat experience, taking into consideration repatriation adjustment issues. Put in a resilience perspective, culture shock “is a manifestation of a generic process that occurs whenever the capabilities of a living system are not sufficiently adequate to the demands of an unfamiliar cultural environment” (Kim, 1988, p.57). It is, consequently, a necessary part of the process towards host culture adaptation. It should therefore be argued for that stress, as much as being the reason for frustration, anger and fear, it should also be credited as a door-opener for growth and adaptation within a new environment. Adler considers a culture shock to be a “profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth” (Haslberger, 2005, p. 162).

Culture shock should consequently not just be associated with negative connotations but equally be considered a fundamental part of the overall adaptation process, something which our Mexican friend has demonstrated by coming to terms with the climate differences between Mexico and Sweden, eventually finding beauty in what was initially only considered dark and difficult to accept:

*I will never get tired of taking a walk in the park and see how the landscape change with the seasons, it is so different than how it is in Mexico, such a dramatic change from one month to another, all the colours...*

### **Going the full circle: experiencing reverse culture shock**

Similar to experiencing culture shocks when adapting to a new culture, many expats also experience reverse culture shocks, by some considered to be the most difficult hurdle in an expat’s life (Werkman, in Gaw, 2000). A reverse culture shock is in definition similar to that of a culture shock, but the adjustment process is focusing on the challenges of re-adapting and re-adjusting to one’s original home culture after a long time abroad. This is part of what is considered a traditional expat cycle: moving to a new country and moving home again. Typical problems associated with reverse culture shock include cultural identity conflict, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety and interpersonal difficulties. A key variable in predicting cultural adjustment, according to Sussman (2002), has been the degree to which an individual identifies with the home country and the host country. This applies to both ends of the expat cycle, be it upon arrival abroad or return at home. Cultural identity is not fixed and can therefore change over time, including the image of the home culture. Research has shown that successfully adapting to a new culture does not automatically mean an easy return to one’s home culture (Sussman, 2002). According to Gullahorn & Gullahorn (in Gaw, 2000), expats underestimate the changes that occur both within themselves as well as in their home country surroundings. Expats often expect that their home culture, including friends and family, remain stable and unchanged while they have been away, experiencing new experiences and consequent changes. Ultimately, overcoming reverse culture shocks is about going a

second round with oneself, adapting to the old, yet constantly developing home culture, and working on ways to find one's place in the home culture.

### **The long journey towards appreciation and adaptation**

Just like beauty, the perception of what is normal lies in the eye of the beholder. Learning to accept that 'normal' is not a fixed term but rather a constantly changing perception of ourselves and everything around us is difficult and living in another culture can often be a steep learning curve. It is a difficult process to come to terms with differences, and living with them, just as much as it is an evolutionary process in which our personalities evolve with the function of experience (Accardo, 1983, p. 147). Keeping an open mind to new experiences and ways of living may capacitate us to benefit and use intercultural experience as an enriching learning experience. Our Italian friend learned through her experiences of adapting to the Norwegian culture (yet feeling marginalised) that it takes time and effort to come to a point where you manage to cope with the differences that surface between the home and the host culture:

*At the end of the day, it's important to embrace the host culture, not just practically, but also emotionally. You need put your nationality aside. This doesn't mean that you leave it behind, but rather making room for new perspectives and avoiding the constant comparison you almost by instinct do and rather accept the diversities that exist.*

Cultural maturity is often the end product of a transcending process where living in cultures different than your own can provide a more balanced and nuanced picture of 'us' and 'them'. Constant exaggeration of one's own cultural supremacy compared to another is often the result of a failure to adapt to another way of living. It is a power play that however runs the risk of hitting back on oneself.

## Chapter Four: Strengthening family resilience: Avoiding family breakdown during expatriation

*Come to the edge, life said.*

*They said: We are afraid.*

*Come to the edge, life said.*

*They came. It pushed them...and they flew.*

Guillaume Apollinaire

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Approximately 80% of all expats are married and 70% have children who are with them during the expatriation period. Often, the reason for early return has to do with family adjustment problems (Kealey, MacDonald & Vulpe, 2004). With the relocation to a new culture follows a string of challenges that the whole family as a unit and the family members as individuals must face. Getting to know a new place and culture is done through the different roles of a father, mother, husband, wife, daughter, son, etc. It is a process where a myriad of expectations, personal differences and perspectives have to emerge, be dealt with and eventually develop into a fruitful and constructive family relationship.

### **Loneliness in a time of change**

Let there be no doubt about it; moving abroad is often an enriching experience for the entire family, but there are serious tests to overcome as well. How each member passes these tests may vary, just as much as the conditions to cope with them can be different. Often, it is the accompanying spouse and child(ren) who are forced to leave his/her job and social network in order to make way for the partner's/parent's international assignment. Where the working expat find continuity in his or hers working life, with a supporting network of colleagues and a familiar organisational culture, the spouse and child(ren) are forced to start all over again in a new and unfamiliar destination. The consequences of this may be daunting to many:

*Two days after arriving at my post, I crumpled to the floor of my living room, screaming and crying to my husband that I couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it. He insisted that I calm down and get off the floor that I pull myself together. After all, he said, the electrician, a man who would be taking care of us for the next two years, was waiting outside our house. Waiting to come in and fix some of the many problems we had found with our house in our first hours there. And it wouldn't do for him to find me in that state. I didn't care. Really. The problem wasn't the electricity, or the house, or jet leg. The problem wasn't my son, although when he asked for a glass of milk at dinner, I ran to bed, curled up in a fetal position, and cried. It wasn't the lack of a social group, though the expatriate community had deserted post last summer. It wasn't the move to a hot, dirty, dusty, unwelcoming, uncomfortable, high-risk, and high-differential post at*

*the end of the world. None of this mattered, and it all mattered terribly, as I fell into a deep depression within days of our arrival at our fourth overseas post.*

*In retrospect, I should have seen it coming. For months, when I had announced our posting to friends, they had asked me how I felt about it. I was okay with it; it was what my husband needed at this point in his career. Why would they ask such a question? I can only guess that my whole manner showed an unwillingness to move. Then I delayed getting ready for the pack-out and ended up shipping things that I could never use at post (ice skates in the tropics?) and storing things that I needed. I never did get my airfreight properly sorted, and I was shoving things at the packer as he was taping all the boxes shut. I knew something was wrong before we boarded the plane, because I went out and bought two bottles of St. John's Wort, having read that it could help with mild depression. I knew I wasn't eating properly (I lost 10 pounds in a couple of weeks) and that I was anxious. But I was convinced it was the normal stress of moving and that I just kept going and got us to post to our new home everything would be fine. I could relax then, and everything would be fine. But it wasn't. Within days, I changed from Superwoman, capable of moving a family half way around the world without losing any luggage, into a person I did not know. A person who couldn't eat; who slept, yet never felt rested; who couldn't stop crying; who couldn't function well enough to take care of herself, much less the school-aged children who were her responsibility while her husband was off at work. Setting up a household, hiring help, learning how to get around - I had done it all before, but now, it might as well have been Mount Everest. It was painful. It was scary. I knew something was very wrong and when I got the courage to talk to my husband about it, he admitted that he also knew. "This isn't me!" I said. We didn't know what to do about it, but I couldn't continue the way I was. To make things worse, I had no place to go. We had sold our house, our car, everything, in preparation for this tour. Finally, I knew that my husband would be deeply hurt if this, his career-enhancing assignment, was ruined because I couldn't handle it. It was hard for him to understand that I couldn't control what was happening. It was equally hard for me to understand. Later, I realized that behaviour had caused stress and tension to my husband and he carried that to his work place. He couldn't concentrate and couldn't give his maximum productivity to his job. I pitied him. But it was too much though, and we agreed that even with the risk of curtailment, I had to make a call to the Regional Psychiatrist appointed by my husband's company. "I need help!" were among my first, tearful words to the Regional Psychiatrist. He talked to me. He figured out what was wrong and prescribed drugs for me, drugs we've all heard of, but never thought of taking, and helped me get the drugs. We did not have to curtail.*

*Eight months have passed since I broke down. Many changes have happened since then: an evacuation, a return to post. I am still taking medication, more of it actually than I took in the first weeks after my diagnosis (that evacuation compounded the problem). And I expect to be taking medication for a good*

*number of months more before we would consider lowering my dosages. I hope someday to be completely myself again...Some days are still hard. I wrote this to share my experience, as therapy, to help others and perhaps myself* (excerpt from Ali, 2003, pp. 4-6).

### **Getting to terms with adversity**

This woman's experience clearly demonstrates the enormous emotional difficulties that can accompany relocation. The woman felt alone, out of place and was filled with panic that ultimately provoking a break-down and depression that endured beyond the expatriation period. Difficulties breaking up from a stable and well-developed home environment are also a huge challenge for children and require high level of resilience at a young age. This is exemplified through the story of fifth-grade pupil Lauren who had to move house and school due to a change of job for her dad: "When my dad told my brother and me he'd got a job in Scotland and we were moving there, we thought he was the worst father that ever lived! Not only would we be moving house, but moving schools and leaving all our friends behind. I was dreading it. On my first day at school, I was shaking and spent the first day in a daze. Eventually some girls started speaking to me and I began to make friends. I was never a confident person, but I feel much more confident now having gone through that experience. In fact, I'm really glad I have, as I now feel much better equipped to cope with other transitions and can reassure other people too" (in Well? Issue 10: Spring/Summer 2007).

One of the most important reasons why international assignments fail is the conflict that arises between work and family issues. Thus, when planning international work assignments, it is pivotal to deal with issues that also concern accompanying family members. Finding a harmonious balance between work and private life is in general a difficult one, but doing so during an international work assignment is potentially an added challenge. Furthermore, family profiles have changed over the years. The time when the man was the breadwinner and the wife in charge of the house has long been replaced by a more equal relationship where both seek to pursue career opportunities and personal growth as much as trying to build a family unit. So is the situation for expatriates. The typical family relocation profile no longer includes a non-employed "trailing spouse" but rather an "accompanied partner" that could just as well be the man. Furthermore, many families are dual career relationships. This means that a joint decision must be made on how long the accompanying partner can put his or hers career on hold, and what the short and long term effect of this will be for him or her, the relationship and the family as a whole. The mutual incompatibility between the demands of the work role and the demands of the family role (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001) is often enhanced during expatriation. Because they are living and working in a new environment, employees are faced with high work demands at a time when the family is also in need of special attention. This conflict between work and family demands is a key reason why international assignments end in failure. Consequently, for the overall success of a foreign relocation and the

individuals/families involved it is crucial that work-family conflicts are dealt with the highest attention. Osland (in Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001) suggests that “unlike domestic jobs, an international assignment is more of a family affair” Issues at home can impact work performance significantly to the extent that the whole assignment can end up in a costly organizational and personal failure.

Family resilience, according to Froma Walsh, refers to the coping and adaptational processes a family faces as a functional unit. It explains “how a family confronts and manages a disruptive experience, buffers stress, effectively reorganizes, and moves forward with life” (Walsh, 2006, p. 15). Within research on intercultural adaptation, however, little research has been conducted on the adaptation difficulties of expatriate spouses and children. Most studies involve the working expat rather than the accompanying spouse and children. This is something of a paradox considering empirical studies proving that spouse’s adjustment problems and family-related problems were among the major causes of international work assignment failures (Tung, 1984 and Harvey, 1985). In a study among American expatriates, Caligiuri (1996) found that family adjustment played a significant predictor when international assignments were terminated prematurely. Equally, studies by Black and Stephen (1989) showed that expatriate spouses who managed to adapt was actively contributing to finish the overseas assignment and not return before the end the intended period was over.

What determinants are therefore considered crucial in order to facilitate spouse and family resilience? According to Caligiuri et. al (1998) and further discussed by Ali, Van der Zee & Sanders (2003), personality dimensions, family characteristics and expatriate work life are the three pillars that need to be adjusted appropriately before, during and after an assignment. The first and strongest determinant, personality dimensions, refers to the development of intercultural competency, where character traits such as cultural empathy (ability to empathize with feelings, thoughts and behaviours of differing cultural groups), open-mindedness (unprejudiced attitude), emotional stability (remain calm in stressful situations), flexibility (capacity to adapt to new and unknown situations) and social initiative (to be proactive, interact). These personal dimensions will be more extensively dealt with later in the paper.

The second determinant, family characteristics, refers to the family as a unit and its’ capacity to adapt to the foreign environment through characteristics such as cohesion, adaptability and communication. Family cohesion has been defined as the emotional bonding that may develop during a time where the family members often experience trials and tribulations together. The stronger the bonding, the more resilient each member will be. Furthermore, the resilience approach also applies to each family member’s capacity to adapt and deal with situational and developmental stress such as homesickness, new schools or friends. According to family system theories, the more capable the family is of changing internal relations in response to the demands of the foreign situation, the better the family will adapt to new

circumstances (Olson et al, 1984, in Ali et al, 2003). Finally, the capacity to address and resolve a stressing situation by means of communicating is crucial during the intercultural adaptation process.

The third determinant, expatriate work life, refers to work-family conflict and how this is solved. There are significant costs associated with conflicts between work and family life and it carries an even higher price during an international assignment. The ultimate indicator of international assignment failure is generally considered to be premature repatriation and is estimated to cost the organization somewhere between \$100,000 and \$500,000. Premature repatriation is not just the result of inadequate selection measures, lack of personality fit, limited preparations and training for the worker and his/her family, and limited support while abroad (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001), but also work-family conflicts.

A key element in solving this is organizational support. Research has shown that employees who perceived that their organization offered a supportive environment, reported lower levels of depression, anxiety, concern for their health, and work-personal life conflicts (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001). The better preparation and organizational follow-up, the higher the likeliness of successful international assignment. A list of recommendations for international companies has been developed by Fitzgerald, B.T. (1997):

- Hire a relocation service in the host country. The relocation service will help the expatriates and their family members in dealing with official and unofficial matters, e.g. obtaining immigration and work permits, car and home insurance, locating housing, negotiating leases and so forth.
- Provide pre-departure assistance and ongoing consultation for expatriates and their family members such as basic language skills and cross-cultural training. Pre departure assistance should also address critical family issues, e.g. children's schooling, medical coverage and making friends.
- Maintain regular contact with expats. Lend a sympathetic and confidential ear when expatriates just need to vent. Call weekly during the first 60 days of expatriation and monthly thereafter for the first year.
- Enhanced support from Human Resource Department will reduce the risks of the organization's expansion strategy and enhances the chances of success.

While more and more organizations implement the above-mentioned measurements, there is interestingly enough a mismatch between organizational support and the expectations expats and accompanying families have of this support. Studies have shown that the expat families themselves are not highly satisfied with the support they receive (Ali et al, 2003). One reason for this is that organizational expatriation programs are above all developed to reduce risks of private issues interfering with work rather than work interfering with private life. Research done by Grant-Vallone & Ensher (2001) has shown that there is a higher degree of work interfering with expats private life than vice versa. A more complete program should therefore (as much as practically and financially possible) better encompass

issues where work interferes with family adjustment issues and not just the opposite. For example, reductions in travel during the early parts of the assignments, flexible working hours and the possibility to work from home are measurements suggested to reduce work-private life conflicts. As a consequence, organizational support programs which are targeted to reduce negative spill over from work to personal roles will increase expatriates' well-being, and will likely affect performance, satisfaction and retention, according to Grant-Vallone & Ensher (2001, p. 275).

### **Bringing out the best of the family**

Studies of resilient families found that in times of crises, 75 % experienced positive occurrences in the midst of hurt and despair. The same majority believed that something positive came out of the challenge. Many families reported that their relationships became stronger and richer because they went through the crises together as one. Family resilience requires determination, creative initiatives and perseverance when meeting challenges that surface during expatriation. As initially pointed out, a family resilience approach focuses on how families can succeed, trying to draw out the best in families, building on key processes to encourage individual and family growth. We have previously in this paper (chapter 2) seen how stress can be turned into a positive growth factor. The family resilience approach is a way of showing how difficult times can also be times of positive occurrences where family members get closer to each other. Through weathering crises together, relationships can become richer and more loving. Crises can serve as “wake-up calls”, helping individuals to focus on the important things in their lives.

Anees Jane Ali (2003) states that over time, expatriates and their family develop skills to cope with problems and challenges during the international assignment. However, such resilience can only be developed if there is a strong enough motivation to endure and overcome these challenges. This underlines the importance of developing an intercultural resilience competence where personal characteristics such as open-mindedness, flexibility, emotional stability and empathy have space to grow. It also underlines the importance of offering expats well-prepared support programs that not only focuses on how private life can affect work, but also vice versa. The combination of personal resilience skills and organizational sensitivity towards initial adaptation challenges will consequently lay a solid foundation for a successful expatriation for the entire family.



## Chapter Five: Understanding culture, understanding intercultural communication

*To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand*

Jose Ortega Y Gasset

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Culture is like a set of matryoshka dolls where each doll represents something different, yet related to the slightly bigger doll. And they fit together, just like culture and communication do within intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is about the ability to understand and communicate with people from other cultures. It is about going beyond boundaries and create a common ground for communication with someone who does not share all of your own linguistic, cultural and social background. But for this communication to work properly, it is necessary to develop an intercultural communication competence that is based on awareness, sensibility, tolerance and cultural knowledge.

### **Understanding culture**

Defining culture is difficult, so difficult in fact that there is yet to be found a definition that can pin-point the essence of culture. Instead, due to the flora of definitions makes it more appropriate to present some and then discuss key characteristics of culture (taken from Spencer-Oatey <http://209.15.42.137/ic.org.uk/publications> ).

“Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tyler, British anthropologist, 1870).

“Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of the culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the other hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action” (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

“Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category from another” (Hofstede, 1994).

“Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shaped by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behaviour and each member’s interpretation of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

According to Spencer-Oatey, there are several key characteristics of a culture. First of all, culture is manifested at different layers, visible and invisible, like the layers of an onion. Visible layers can be artefacts and products, expected behaviours and rituals as well as systems and institutions. Layers that can be invisible are values and beliefs although they are often expressed through rituals and behaviours. Second, culture affects the way we behave and how we interpret others' behaviour. For instance, gestures do not necessarily mean the same in one culture as it does in another. Third, culture can be differentiated from a universal human nature or the personal uniqueness of each individual human being. Human nature is common to all human beings, it is inherited with each individual's genes. Culture on the other hand is learned, not inherited. It derives from one's environment and surroundings. Personality is a combination of the unique nature that belongs to each individual and inherited and learned values that come with cultural experiences.

Furthermore, culture is something which is shared, it can not be idiosyncratic, limited to only one individual. We all belong to one or several groups or categories, be it as a member of a country/national culture, a religion affiliation, gender-related, socially, etc. Consequently we are all members of several cultural groups on different levels, not just vertically, but also horizontally/cross-cutting. Culture is both an individual as well as a social construct. Culture can never be anything but 'fuzzy' because cultures interact, the borders between different them are not absolute but rather in a constant flux. Culture is dynamic. This is underlined by the fact that culture has both universal (etic) and distinctive (emic) elements. Every culture, just like every individual, is unique, however every culture has elements that are recognized in every culture. The etic and the emic co-exist. Culture is learned from interaction with others and is part of building values and beliefs. As Lustig and Koester points out, "culture is taught by the explanations people receive for the natural and human events around them" (Spencer-Oatey, <http://209.15.42.137/ic.org.uk/publications/>). Finally, culture is a descriptive rather than an evaluative concept (12). One culture is not better than another, only different or similar to each other.

To sum up, culture is not homogenous, it is not a thing, it is not absolute and it is not restricted to one per individual. Culture is the framework from which all of us develop our value systems, language, behaviour and beliefs.

### **Identity and cultural differences**

Culture should not be confused with identity. They are two different entities, however they both relate in our attempt to understand intercultural communication. While culture relates to attitudes, values, beliefs and behavioural conventions, identity is how we see ourselves. But together they form our cultural identity expressed through our belonging to different groups.

In our lives, we belong to and function as members of a variety of groups, be it gender, class, profession or social commitments that together give us a particular sense of identity. We are, as Amartya Sen points out, “all individuals involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities” (Sen, 2006, p. 23). When living in an intercultural context, it can sometimes be difficult to maintain a harmonious balance between what group we feel most loyal to. Expats can often be caught in the conflict between maintaining a loyalty to home culture features and the willingness to embrace aspects of the host culture. In a conflicting situation, it does not mean that one has to deny one identity in order to give way for another, but it forces an individual to decide on what identity has the greatest importance in that given situation, or the need to “dress the part” the way a 27-year old Canadian woman experienced during her time in France and UK:

The most difficult aspect of living abroad in both France and the UK was coming to terms with local norms and unspoken rules of conduct. This was especially true in the workplace. For instance, wearing formal and “feminine” dress on the job in France was very important. I was once told off for not wearing makeup, which I resented at first, but once I dressed the part, I found customers responded to me entirely differently.

#### **Cultural differences and intercultural communication failure**

If intercultural communication is about the ability to understand and communicate with people from other cultures, what are the reasons we so often fail to communicate across cultures? Difficulties in communicating with members of a different culture may occur because one feels awkward and anxious while interacting (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern 2002). Differences surface on a number of levels including cognitive (values and norms) and behavioural level (language, customs and communication styles) (ibid. p. 610). Furthermore, confusion may also arise due to how we communicate non-verbally, as experienced by a 30-year old Canadian man while working in Asia:

*I worked as an English teacher in Bangkok for one year and in Taiwan for another. Language was never a big barrier per-se, but the culture behind the language was often a source of confusion. Most miscommunication was due to the intent behind what was said, and the emotion presented, rather than with translation issues. A major coping mechanism to curb the stress that came from this was to always remain calm – getting upset or angry rarely helped in Asia. The rule of thumb was the angrier you felt, the more you should smile...*

When dealing with cultural differences, stereotypes are, as Milton Bennett points out, usually not far behind (1998). Stereotypes, he says, “arise when we act as if all members of a culture or group share the same characteristics” (Bennett, 1998, p. 6). Such stereotypes can be of both positive and negative

character and are relevant to whether we respect (positive) or disrespect (negative) the characteristics. However, common for both of them is that they are problematic when they arise in an intercultural communication context. By stereotyping, we falsely believe to possess an understanding of the person we are communicating with. At worst, such false understanding can eventually turn into self-fulfilling prophecies, where we see people the way we want to see them, whether or not it is prejudiced or not (ibid.). However, some sort of cultural generalization is necessary if we are to avoid what Bennett calls “naïve individualism” as if every individual is unique and without grounds for comparison with cultural characteristics.

Cultural generalization can be made without falling prey to stereotypes if we stick to what has been termed “preponderance of belief” (ibid. p. 6). This refers to how each culture has a preference for some, specific beliefs compared to another culture. We apply this generalization to the culture as a whole, however without excluding that some individuals within the culture deviate from those beliefs, although these individuals are more the exceptions that confirm the rule. Consequently, it is appropriate to generalize that U.S Americans as a group are more individualistic than for instance Japanese, while it is stereotyping to say that all Americans are individualistic. This is called deductive stereotypes (ibid. p.7). The opposite would be inductive stereotypes, where we apply a general knowledge about a culture based on a limited number of encounters with the culture in question. Such kind of stereotyping is what typically happens when we describe curious holiday incidents and conclude that that is how they do it there.

## Chapter Six: The first steps towards intercultural resilience: Developing intercultural communication skills

*Father, Mother and Me,  
Sister and Auntie say,  
All the people like us are We,  
And everyone else is They.*

*And They life over the sea,  
While We live over the way,  
But - would you believe it? – They look upon We  
As only a sort of They!*

*All good people agree,  
And all good people say,  
All nice people, like Us, are We  
And everyone else is They:  
But if you cross over the sea,  
Instead of over the way,  
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We  
As only a sort of They!*

Rudyard Kipling

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In order to effectively communicate with people from the host culture, we need to understand their culture, we need to be able to overcome possible linguistic barriers and we need to understand and accept rules, values and norms that can be different from our own. But it takes a lot of effort because it touches the very foundations of our own cultural identity. The experience of living and interacting in a different culture can pose two, opposing challenges. Not only does it trigger an awareness of our own culture (Lustig & Koester, 2003), but it also triggers an evolution of that very same identity. Consequently, as you adapt to various intercultural challenges, your cultural identity may be transformed into one that is substantially different from what it used to be (ibid. p. 145).

Over the last five decades, empirical research has tried to identify what skills, knowledge and attitudes that are needed in order to live and work in another culture (Kealey, MacDonald & Vulpe, 2004). According to Vulpe (2000), an interculturally competent person is someone who is able to “live contentedly and work successfully in another culture” (ibid. p. 4). It is someone who has the ability to communicate with people of another culture, someone who has the capacity to adapt his/her professional

skills to fit local conditions and who has the capacity to adjust personally in order to be content and generally at ease in the host culture. His research into creating such a profile revealed that “there is a common understanding among theoreticians and practitioners of what defines intercultural effectiveness, and yet, little exists of a defining statement. What is it that you do or do not do, say or not say, that would indicate to an observer that you are, in fact, interculturally effective?” (Volpe, 2000, p. 2). His questions are the basis of a very detailed identification of interculturally effective behaviour which has been structured into nine major competency areas for a person to be acknowledged as being interculturally competent. Furthermore, each of these nine areas contains a detailed description of 29 core competencies and qualities an interculturally competent person should have.

### **1. Adaptation skills**

A person that possesses intercultural adaptation skills has the ability to cope with the conditions and challenges of living and working in another culture. He or she is able to cope with the stress of culture shock, enjoying the sojourn as an enriching experience and take on a different behaviour in the host culture than what is expected in the home culture.

### **2. An attitude of modesty and respect**

Living abroad requires the ability to show humility and respect towards the host culture and the willingness to learn and consult with members of the host culture before coming to conclusions on various issues.

### **3. An understanding of the concept of culture**

An interculturally competent person has an understanding of what constitutes culture and how culture influences life and work abroad. Furthermore, he or she is aware of how their own cultural identity and background can create challenging situations in the host culture.

### **4. Knowledge of the host country and culture**

An interculturally competent person possesses an increasing amount of knowledge on history, geography, social mores, customs and socio-economic conditions about the host country.

### **5. Relationship-building**

An interculturally competent person has the capacity to create and facilitate good social and professional relationships.

## **6. Self-knowledge**

Living in a different culture and country requires the ability to know one's own strengths and weaknesses and how one's own cultural background affects one's behaviour.

## **7. Intercultural communication**

An interculturally competent person has developed sufficient host language skills to express his or hers thoughts, opinions and expectations in a way that is understandable yet culturally sensitive. Furthermore, he or she is not afraid to make mistakes but rather actively takes part in the host culture and language.

## **8. Organisational skills**

An interculturally competent person has the capacity to strike the balance between adapting to the host culture and maintaining his or hers own cultural identity, to build consensus between local and foreign interests.

## **9. Personal and professional commitment**

Lastly, an interculturally competent person expresses a high level of personal and professional commitment to the international experience, expressing the desire to take part and contribute to the welfare of themselves and the people around him/her set within realistic boundaries.

Naturally, this is the profile of the ideal interculturally competent person. Any real-life individual possessing all these qualities would, as Volpe himself acknowledges, a "super-human". However, it puts into perspective the skills and requirements every transferee should strive for in order to succeed abroad. Bhawuk and Triandis (Salo-Lee, 2006) distinguish between four different stages in the development of intercultural competence: "lay person", "novice", "expert" and "advanced expert". The first category, lay person, does not have any significant intercultural experience or knowledge. Novices have no intercultural education but have spent two years or more in a foreign culture. Experts are individuals who have a theoretical intercultural knowledge enough to analyze cultural differences. Lastly, an advanced expert possesses both a theoretical education as well as practical experience. Milton Bennett (1988) has used the term intercultural sensitivity rather than competency. Nevertheless, the development of intercultural competency involves an increasing ability to interpret and evaluate behaviour from different cultural perspectives (ibid. p. 89).

In Bennett's "Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), he identifies six stages of development: denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and finally integration. The first three stages involve a high level of ethnocentric behaviour where one's own standards, values and perspectives are dominantly used in the judgment of others. The remaining three factors fall under the category of ethnorelative behaviour where the individual gradually starts to be comfortable with cultural differences

and adapts to them. At the final integration stage, the individual is, similar to the “advanced expert”, capable of interpreting and evaluating cultural differences. This is expressed through the ability to behave appropriately in various cultural settings along with the “contextual awareness and ethical responsibility” (ibid. p. 90) that is required in an intercultural situation.

### **Questioning intercultural training**

Can such intercultural competency be acquired through training? There is still disagreement on what the best way of developing intercultural competency. For some, according to Kealey & Protheroe (1996), the hypothesis is that effective workers are “born and not made”, and therefore it is more a question of selecting the right person rather than training him or her. This is in line with the practice of most organizations (ibid. p. 143), that the selection of staff to international assignments is primarily based on technical competence and experience rather than intercultural competence skills. Consequently, it is assumed that a high-performing employee at home will be a top performer in another culture. Another argument is that it is not the pre-departure training but the overseas work environment or the organization of the project that ultimately determines whether or not the international assignment will be successful or not. Intercultural training programs are, as Ptak, Cooper & Brislin explain, “formal efforts to prepare professionals for work in cultures other than their own or with individuals from different cultural backgrounds” (Ptak, Cooper & Brislin, 1995, p. 425). This training and consulting often consist of a variety of products such as workshops, simulation games, videos and books that tell you all the right moves when operating in an alien culture.

But despite the growth of trainers, the question whether intercultural training actually helps equip sojourners with the desirable intercultural skills still remains critically open to discussion. Training is only one ingredient in the recipe for success. As Kealey & Protherhoe state, effectiveness overseas is a function of many variables, of which three are particularly central: the aptitudes and motivations of the expatriate and his/her family, the aptitudes and motivations of the local workforce and the overall organisation of the project (Kealey & Protherhoe, 2002, p. 144). The intercultural training is thus a piece in a bigger puzzle. Whether or not training is important or not should therefore be put in context and not isolated from other variables.



## Chapter Seven: Turning interculturally resilient: Skills and attributes

*Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.*

Helen Keller

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If you manage to turn strains into strengths you will find that future challenges can be overcome far more easily. However it takes time, effort, (and yes...) resilience. The characteristics of a resilient individual derive from the landmark study by Werner and Smith (1982) who followed the lives of 505 individuals born in 1955 on the Island of Kauai (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). Documenting their lives from birth until they approached their 40s, the study revealed significant differences among individuals despite growing up in a similar environment. This study marked the beginning of resilience research and the development of so-called protective factors that are the specific attributes necessary for resilience to occur (ibid.). It is important to note that these attributes are indeed contextual and individual which can lead to varying outcomes. This means that protective factors that are beneficial to one individual may not be beneficial or positive to another in a similar situation. However, as much as these attributes must be applied with individual caution, they nevertheless represent characteristics consistently associated with resilience (ibid.). Empirical referents for these attributes have been shown through various instruments that measure resilience. The Resilience Scale for Adults (RSA) is one example of this. The RSA consists of 37 items and five subscales including personal competence, social competence, family coherence, social support and personal structure (ibid.). The Resilience Scale was developed to measure what has been considered to be key resilience attributes:

### **1. Develop the ability to bounce back**

Being able to bounce back is, very much the essence of resilience. It is the capacity to move on after having faced challenges that force changes in life. "Easier said than done", you can rightfully claim, but as I have argued earlier in this paper, resilience is not equal to indifference, invulnerability and in-born strength. Resilience can only develop through times of adversity and not despite it. It is not necessarily any correlation between ruggedness and resilience. On the contrary. Very few individuals manage to maintain a consistent state of normal functioning and emotional stability through times of adversity. Vulnerability towards change must therefore be acknowledged to be just as important as the ability to overcome the same changes. Bouncing back therefore, is about growing stronger through risk taking on matters that hold you back:

*Going out and do things on my own helped me a lot and is something I'm really proud of...Going out and buy the food in a small market where you have to talk to people or open your bank account by yourself, go to the doctor alone, these kind of daily activities you will have to do sooner or later. It is better to face it.*

26-year old Mexican woman, living in Sweden

Corresponding items from RSA:

- I know that I succeed if I carry on
- No matter what happens I always find a solution

## **2. Be determined/self-determination**

Self-determination refers to the ability to overcome the challenges that come your way regardless of the circumstances or barriers. It is about taking control over a situation and possess a strong sense of purpose and achievement, rather than resigning to the belief that a challenge is too overwhelming to surmount. As the Challenge model in Chapter 2 indicated, taking on challenges step by step within reasonable limits at a time, risks can be confronted and above all overcome.

*One of the biggest challenges was my difficulties with the language. This difficulty got worse when I was asking for help but got turned down. My way of confronting this rejection was by keep asking until I found someone who was willing to help. Finally I was successful by doing it this way.*

54-year old Chinese woman during her time in Sweden

Corresponding items from RSA:

- I believe in my own abilities
- My future feels promising
- I work best when I reach for a goal

## **3. Stay flexible**

Flexibility captures the essence of adaptation with the capacity to roll with changes, being open for other ways of doing things than your own solutions, having an open and tolerant mind and keeping an easy temperament to situations that normally would bring out negative reactions.

*One of the most significant conclusions I have drawn from living abroad has been to not have too high expectations on what I will eventually gain from the time abroad. Move with an open mind. Personally I always try to meet as many locals as possible as part of the cultural journey that follows a life abroad.*

33-year old Swedish woman, having lived multiple periods abroad

Corresponding items from RSA:

- I easily establish new friends
- I enjoy being with other people
- It is important for me to be flexible in social circumstances

#### **4. Maintain a positive relationships and social support**

The importance of good friends and family can hardly be stressed enough during times of adversity. Resilience does not only come from within but also from the support and input provided by the environment around us. Communication and interaction is key in developing intercultural resilience.

*Living without close friends and family is very difficult at first. However, after some time you start to create new friends and build a social network and very often you meet people that are in the same situation as yourself. This makes it easier, since you share many of the same challenges and it's also easier to help each other during this new adventure.*

31-year old Italian man, living in the UK.

Corresponding items from RSA:

- There are strong bonds in my family
- I have close friends and family members that care about me
- I always have someone who can help me when needed

#### **5. Keep a sense of humour**

Seeing the bright side of things is an important capacity in order to develop coping mechanism and to moderate the intensity of emotional reactions. Praising the capacity to see the humoristic side of things should of course not be done without acknowledging the difficulty of doing precisely so in various intercultural situations. Staying positive in a time of crisis, be it family/partner difficulties adapting to life abroad or a having to cope with immense homesickness, is in many ways asking too much of someone. The importance here is to take control of the situation, focusing on positive aspects rather than the negative ones, discovering the world of new opportunities that living in a different culture offers and letting risks and challenges are a part of a bigger picture. It is a personal development process where the period abroad represents a time of enrichment in every sense of the word. Humour should never be underestimated in this process:

*If you move to a country far from your own, you probably have to prepare yourself for future shocks. But it can also be fun! In Japan I came across many things that I found strange and difficult, such as the need to wear a swim-cap in the swimming pool even if your head was completely shaved, the challenge of trying to find meat-free products in a supermarket where no one spoke any of the languages you do and*

*the concept of vegetarianism was unknown to most of the ones you talked to. Patience and smiles are the key words here. I realised quite fast that you don't get anywhere by getting upset about things, even though it can be very frustrating not being understood. I always tried to relax and see the fun in the situation. When I didn't make myself understood in one way I tried to communicate in a different way, using pictures, body language or trying to find someone who could translate for me. At work, some of the things I did my colleagues found a bit odd, but I dealt with it by explaining to them (with a smile) why I did it that way.*

30-year old Swedish woman previously living in Japan

Corresponding items from RSA

- It is easy for me to make other people laugh
- I easily laugh

## **6. Be self-confident**

Resilience and self-esteem go hand in hand. Developing intercultural resilience means confronting and adapting to new situations within a different culture than your own. This requires courage, and courage does not come without self-confidence. Taking risks and pushing your own limits is fundamental in order to develop successfully during expatriation. This risk-taking is also a key instrument in building self-confidence when faced with different intercultural challenges in the future. The Challenge model has shown the importance of taking on risks on a scale that provide realistic chances for a positive outcome. Taking on, and consequently mastering challenges will only be a spur for increased self-confidence that ultimately create grounds for further personal development.

*During the first two years in Italy, which were without a doubt the most difficult, it was my belief in myself and my capacity to make it work that kept me going. In general I don't give up easy so my tenacity also helped. "Luck" in life I believe is made up of hard work, focus, and tenacity, therefore, I knew that if I applied these attributes also to my life in Rome, I, too, would have a "lucky" life in Rome.*

40-year old Irish man, living in Italy

Corresponding items from RSA

- Believing in myself helps me overcome difficult times
- I am pleased with myself
- I completely trust my judgments and decisions

## Chapter Eight: Some useful advice along the way...

*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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If you are about to embark on your first long-term period abroad or in the middle of it but finding it slightly uphill, there is nothing more valuable than getting some good support along the way. This chapter blends Young Yun Kim's work on cross-cultural adaptation with advice from expats who themselves have gone through the up's and down's of expat living (all seven points below are taken from Young Yun Kim's book "Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: An Integrative theory", 1988, chapter 11).

### 1. "Everyone adapts, but at a different rate"

Adapting to a new culture is a process that will proceed naturally provided you are sufficiently engaged, committed and dependent on communicating with the host culture and its environment. There are several conditions that affect the adaptation process:

- 1) host environmental conditions (how receptive is the host culture and is there a pressure to adapt?)
- 2) your own predisposition for change,
- 3) your host communication skills (how well do you speak the language? Are you open to the differences in how people communicate? And how motivated are you in appreciating the aesthetics of the host culture?)
- 4) relationship with host nationals and other expats (how much effort do you put in getting to know people from the host culture vs. spending time with other expats?)
- 5) use of host culture mass communication (do you follow the local news and keep updated with what is taking place in the host culture?)

*Stay open minded, and take the time to understand how 'normal' activities may be done differently. This can be achieved by observing others' behaviour more closely, or simply asking people if one should act this or that way. Most people, in my experience, are happy to explain these local rules to a foreigner, and it's much better to ask first than to commit a faux pas and upset everyone by doing things rudely or inappropriately for that culture!*

Canadian woman, 27, living in Sweden

### 2. "Cross-cultural adaptation is both challenging and rewarding"

Moments of stress during the time abroad should not only be regarded as something negative but also as something natural and healthy which occur in all situations of change. Stress is consequently an "essential and integral part" of adaptation to change and continuing growth. Furthermore, the level of stress is

higher in the beginning of the period of adapting and will decrease the more functional you become in the host culture.

*Think about it as a unique experience and remember how lucky you are to be able to go abroad, see something new, have an "adventure".....*

German woman, 28, living in Sweden

### **3. “Individuals’ adaptation potential can be assessed prior to migration”**

The more open, motivated and tolerant to the changes that await you, the higher the chances are that you will succeed in living abroad.

*Accumulate experiences and move with an open mind. Don't have too specific expectations on what you will gain from the time abroad. It will for sure be a rewarding experience, but not necessarily the way you imagined. Expect tough times and that you need to make an effort to settle in, both practically as well as socially. One extra piece of advice: write a diary and read it after your time in the new destination is over. It can be an amusing experience but also an excellent documentation of your own personal development.*

Swedish woman, 33, having lived several periods abroad.

### **4. “Host communication competence is essentially to cross-cultural adaptation”**

The better you are able to communicate with members of the host culture, the more you participate in the host environment and appreciate emotional and aesthetic sensibilities of the locals, the higher the chances that you will more effectively adapt and above all enjoy the time abroad.

*The priority is always the language - start learning the local language(s) right away. This will both introduce you to a group of people in similar situations and it will show local people that you are serious about living in their country.*

Canadian man, 30, living in Sweden

### **5. “Participation in the interpersonal communication and mass communication processes of the host society facilitates cross-cultural adaptation”**

Host communication competence can be maximized if you develop stronger interpersonal relationships with the host culture members and regularly use their mass communication channels.

*Maintain an open mind, embrace each day as a gift and get out there and NETWORK! Make contact with ex-pat communities in the area by all means but also try to assimilate into the local culture. A commonsensical approach and the exercising of caution are tools to keep close to hand!*

British woman, 47, living in Sweden

**6. “In time, strangers will become increasingly proficient in managing their life in the host society”**

As much as some will give up and eventually return home, most expats will adapt according to a stress-adaptation-growth pattern. In times of strain and frustration, it is therefore important to keep in mind that in the end, that the difficult moments will eventually go away and you will regain a familiar sense of control and efficacy in your life.

*Be open. Don't make snap judgments about the people and culture -- you will probably be proved wrong. Persevere with the language -- don't feel silly if you make mistakes.*

British man, 34, living in Sweden

**7. Adaptation comes most naturally when strangers stop ‘fighting’ and remain open and relaxed instead.**

As Kim concludes “individuals with openness and resilience are fully engaged in the present moment with an inner posture of being ready to cease to ‘fight’ for or against the process of change, and are willing to ‘let go’ ...just as in the situation in which we sink when we try to stay on the surface of the water, but float when we let our body go’.

*Accept that you are not at home, things just work differently and you cannot change it, the more you resist, the more difficult it is to adapt. Be patient, learning and understanding another culture takes time. If you live your life complaining about how dark and cold the winter is it will be darker and colder each time.*

Mexican woman, 26, living in Sweden

## Chapter Nine: Final thoughts

*I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot... and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that's precisely why I succeed.*

Michael Jordan

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Living abroad is not easy, and there is no single “cure” against the strains of expat living. Any theory is useless unless practically applicable and tangible within the context it wishes to influence. This paper has attempted to show how intercultural resilience is not only an instrument to face adversity, but also a way of living an experience abroad. Resilience does not eliminate risks and challenges, but it helps you deal with them more effectively. It is about confronting risks and challenges in a new way, turning stress and adversity up side down and focusing on what you can gain from it rather than the opposite. Being resilient requires a conscious effort to go beyond previously defined limits within yourself, to consider life abroad as an excellent time for personal development. Along the way you will face challenges and some times stumble, but you will learn from those failures, and you will appreciate them often being far more informative and valuable than the successful ones.

I leave you with these pieces of advice:

Don't try to change the host culture, live with it, not against it.

Let your guard down.



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# Appendix

## Expatriate feedback

### Informant 1

#### 1. Your gender

Woman

#### 2. Your age:

33

#### 3. Country of origin

Sweden

#### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

Det var olika olika gånger.. Den största "chocken" var första tandsvetselsen som 17 åring ett år i en fransk by. Senare erfarenheter har varit i större städer eller studentstäder där det finns andra utlänningar och jag har kunnat ha ett erasmusliv/expativ förutom att försöka vara en del av samhället. Så första gången.. då var ju språket en absolut nödvändighet att lära mig. Kommer ihåg att jag ände mig handikappad och försod att människor har inte såg min som en pratig, glad skämtsam person utan som en tystare, lite dummare och definitivt utan humor. Det var tufft. Som tur var ville alla bli vän med mig för att jag var exotisk utlänning. under senare utlandsvistelser har det varit svårt att bli vän med inhemska befolkningen, men inte då. På skolan där jag gick fanns stränga regler och alla var vana vid dem utom jag som blev frustrerad över att till exempel inte få gå utanför skolan, men ingen förstod mig. Det var ju jag som var annorunda. Mycket handlade så om att försöka passa in. och när det inte gick, skrev jag brev eller pratade med en mexikansk vän jag fann (enda utlänningen) Det var ett av de jobbigaste åren i mitt liv men efter det har jag bara velat vara utomlands. Blodad tand som man säger på vkingaspråk. Det finns så mycket mer att berätta om det här eller andra vistelser.. men nu är det ju DU som ska skriva uppsatsen och inte jag. Good luck

#### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Ackumlerad erfarenhet. Flytta med öppet sinne. Ha inte allt för precisa förväntningar på vad som du ska 'få ut av' vistelsen. Det blir nästan alltid en oerhört roligt och lärorik vistelse, men nästan aldrig på just det sättet som du hade förväntat dig. Förvänta dig att det kommer att bli tufft. Att du måste göra många ansträngningar för att få vänner och skaffa dig ett liv som du trivs med där du ska. Ge dig själv sex månader innan du börjar förvänta dig att ha funnit dig till rätta. Personligen vill jag alltid skaffa så mycket vänner från den platsen jag kan för att få göra den kulturella resan. Så det kan jag rekommendera. Man kan t.ex bo med "inföddingar" så att säga. Det kan dock vara svårt på en plats som t.ex Bryssel. Somliga är ju nöjda med att bara umgås med utlänningar också.. Att resa, flytta är en bra möjlighet att förnya sig själv. Ingen vet vem du är så duktigt plötsligt bli mer den du vill vara. Man kan passa på liksom. För nöjes skull: Skriv ner tankar någon stans som du senare kan läsa, och ha glädje av. Roligt när man möter nya vänner att läsa om vad man t.ex tyckte om dem när man möttes.

## Informant 2

### 1. Your gender

Man

### 2. Your age:

30

### 3. Country of origin

Canada

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

I worked as an English teacher in Bangkok for one year and in Taiwan for one year. Language was never a big barrier per-se, but the culture behind the language was often a source of confusion. Most mis-communication was due to the intent behind what was said, and the emotion presented, rather than with translation issues. As an employee of local companies, the expectations of what a staff person should do was sometimes quite different from what I was used to. For example, important information such as where I was going to teach on a certain day was sometimes not told to me until a few hours before - a big source of stress. Thus a major coping mechanism was to always remain calm - getting upset or angry rarely helped in Asia. The rule of thumb was the more angry you felt, the more you should smile. I also lived in China for three months while I was conducting research for my master's degree. There, it was an issue of hierarchy - where I fit into the hierarchy and thus how easy or difficult it was to accomplish tasks. In terms of creating a social network, since both jobs teaching English were only for one year, it was really only other foreigners in similar work environments that had an interest in interacting socially. After living for two years in Sweden, I can understand this situation because I myself feel hesitant in making too close friends with other foreigners who may not be staying in Sweden for a long time.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

The priority is always the language - start learning the local language(s) right away. This will both introduce you to a group of people in similar situations and it will show local people that you are serious about living in their country.

### Informant 3

#### 1. Your gender

Man

#### 2. Your age:

31

#### 3. Country of origin

Italy

#### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

I think the language barriers have been the most hard challenge when I moved abroad. It's the first rock I had to climb to be part of the country I moved to. Without a comfortable level of the country language is difficult to understand the country itself, find a good job, make friends. Once I got a fluency in the language other problems came. First living without close friends and your own family is very difficult. After some months you start to create your new friends network and very often you meet/get in contact with people with the same background. People that moved to the country where you live like you. This is easier: you meet people had the same problems and could help you with the new adventure.

#### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Get in contact with people moved to that country from the same country where he/she is from. New technologies (internet) help a lot in this. Learn the language of the new country as much as you can before moving there. Have a long holiday in the new country before moving there.

## Informant 4

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

27

### 3. Country of origin

Canada

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

The most difficult aspect of living abroad in both France and the UK has been coming to terms with local norms and unspoken rules of conduct. This was especially true in the workplace. For instance, wearing formal and 'feminine' dress on the job in France was very important. I was once told off for not wearing makeup, which I resented at first, but once I dressed the part, I found customers responded to me entirely differently. In the UK, unwritten workplace rules like offering to make your colleagues a cup of tea (and remembering their preferences!) is very important to team cohesion. The other differences such as different food, climate and language are expected, so easier to deal with.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Staying open minded, and taking the time to understand how 'normal' activities may be done differently. This can be achieved by observing others' behaviour more closely, or simply asking people if one should act this or that way. Most people, in my experience, are happy to explain these local rules to a foreigner, and it's much better to ask first than to commit a faux pas and upset everyone by doing things rudely or inappropriately for that culture!

## Informant 5

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

27

### 3. Country of origin

Canada

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

The most difficult aspect of living abroad in both France and the UK has been coming to terms with local norms and unspoken rules of conduct. This was especially true in the workplace. For instance, wearing formal and 'feminine' dress on the job in France was very important. I was once told off for not wearing makeup, which I resented at first, but once I dressed the part, I found customers responded to me entirely differently. In the UK, unwritten workplace rules like offering to make your colleagues a cup of tea (and remembering their preferences!) is very important to team cohesion. The other differences such as different food, climate and language are expected, so easier to deal with.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Staying open minded, and taking the time to understand how 'normal' activities may be done differently. This can be achieved by observing others' behaviour more closely, or simply asking people if one should act this or that way. Most people, in my experience, are happy to explain these local rules to a foreigner, and it's much better to ask first than to commit a faux pas and upset everyone by doing things rudely or inappropriately for that culture!



## Informant 6

### 1. Your gender

Man

### 2. Your age:

34

### 3. Country of origin

UK

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

It has been a problem making Swedish friends. Most of my friends here are ex-pats. I guess this is largely to do with the language barrier. I can speak Swedish, but it's slow going -- my working language is English, and often Swedes like the opportunity to speak English if they get the opportunity, so it's often hard to get practice. The climate here can be a problem. The winter is very long and dark, and this can be depressing. This is compounded by the fact that Swedes (not the most gregarious people at the best of times) tend to withdraw into their shell a bit during winter. Sometimes I have left my flat as another person is leaving at the same time, only to find that my neighbour will retreat indoors again until I have left the building. Luckily I don't think take this personally -- it's just the Swedes. There are daily frustrations that alone are not important, but taken together can become frustrating -- simple things like communicating properly when you go to the doctor, deal with the government paperwork or visit the bank, can all be problematic at times. Even when I want to fix something up around the flat, all the fixtures and fittings are different, and I'm not sure where to buy things or what they are called. Little things like this can piss me off.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Be open. Don't make snap judgments about the people and culture -- you will probably be proved wrong. Persevere with the language -- don't feel silly if you make mistakes. Don't lose your identity.

## Informant 7

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

32

### 3. Country of origin

Spain

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

I guess that at the beginning, the most difficult thing to deal with, was myself. I realize pretty soon, that my personal development was going to the teenagers again. I mean, when I left Spain, I was already 27 and had a well organized life there: I had a job, a flat by my own, a boyfriend, a social network, etc. To go to live abroad was like a fresh start in one hand (what was good), but also meant to have nothing of what we take for granted in our daily life. Language was not a barrier at the beginning, because they speak very good English, but to find real friends you need to be able to speak Danish, and that was pretty hard, because it was very difficult to learn. My first friends were other international students, with whom I shared that we were not in our culture, although everybody came from a different country. It was difficult at the beginning to have contact with the locals: it was a bit like two groups: us (foreign students) and them. I come from a country where things are more chaotic, and to deal with a society like the Danish society, where "there is a place for everything, and everything is in its place" was very confusing and even frustrating. The lack of spontaneity and the severe cold weather were definitely not helping. After two years there, I was depressed to the point that I had to leave Denmark. I moved to Germany, where I live now, and it was much easier to adapt here. But maybe it's because in Berlin there is much more chaos than in other regions in Germany.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Expect the unexpected!! I think that everybody should find by themselves what works for them: there is not magic recipe to be integrated in a new country. For me was quite useful to think, that I could go back whenever I wanted. It should be helpful as well, to learn the language as fast as possible, try to meet local friends and not to build ghettos. In a word, to be open minded and not to measure the new culture with your own culture standards.

## Informant 8

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

26

### 3. Country of origin

Mexico

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

Weather: The first time I came to Sweden was on summer just for a short visit and I found people very kind and pleasant. When I moved in to live in Stockholm it was autumn and I was shocked when I went in to the metro train and it was so quiet and depressing. I thought: "Maybe the king died or something..." After two years I understand... Swedish have double personality one for spring and summer, one for autumn and winter; and after two years I think I have them too. People here tells you that November is the worst month because it makes you think there are still four months to go, but I think it is February, by then I am tired of carrying half of mi weight in clothes, being hungry all the time and not seeing the sun at all! I could just hibernate till April!!! I've never thought the lack of sunlight would affect people so much, but it does, as soon as spring comes I feel how my humour changes and I get more energy. Society: Just a couple of months ago a friend of mine and me went for a coffee in downtown and had a chat about what's the most challenging of living in Stockholm. We both agreed on the pressure we feel of being super-women. Everywhere from the media to walking on the street we got the idea that women here must do everything, clean the house, take the children to school, work fulltime, prepare dinner, exercise, receive the guests with a smile and look beautiful. Of course here is more expensive to hire someone to paint your living room or clean it, it is cheaper as well to buy IKEA furniture, a sewing machine and a tool case and do it all yourself; but besides the economic advantages I feel that Swedish society in general expects everyone to be able to be an expert in everything. The language barrier is not a big challenge I think, I can understand quiet a lot of Swedish and I can manage to communicate, It is not a difficult language to learn and I think I am improving quickly. It is hard sometimes since Swedes enjoy speaking English and as soon as they hear you don't speak good Swedish they will automatically switch to English but is just matter of being persistent. Another challenge I have found not only in Sweden but when I studied in France and Spain is learning all the paths and processes live: a personal number, bank account, revalidate your diplomas, going to the doctor (I waited 2 hours to get a pain killer and 7 to get a plaster cast when I broke my arm in Stockholm last year), getting a manicure... everything needs an appointment, a form to complete a waiting line. Everything has its time and it's so rigid! Lunchtime is at 12 and there is nothing to do at that time than eating lunch, and don't bother on calling to get an appointment at health service after 10. Creating a social network away from your home country is always difficult I guess, even though, I think it easier in Latin America, people is very hospitable and will do everything to make you feel at home, besides, we are very curious about foreigners coming to visit and we'll try to ask everything about them in the first visit. In Europe people has it more difficult to receive strange people in their lives in general... probably in south Europe is less dramatic that up north but any way it is a longer process, the first conversations will be quite superficial and won't speak about personal opinions or feelings. Now I have a circle of friends but only three of them are Swedish, the rest come from Latin or north America; on the other hand I still don't manage to integrate myself into my boyfriend's circle, which I find very frustrating, Is just so hard to find something in common with people that seems to be not interested at all on knowing you... maybe the clearest example I have is the first New Year I spent here. My boyfriend and I went to Sälen for skiing for a four of days and celebrate with his childhood's friends. I struggled the whole week trying to have a conversation with someone, even if I tried to ask questions to know what they liked or what where their interests I just received very short answers and it wasn't until three days later when someone asked something about me. Definitely the coldest, loneliest and most depressing new-year ever ! Culture: I think one of the things I miss the most from Mexico is the culinary culture; of course because of the food but it is not just about that... Dinner time since I can remember was the time to be with the family and friends, from the moment we started to prepare the food everybody was around the kitchen to talk and drink a cup of coffee and everything from planning the menu trough cooking and sitting around the table to eat was a whole experience of flavours, perfumes and sounds. In Sweden I've got the impression that people eat to get something in their stomachs but not to enjoy, I really don't understand why, because you can find everything you want to do any kind of dish in the super market. The social part of preparing food and sitting together around the table is completely forgotten as well, except from special occasions. By all this I just describe I don't want to mean I don't like living in Sweden or that there are not positive things. People here has been really patient with me while learning how Sweden works, in general Swedes are very tolerant and kind.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

-Accept that you are not at home, things just work different and you cannot change it, the most you resist to accept it the most difficult is to adapt. -Be patient, Learning and understanding how another culture works will take time, I pushed myself too much trying to fit and it just made it more frustrating, I think it would have been better to take my time and observe a bit from outside. -Getting a circle of friends where you can speak your own language. I think this make all easier for me because you can share experiences and ask questions and get some advice and support from

someone that understands what you are going through; on the other hand it is very comfortable to stay within a group like this and the risk exist isolate from the rest of the society. - I lived for a while in a neighbourhood in Stockholm where a lot of immigrants live and I saw that in many cases they form very compact groups that doesn't really mix with other immigrants or even Swedes, I really didn't want that because I think in that way you never feel integrated in a community and it must be more difficult to make yourself feel at home. I think part of the process is adapting to a new culture; accept that you must leave behind some of your beliefs and habits, and be tolerant towards different ideas. -Going out and do things by your own. I think this helped me a lot and it's something I am really proud of... going out and buy the food in a small market where you have to talk to people or open your bank account by yourself, go to the doctor alone, this kind of daily things you will have to do sooner or later, it is better to face it and try to manage it in the language you are trying to learn, ask questions even if you think they are stupid and make mistakes. I think this makes the learning process faster and it is also a good opportunity to open your social circle. -Enjoy all the new , different things: I will never get tired of taking a walk on the park and see how the landscape change with the seasons, it is so different than it is in Mexico, such a dramatic change from one month to another, all the colours and dynamism. I think a big part of making the experience of living abroad a good experience is to enjoy this kind of things even if they are little details the food, a landscape a little restaurant around the corner... If you live your life complaining about how dark and cold the winter is, it will be darker and colder eachtime.

## Informant 8

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

34

### 3. Country of origin

Germany

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

Going to live in the south of Europe i arrived and found that the place in a shared apartment I was supposed to have had been forgotten to be reserved by the university and I had to use all the spare money I had for the first week for a night in a hotel. I asked for the cheapest on in town (in English) but the taxi driver did not understand me and brought me to a very expensive place. The next morning it turned out the university was actually in another town half an hour by bus from the main city, I did not speak a word of the language and had to somehow find my way there with all my luggage. After a lot of persistence from my side the university (that did not want to fill responsible for anything) finally organised a place for me to stay - that they promised 2 people at the same time but at least one of us had a bed, the other the sofa before the next day we went through the same exercise with the university again. We are best friends until today.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Do not be afraid, the first month is the hardest, you don't know anybody or how the country works but you will soon meet very nice people that help you and becom friends and have a great time!

## Informant 9

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

54

### 3. Country of origin

China

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

Challenging aspect: language difficulty. This difficulty got worse when I was asking for help but got turned town. How I confronted the challenge: keep asking until I found someone who was willing to help. I was successful finally by trying it in this way.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

From this experience I learned two things so that I am not frustrated when I come across the similar situation. (1) People have reasons for not being able to help you and so don't take it too serious. (2) Try to give help when I am asked to so that I won't frustrate others. Keep a close link to your own culture as people in general are friendly.

## Informant 10

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

30

### 3. Country of origin

Sweden

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

Before I moved to England I never thought that the climate was a big issue. Coming from a city at 60° north I thought I was pretty hardy, but predominant damp, cloudy or rainy weather can really get to you. I suppose it helps to have foreign friends who have the same experience (since the English friends are too used to it and don't understand the difficulty), and also to have the possibility to get away every now and then! Language barriers are difficult things, and I believe that if you intend to stay in a country for a longer period you should try to learn the language. Language courses are perfect environments not only to learn the language but also to start your social network. When I first moved to Italy I felt a bit isolated since I didn't speak the language, but anyway mostly hung out with people speaking mainly Italian. Some situations, e.g. dinners, became quite difficult and I often felt a bit stupid. Many of these first Italians that I met had never lived abroad and did maybe not have the understanding of how it can feel to be isolated because of language barriers. Starting a language course became a great help both to build my own network of friends and to feel comfortable in situations (e.g. dinners) with only Italians. Of course it takes time to learn to speak a language, but it helps a lot only to understand what a conversation is about. The sense of isolation decreased and I felt like a participant and than an observer or outsider. If you move to a country far from you own, you probably have to prepare yourself for culture shocks. But it can also be fun! In Japan I came across many things that I found strange and difficult. It could be everything from why you had to have a swim-cap in the swimming pool even if you are totally shaved, to try to buy meet free products in a supermarket where no one speak any of the languages you do, you can't read the declaration of contents, and the concept of vegetarianism is unknown to most people. Patience and smiles are the key words here. I realised quite fast that you don't get anywhere with getting upset with things, even if it can be very frustrating to not be understood. I always tried to relax and see the fun in the situation; it's not the end of the world if things don't go exactly as you planned. When I didn't get understood in one way I tried a different way, using pictures, body language or I tried to find someone to translate for me. Since my stay was quite short I didn't take any language course, but again, I think that is very helpful. For that length of time it felt fine to only get friends with whom I could communicate in English. Since the town where I lived was rather small, once you got to know one foreigner you soon knew the whole foreign community! What was most frustrating was to not be fully understood at work. Several people spoke some English, but I always had to express myself very slowly and with easy terms. But since my stay was short, that just had to be the way to get by. Some things I did, my colleagues thought were a bit odd. I usually dealt with this by explaining why I did something in a certain way (with a smile) and then I just continued my way; or occasionally I changed my behaviour to the Japanese way. Sometimes there can actually be a way that is better than your way, it opens your eyes and gives you perspective.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

To me, one of the most important things is to have friends. However, it's not always so easy to "get" friends, especially not if you don't speak the language. Other foreign people or people who have been abroad themselves often have a better understanding of cultural differences, language difficulties, and other problems you might face as a citizen in a foreign country. I would therefore suggest to look for your first friend within this group. Try to join a language course or some other course/clubs/societies. My second advice is to work a bit harder than usual to "get" those first friends. Friends don't just appear from nowhere, you have to open up, speak to people, and make an effort. If you met someone you think you would like, ask for the number; ask if you could do something soon again. If you get an invitation, GO! My third and last advice is to choose to live in an environment that you feel comfortable in, inner big city, smaller city, or town/countryside. It is not always easier to create a social network in a bigger city just because there live more people there (rather the opposite I would say after my own experiences).

## Informant 11

### 1. Your gender

Woman

### 2. Your age:

47

### 3. Country of origin

England

### 4. Could you describe in your own words one or some of the most challenging aspects you have had to face while living abroad and explain how you confronted these challenges (e.g. language barriers, culture shock, problems creating a social network, difficulties dealing with local norms and rules, homesickness, climate, difficulties dealing with everyday practical issues etc)? Please feel free to write an elaborated description of your experience (emotions, reactions from your surroundings, decisions made etc.)

My journey began in 1989 when I relocated to Stockholm, Sweden. I had fortunately already secured employment prior to arrival and the next challenge to overcome was the language. I duly embarked on a part-time course and fueled with enthusiasm for my new life, threw myself in to my studies. This proved to be a great way to network and meet people and make friendships which proved to be invaluable during my early years in Sweden. Feelings of isolation and homesickness were par for the course in those first years, so we were reliant on each other and formed bonds which are tight even to this day. Being of a naturally communicative nature - I found it frustrating not being able to express myself in the manner I wanted to in Swedish. This had a negative affect on my naturally outgoing personality and caused me to withdraw. I have often felt that I have a different personality in Swedish as it is not my mother tongue and have found this feeling to be quite prevalent amongst other expats battling with the language. With Swedish being a much smaller language than English it perhaps is quite natural for this to happen. Smaller language = smaller vocabulary. I don't feel I have experienced any cultural barriers/obstacles, apart from the language in Sweden - I have tried to embrace/process them. Having also lived in multicultural New York/London where the pace of life/business is far faster than Stockholm where I currently reside, I feel that the need for adaptability/flexibility in life to be paramount. Being a mother of two children who have been subject to a great deal of change with regards to their schooling/relocation - I have observed that they in the process have developed the ability/skills to penetrate the sometimes hostile environment of the school playground, form friendships and readily adjust without preconceived ideas regarding social norms etc. Something which perhaps can be an invaluable tool in later life.

### 5. In terms of personal attitude and approach, what is the best advice you can give a person who is about to embark on his/her first long-term living experience abroad?

Perhaps the most important thing when moving in this increasingly globalised world and faced with different cultures/norms is to not lose oneself in the process. Maintain an openmind, embrace each day as a gift and get out there and NETWORK. Make contact with ex-pat communities in the area by all means but also try to assimilate into the local culture. A commonsensical approach and the exercising of caution are tools to keep close to hand! >