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CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING

**An Exploratory Analysis of Experiential Narratives
And Implications for Management.**

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FOREWORD

What can be learned from cross-cultural interactions?

This question is a lingering legacy that emanates from our experience as foreign students participating in the International Management Programme, with the primacy of group work through problem-based learning and the challenges arising therefrom. Hence, the subject of this study is not only a question of academic curiosity and its potential significance to managerial practice, but also of personal interest.

We realise and appreciate, in a practical sense, that cross-cultural encounters, be they academic or business in nature, often involve the interplay and interaction of competing, sometimes contradictory, and diverse dynamics that are firmly grounded in our cultural background. In such a dialectical setting, trying to fit in the environment and also accomplish a common task is, indeed, challenging. How people go about these challenges is therefore a cause for reflection.

As the completion of this study marks the conclusion of the MIM programme, the above question is in some way a parallel reflection on our experiences during the course. We hope that at the end of the day, by exploring the experiences of other people, we should be able to understand ourselves better. The words of *T.S. Eliot* come in handy:

*“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”*

(Source: Eliot; T.S. (1968). *Four Quartets*, Harcourt Brace: New York).

ABSTRACT.

Mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and numerous forms of partnerships have necessitated the intercourse between people of diverse cultural background in the same work place. This has ultimately contributed to a considerable interest in the subject of cross-cultural learning. However, most studies in this area, though scanty, have addressed this subject from the organisational point of view.

Thus, this study explores the area of cross-cultural learning from the perspective of the individual employee. The narratives of 7 Swedish managers are analytically explored to try to understand what individuals learn, if any, from a cross-cultural interaction in a work environment. The framework of analysis is based on the motivations for working on international assignments or projects (including expectations), how individuals cope with work in a different cultural environment (adjustment issues), and what influence, if any, this kind of experience has on the individual on completion of the assignment.

It is observed that, by and large, there is no reciprocity with regard to learning in this nature of interaction. Most importantly, individuals simply revise and modify work practices, in view of prevailing circumstances, but not the thinking behind such practices. The basic framework of thought behind individual action, filtered through a set of cultural assumptions, remains unchanged.

Keywords: Cross-cultural learning, Interaction, Individual, Experience, Narrative, Knowledge.

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1. INTRODUCTION.

The twin concepts of Internationalisation and globalisation have contrived to encourage an increasing number of mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and other forms of partnerships across national borders (Laurent, 1981). This trend has given rise to ways of working that ensure the coalescing of individuals from diverse backgrounds on the same project or assignment in a foreign environment.

As the world gets “smaller”, more and more people are spending time living and working away from their home country, giving rise to greater face-to-face contact among people from different cultural backgrounds (Brislin, 1981). Such intercourse, therefore, serves as a kind of arena for, deliberate but sometimes unconscious, diffusion of significant and varied experiences among the interacting individuals.

Consequently, there is a resurgence of interest in the experiences of people who work in other cultures (Goodman, 1994; Ward and Kennedy, 1993). This study therefore sets out to explore such experiences.

1.1 Conception and Definition of Culture:

A Persistent Dilemma.

It is imperative that discussing the phenomenon of cross-cultural learning entails the proper understanding of the term culture. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that comprehension of the term culture has remained a long-standing dilemma; it is problematic in itself. This difficulty originates from the fact that, over the years, there has been no consensus on a comprehensive definition of culture. This is explicable in the sense that, the term culture is used in a wide range of social sciences, and therefore has different meanings in the different fields. Indeed, in the realm of management theory and practice, the concept of culture is an import from the area of ethnographic studies.

Regardless of the fact that academicians and practitioners have increasingly acknowledged the importance of culture, a common understanding and agreement on the definition of the term culture (including variations of culture) has not yet been reached (Doherty and Groeschal, 2000). Similar sentiments have been expressed by Ajiferuke and Boddewyn (1970) when they suggest that culture is one of those items that defy a single all-purpose definition. They go further to argue that there are almost as many meanings of culture as people using the term. As though to sum up the dilemma, Hofstede (1983) maintains that there is no commonly accepted language to describe a complex thing such as culture. In the case of culture, such a scientific language does not exist, he further intimates.

Be that as it may, we wish to contend, based on evidence from literature, that it is possible to identify a common theme in the various perspectives of culture that forms a constellation of issues that can be applied to characterise culture. Most of the contemporary definitions of culture claim descent from the earlier work of anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) who list more than 250 different definitions. Sackmann (1991) reveals that the definitions as “discovered” by the two anthropologists include components such as ideas, concepts, ideologies, values, attitudes, goals, norms, learned behaviours, symbols, rites, rituals, customs, myths, habits, or artefacts such as tools and material representations.

From a cross-cultural perspective therefore, we find it appropriate to view culture as a *mental map, which guides us in our relations to our surroundings and to other people* (Downs, 1971).

1.2. Learning in the Context of Cross-Cultural Interaction.

Theoretically, the governing belief is that the learning process of individuals in a cross-cultural context requires the creative destruction of barriers to learning and the broadening of access to new sources of knowledge and

experience (Starky, 1996). The ideal arena for access to new sources of experience can therefore be found in international assignments.

Thus learning is viewed as the process of adjusting behaviour in response to experience (Yeo, 2002). It is about making sense of issues and situations, of developing insight and understanding, and of seeing patterns in the environment (Cole, 1995; Sadler, 1994). From the vantage point of thinking and action, it should not escape our understanding that, one can change understanding resulting in changed thinking and talking but no noticeable change in routine behaviour.

Understanding the interplay of issues between the individual and the culture with which he/she is interacting is essential to the development of an interpretation of learning along the transitory stages the individual goes through in the process of interacting with the new culture. We therefore seek to explore learning by analysing the interactional dynamics as experienced by individuals in a new environment.

1.3 Perspectives in Cross-Cultural Studies.

Our aim in this section is to highlight the dispensations that are predominant in research and studies on cross-cultural learning. Against this background, we underline our orientation in this study.

A review of literature suggests that in essence, studies in cross-cultural learning represent a cognitive stance. We also observe that these studies provide little illumination into the playing out of broad cultural assumptions in particular cross-cultural work contexts. Cross-cultural learning is portrayed as a cognitive understanding of a relatively stable other culture. For example, the classic works of Hofstede (1980), Hall (1966), and Hall and Hall (1987) identify several hidden cultural dimensions that contribute to behavioural differences between cultures.

However, it is evident that not every individual from a particular culture behaves similarly along these broad dimensions. Within any culture group exists a degree of individual heterogeneity with respect to cultural mindscape (Maruyama, 1994). In fact these intracultural variations should lead us to question what is meant by cultural differences. Nevertheless, such contestation lies outside the parameters of our present study. It should be observed that culture can be varied, contentious, and, in the making, unstable across time and place (Wagner, 1981).

At the other end of the spectrum, authors like Prus (1997) espouse a critical stance on cross-cultural studies. This orientation gives primacy to generic social processes that highlight the interpretive features of association. They focus our attention on the activities involved in the “doing” or accomplishing of human group life. *Culture is then something in-the-making that is experienced intersubjectively.* Therefore, this view of culture situates culture not simply as a stable and homogenous structure but as a socially enacted, dynamic process involving the reproduction and revision of practices (Weisinger and Salipante, 2000).

Indeed, the two authors call for new concepts of “cross-cultural knowing”, portraying cultural understanding as locally situated, dominantly behavioural, and embedded in the mundane and evolving social practices that are jointly negotiated by actors within specific contexts.

In view of the above somewhat mutually polemical perspectives, we should approach this subject with a perspective that is integrative and takes cognisance of both the cognitive and behavioural aspects of cross-cultural learning. The details of this orientation shall be underscored in the theoretical framework.

1.4 Toward a Research Focus.

Evidence in literature suggests that there is a proliferation in the adoption of international assignments as a corporate strategy to achieve co-ordination and

control, creating international informal personal networks (Edström and Galbraith, 1977; Prahalad and Doz, 1981).

Overtime, it has become of special interest to a parent company to identify and make use of “expatriates” who have proved themselves successful in handling relationships with head office, host-country relations and management of foreign subsidiaries (Selmer, 1998).

The point of departure with previous research lies in the fact that, despite the growing importance of cross-cultural experience, anecdotal theorising frequently characterises studies on cross-cultural learning. Studies that have succeeded in documenting facts about the underlying issues in the experience of individuals in a cross-cultural context and the implications therefrom are particularly scant and hard to come by. We therefore wish to undertake an analytical exploration of individual experiences in this regard. Against this background, the focus of our curiosity is:

What do individuals learn, if any, from working in a cross-cultural setting and what implications does this have on the management of cross-cultural interactions?

In pursuance of a solution to the above problem, we broaden our scope by asking further questions. We believe that pursuance of the foregoing questions will offer a sound basis in framing the issues involved in analysing the above problem:

- Why do individuals work on international projects or assignments? (Underlying motives, preconceptions, and expectations).
- How do they cope with work in a different cultural environment?
- What influence does this kind of experience have on the individual on completion of the assignment?

1.5 Purpose of the Study.

The basic purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of individuals who have worked (or, in a limited way, those who are still working) on assignments outside their country of origin. This study is mainly based on the experiences of Swedish managers on overseas assignments. Our aim is to try and establish whether there are any useful lessons that can be derived from such cross-cultural encounters and the implications of such lessons, if any, for management.

1.6 Delimitations.

Our intention is to explore the outcome of expatriates' learning in cross-cultural relationships while they are on assignments abroad. We will also strive to examine how organisations have attempted to tap from the knowledge acquired, if at all, by these expatriates.

While we acknowledge the fact that, more often, expatriates always move overseas along with their family members, and therefore, family situation might affect relationships or dispositions, we choose to limit our study on the experiences of these expatriates. This to us is for fear of deviating from the core of our studies, even more, as some of our interviewees were single before and in the course of their assignments.

In order for us to link existing theories with practical realities, we have chosen to interview expatriates who are currently at their outposts and those who have come back to the head office. We also limit our studies on expatriates from three companies in Sweden in order to give us an insight into learning potentials of Swedes on assignments abroad.

1.7 Constraining Issues.

The process of undertaking a study of this nature is always wrought with considerable constraints. We have encountered the following issues as we progressed:

- Due to time constraints, it was not possible for us to interview as many people as we would have liked to.
- It would have been appropriate to interview some low level or shop floor employees who have at one time or the other worked with some of the expatriates we interviewed.
- Our results could be prejudiced because our interviewees knew our subject matter and it was possible some of them could have tried to tailor their answers in consonance with what they felt would be adequate for our report.

1.8 The logic of approach.

The exploratory nature of our study necessitates that we adopt a mainly qualitative approach methodologically. This is not only attributable to the conceptual diversity surrounding the core notions of culture and learning, but also to our orientation towards these issues that is likely to offer a substantially vague quantitative outlook in case it were attempted.

We also depart from the traditional structured interview method to a narrative undertaking in which there is less intervention on the part of the researcher(s) and more leeway on the part of the narrator to say more within the framework outlined by the researcher(s). Narrative studies in management are not common. This fact is buttressed by Jabri and Pounder (2001) when they postulate that this state of affairs may reflect the prevailing epistemology in management and organisational research that is concerned with establishing universal paradigms. Personal Narratives are increasingly regarded as having merit in management research.

Why the Narrative Mode?

Narrative departs from the search for universals and reflects a conception of reality that involves a multiplicity of views and interpretations. These views and interpretations are made known through narrative or storytelling (Anderson, 1997).

From this perspective, narrative is a distinctive mode of explanation characterised by an intrinsic multiplicity of meaning. *It is therefore a suitable form for expressing the knowledge that arises from action.* The narrative individuals tell is embedded in the subtleties and complexities of subjective and interpersonal understandings. Thus, Alasuutari (1995) reinforces our view that narratives transmit, among other things, temporal change, a characteristically modern experience of history. An essential part of modern people's world of experience is the idea of change and individual development with time. Therefore the gist of our study gravitates around whether this projected idea of change and individual development constitutes learning (from a cross-cultural perspective).

We employ an exploratory means of analysis as a method of gaining insights in the narratives and the implications therefrom.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Under the various sections, this chapter dwells on theoretical issues cogent in the understanding of the issues around the main research problem. The various sections indicate the transitional phases undergone by the individual employee in the cross-cultural experience. This process is crucial in providing a background for answers to the main research problem.

2.1 Why Individuals Work on International Assignments.

Generally, people interested in international assignments want to travel and learn from other cultures. They think that international assignments represent an opportunity to have a cross-cultural and personal growth experience (Adler, 1986).

Nonetheless, considerable research has shown that autonomy, responsibility, and job challenge are a major component of international assignments (Adler, 1981, 1986; Baker and Ivanevich, 1971; Torbiörn, 1982; Birdseye and Hill, 1995). Therefore, employees who expect to be more satisfied with the challenge, autonomy, responsibility, and opportunities to travel and learn from other cultures will be more interested in international assignments (Boeis and Rothstein, 2002).

From a theoretical vantage point, however, an understanding of the motivation underlying the employees' intention to accept such assignments is valuable. Intention is generally a good predictor of behaviour. Specifically, there is some evidence that willingness to relocate is a good indicator of actual relocation decision.

Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) *theory of reasoned action* provides the theoretical rationale for the use of an intention measure. According to their theory, attitudes will predict behaviour through the influence of intentions. Thus, attitudes (and subjective norms) will predict intentions that will predict

behaviour. In this case willingness to relocate is the behavioural intention, which predicts the relocation decision (the behaviour).

In the same vein, Eby and Russel (1998) as well as Adler (1986) have suggested that employees' *general beliefs* can be important in understanding their willingness to relocate. General beliefs concerning the instrumental values of domestic versus international assignments should affect their interest in an international assignment.

Aryee et al. (1996) specify that the strength between career related variables and willingness to relocate would depend, in part, on the extent to which employees' perceive expatriate assignments to be instrumental to their career. Thus, they suggest employees' general beliefs may moderate the relations between career-related variables and employees' willingness to relocate. However, regardless of their beliefs about international assignments, if employees are satisfied with the progression of their careers in the current location, they may not wish to go through the uncertainty associated with accepting international assignments.

It is also suggested that, employees who are dissatisfied with their current work will be more likely take on an international assignment as an alternative. Boies and Rothstein (2002) postulate that dissatisfaction leads to thoughts of quitting, which leads to a search evaluation and behaviour (evaluation of alternatives). From this perspective, authors like Eby and Russel (1998), consider international assignments, to a certain extent, as a peculiar kind of turnover. Eby and Russel (1998) maintain the view that, since an international assignment represents a change in job characteristics such as co-workers, supervisors, and location, it could be considered a "particular form of turnover."

2.2 Pre-Departure Orientation.

It is a norm, at least theoretically, for organisations to offer some kind of orientation to its employees posted for international assignments. This, it is

assumed, will help the employee to grasp some important issues while working in the new environment. In literature (Odenwald, 1993; Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Zakaria, 2000), this kind of briefing is commonly referred to as *cross-cultural training*. For practical purposes therefore, we will use the term training in reference to the pre-departure briefing.

Cross-cultural training has long been advocated as a means of facilitating effective cross-cultural interaction (Bochner, 1982; Harris and Moran, 1979; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1986). Cross-cultural training may be defined as *any procedure used to increase an individual's ability to cope with and work in a foreign environment* (Tung, 1981). The importance of such training in preparing the individuals for intercultural work assignments has become increasingly apparent (Baker, 1984; Lee, 1983). A comprehensive review of literature by Black and Mendenhall (1990) found strong evidence for a positive relationship between cross-cultural training and adjustment.

Zakaria (2000) argues that numerous benefits can be achieved by giving expatriates cross-cultural training prior to the departure for international assignments. The same author maintains that this kind of training can be seen as:

- A means for conscious switching from an automatic, home-culture mode to a culturally appropriate, adaptable, and acceptable one;
- An aid to improve coping with unexpected events or culture shock in a new culture;
- A means of reducing the uncertainties of interactions with foreign nationals, and;
- A means of enhancing expatriates' coping ability by reducing stress and disorientation common with such relocations.

Underlining the complex nature of culture, however, the same author observes that, even as organisations try to equip the employees mentally, it is difficult to develop the appropriate mental frame of reference for dealing with different cultures worldwide. A frame of reference in this sense includes a basic awareness of cultural differences, which exist between the "home" culture and

those with which people are doing, or would like to do business (Benders, 1996).

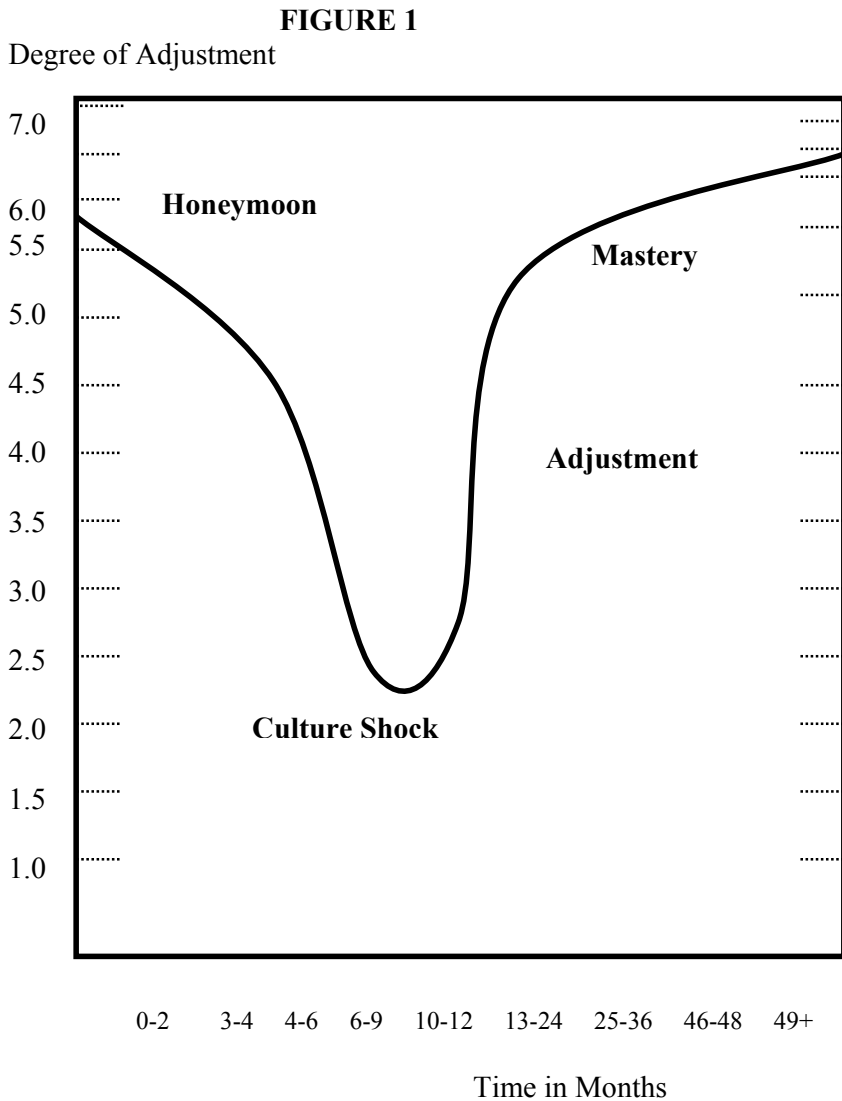
2.3 Cultural Immersion: How Individuals Fit In The Changed Work Environment.

Working in a foreign culture entails, as a matter of necessity, interacting with an unfamiliar environment. Nevertheless, it is crucial for individuals to reconcile themselves with the dynamics of the new work environment. This process of trying to “fit-in” with the host culture is commonly referred to as adjustment. Torbiörn (1982) suggests that adjustment refers to the changes, which the individuals actively engender or passively accept in order to achieve or maintain satisfactory states within themselves. In the same vein, Church (1982) views cross-cultural adjustment as the degree of comfort, familiarity, and ease that the individual feels toward the new environment.

2.4. Models of Cross-Cultural Adjustment.

The process of adjustment has been explained in many ways by different authors and over the years models have been developed to explain the process of adjustment in reaction to cultural immersion. Popular models in literature include “The U-curve of Cross- Cultural Adjustment”, which is based on the work of Lysgaard (1955), and the “Cross-Cultural Cycle” (Zakaria, 2000). A brief review of these models should aid in the understanding of the dominant conceptualisation in literature. On the basis of this, we should be able to derive our own understanding of the notion of adjustment.

2.4.1. The U-curve Theory of Cross-Cultural Adjustment:



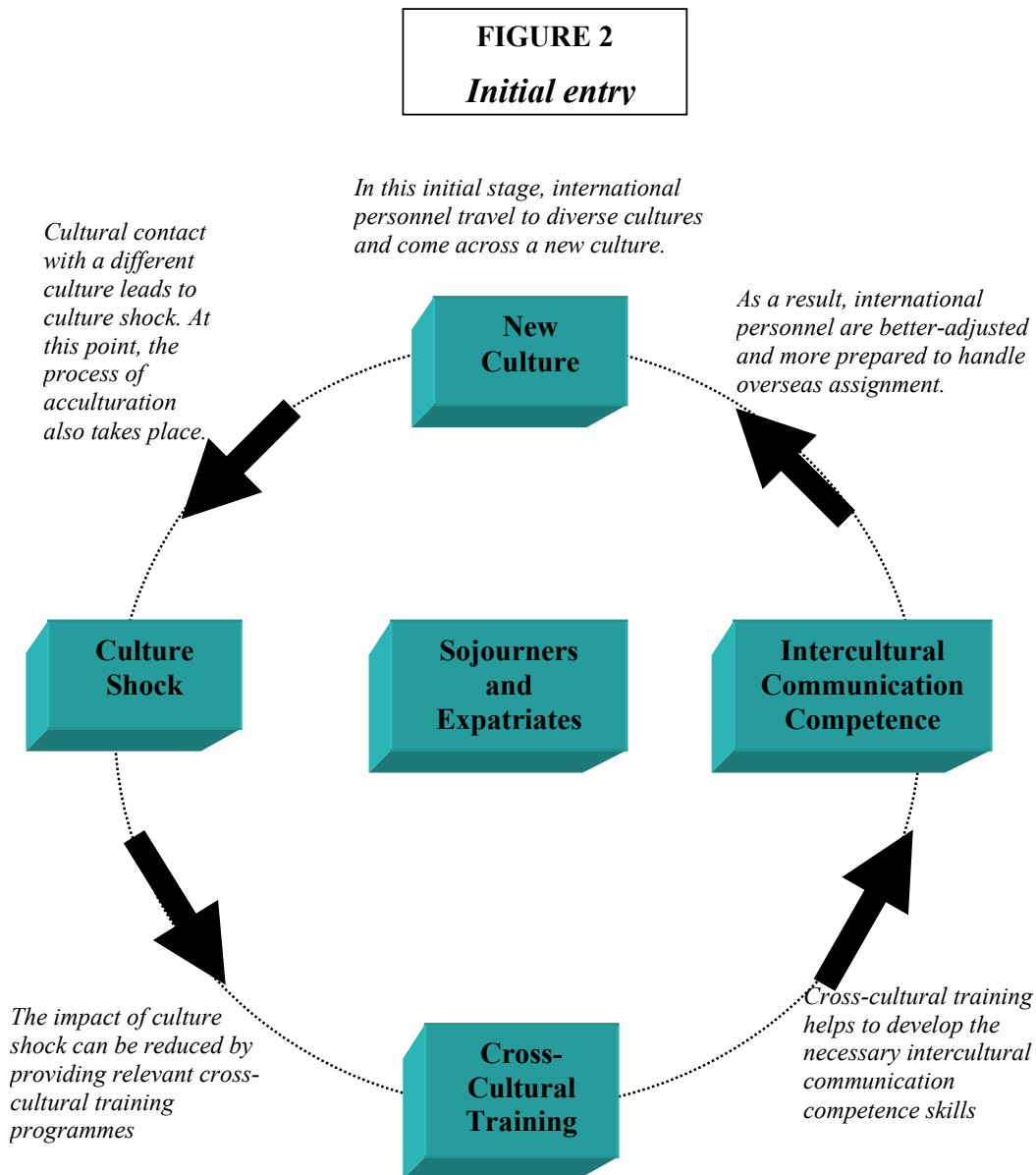
Source: Black and Mendenhall (1991), Pg.227.

This model is based on the theory that the process of adjustment takes the shape of a U-Curve. Black and Mendenhall (1991) provide a basic description of this model. In the initial stage (“honeymoon”), individuals are fascinated by the new culture and are excited about all the interesting “sights and sounds.” This initial infatuation is followed by a period of disillusionment and frustration (or “culture shock”) as the individuals must seriously cope with living in the new culture on a day-to-day basis. The third stage (“adjustment”) is characterised by gradual adaptation to the new and learning how to behave

appropriately according to the cultural norms of the host country. The fourth stage (“mastery”) is characterised by the small incremental increases in the individual’s ability to function effectively in the new culture.

2.4.2. The Cross-Cultural Cycle :

We wish to state that the distinction between this model and the previous one lies in the fact that, whereas the former only gives the stages of adjustment, this one goes further to identify cross-cultural training and intercultural competence as necessary aids to cross-cultural adjustment.



Source: Adapted from Havelock (1963) and Conner (1993), (Zakaria, 2000 P. 495)

This model is developed on the concept of "cultural change", which represents a transition between one's own culture and a new culture. Cultural change is part of a problem solving process undergone by users (Havelock, 1963; Conner, 1993). Here, the users are identified as sojourners and expatriates who experience a new culture that is unfamiliar and strange.

In the initial stage of confrontation with the new culture, the user experiences a culture shock. Then, full or partial acculturation takes place, depending on factors such as former experience, length of stay, cultural distance between home and new culture, training, and language competency, among other factors.

Nevertheless, Black et al. (1991) argue that cross-cultural adjustment should be treated as a multidimensional concept, rather than a unitary phenomenon as was the dominating view previously (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1962; Oberg 1960). In their proposed model for international assignments, Black et al.(1991) made a distinction among three dimensions of in-country adjustment :

- Adjustment to work;
- Adjustment to interacting with host nationals; and
- Adjustment to the general non-work environment.

We are therefore conscious of the multidimensionality of adjustment in our approach to this issue.

2.5. Repatriation and The International Experience- The Influence of Cross-cultural adjustment on the returning employee:

Repatriation is the last phase of transition in the cross-cultural experience. It can be viewed as cross-cultural re-entry. Adler (1986) describes repatriation as the transition from the foreign country back into one's own country. It is

interesting to note that few studies have been done on this subject by exploring the experience of the individual employee.

Repatriation of employees is not something that happens easily or naturally. Depending on how the process is handled, the result could be beneficial or costly and dysfunctional to the effective functioning of both the returning employee and the organisation (Adler, 1991; Kendall, 1986).

Successful repatriation means that employees acquire career and personal payoffs from the overseas experience and that the organisation enriches itself through the addition of the international competencies of its repatriated employees (Solomon, 1995). In this sense, the experiences and knowledge of the employee need to be applied in the best interest of the organisation and an individual's overall career (Fish and Wood, 1993). Indeed, repatriates expect to return to a meaningful position back home, where they can use their new skills and knowledge (Hauser, 1998).

However, upon their return employees often face organisations that do not know what the person has done for the past several years or how to utilise the skills and knowledge gained overseas in the most effective way for the organisation and for the ongoing career of the individual employee (Bender and Fish, 2000). In some cases the organisations do not even care about the utilisation of the gained skills and knowledge. To compound the problem, some organisations often fail to recognise that the returning employees have learnt anything.

In consonance with the above predicament of the returning employee, Allen and Alvarez (1998) argue that organisations too often fail to reward or recognise the new skills and knowledge acquired in overseas positions. In the absence of tasks where the knowledge gained can be utilised, organisations may be confronted with a situation where such employees choose to leave the organisation.

It should therefore be observed that prior to leaving for offshore assignments, employees expect to meet unfamiliar situations, however, on return they expect that the prevailing situation should be the same as they left it. To a large

extent, therefore, their return is always marked by disappointments. They neither come back to the situation they left nor to the world they are expecting. While overseas the employee has changed, the organisation has changed and the country has changed.

3. EXPLORING THE NARRATIVES ANALYTICALLY

In this chapter, we explore the narratives analytically with the view, not only, to examining the correlation between the experiences of the employees with what is known theoretically, but also dimensions that are either not mentioned, given peripheral consideration, or treated discursively. This outlook shall also be tempered with our interpretation of the issues underscored in the narratives. Finally, We intend to delve into the learning aspects arising from the experiences narrated.

Before embarking on the task earmarked above, it should be stated that, the analysis is based on the narration of seven (7) individuals from three (3) different companies also in different industries. One company is in the automotive industry and has operations in Europe, N. America, Asia, and South Africa. The second company is a world leader in supply of mechanised welding and cutting equipment with operations in Europe, N. America, Asia, and the Middle East. The third company deals in health care products, specialising in surgical and wound care products. This company has operations in Europe and N. America. These companies have solid experience and a fairly long history in international operations.

The individuals are aged between 31 years and 60 years. Most of them have served in more than one location and on more than one assignment for a period of tenure ranging from 2 years (for the shortest) to 8 years (for the longest). These individuals held managerial and leadership responsibilities in their respective assignments.

Our interaction with the narrators lasted between 1 hour (for the shortest time) and 4 hours (for the longest time). All the narratives were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis. We also noted down important issues in the process of the narration for purposes of comparison and ease of analysis.

The analysis of the narratives is executed thematically on the basis of issues identified as cogent, insights developed in our interaction with the narrators and derived from the theoretical framework.

To forestall the possibility of creating a repetitive impression on the reader, within the paragraphs, we intend to limit direct reference to those statements that are inclusive of the views of all the narrators. However, related narrations are quoted and indented.

Further, Confidentiality considerations oblige us to craft acronyms in reference to the narratives, viz: BVA, AEA, BMS, BMK, AES, JVL, and MMA. The following terms are quantified thus:

All = 7

Most = 5

Many = 4

Some = 3

Few = 1-2

It is also imperative to proclaim, from the outset, that the narrative approach is not a commonly used technique, especially so, in the area of management studies. We are therefore obliged to introduce the concept at this point. Narrative is a mode of knowing that captures in a special fashion the richness and nuances of meaning in human affairs which cannot be expressed in definitions, statements of fact, or abstract propositions. It can only be demonstrated or evoked through story (Carter, 1993). It is therefore a more viable method in attempting to explore learning in a cross-cultural environment. This report therefore can be viewed as a “narrative of narratives.”

3.1. Why Individuals Work on International Assignments **Organisational Motives for sending people abroad.**

From studies, organisations focus heavily on strategic international human resource expatriation-based staffing for managing the combined control and coordination needs between subsidiary and parent operations (Taylor et al.,

1996). A subset of this view is that organisations want to be sure that its goals are clearly communicated and effectively carried out. An important element of control is the recognition by organisations of the need to secure their brand image through ensuring that the standard of their products are maintained throughout their production plants across the world, and also preserve their culture:

BVA: “Our company had a clear concept to introduce on board there, that this is the way we want to run the business.”

JVL: “The only thing is that we must ensure that our own culture is being taken care of...For marketing reasons, we must be assured that communication in the local organisations are made in such a way that represents our company’s values...We had once somewhere ... an advertisement with a naked woman on our product, and that was of course, forbidden.”

AES: “From the technical production point of view, organisations want to make sure that the standard of their products are maintained throughout their production plants across the world. They always want people to trust their product. Another consideration is the issue of security or a form of control.”

MMA: “The company wanted a Swedish person in the subsidiary organisation’s research and development division to ensure that the company processes and procedures were implemented.”

BMK: “I was told to implement the organisation’s culture in the overseas company and also learn about the culture over there...The biggest assignment was to implement our processes because we are a process-oriented company. Then we implement a new computer system and the third was to implement our culture and lastly, our financial report...I think in a new market even though you work with local distributors or you set up a new factory..., it’s

very important for a company to have somebody from the head office with broad experience to help the local company to start up activities.”

Furthermore, in most cases, organisations seek to transfuse knowledge between subsidiary and parent company hence, the deployment of experts on integration for instance, from the head office. All the narrators agree with these viewpoints (BVA, AEA, AES, BMK, BMS, MMA) and a few of them (AES) explained this reasoning in the necessity by organisations to make a transparent accounting report as many are listed on the Stock Markets of countries around the world:

BVA: “We found some key players in the Canadian company that came to Sweden to experience what we try to transport to Canada.”

BMK: “My organisation needed to send somebody to Mexico to carry out integration in the new company, so I was sent there and worked for eighteen months.”

BMS: “Then I told my boss at that time whether it was not better that I go to Germany (that was considered a big market at that time) so that I work and stay there for a couple of years and report back about the needs and so on.”

MMA: “My assignment is to carry out integration between Sweden and US research and development.”

AES: “Another motive... is the issue of security or a form of control.”

In a reversal scenario, organisations send employees abroad to be able to have knowledge in areas that are not available locally:

JVL: “We send people on assignments abroad because they have knowledge in areas that we can’t find locally.”

Some organisations are conscious about the need to have a global outlook and ultimately view that a mix of culture has a potential to facilitating organisational learning. As BMS puts it:

“... not only do Swedes have to move out to other local organisations; people from other markets have to come here to Sweden too”.

He rationalised this reasoning thus:

“People should be mixed such that they could bring other cultures and knowledge in here and take with them the organisation’s culture.”

One dimension to organisational motives of sending personnel on overseas assignments that we have not found in any literature is the issue of sending “rebellious” personnel out on overseas assignments. There are bound to be rebellious elements in most organisations. Much as management try to influence certain people to change their work habits or interpersonal relationships amongst co-workers, some people simply fail to adhere. Therefore, such people are labelled rebellious. Even though management would prefer to dispense with their services, labour laws or high position in the company may be an inhibitor to this preference. Therefore, the choice open to management is to cleverly send such people on overseas assignments. Only BVA mentioned this dimension to organisation motive for sending people abroad and one can hardly fault this claim due to the position this narrator held in the organisation:

BVA: “Sometimes, people are sent out because they make too much trouble at home, so they say, get rid of them. If we place them out there, it is safe for us at home.”

3.1.1. Individual Motives for Working Abroad.

In theory it is presumed that people interested in overseas assignments want to travel and learn from other cultures. Some people are naturally adventurous in nature. They enjoy meeting new people and learning about them and even go as far as learning their languages. These categories of people are open minded and not judgemental about attitudes, religion and behaviour that are distinctly different from theirs. Most times, adventurous personalities would not consider personal risk. What matters to them is their propensity to satisfy their inquisitiveness. Few of the narrators fall into this category of adventurers:

BVA: “They always want to make a fresh start and that is why it is sometimes difficult to get them to return to HQ... They always want to seek new things.”

AEA: “I went to Dubai in 1982. I was young then and took it as an adventure...I didn’t have any career reasons for the assignment. I was just curious to do something new. I was young and with no family obligation, so it was easy for me to go on adventure.”

The concept of responsibility, autonomy and job challenge as a major component of international assignments have semblance with the experiences of our narrators. We found out that while some people are quite adept at identifying sources of potential businesses overseas, for their respective organisations, others view their experience as not justifying the nomenclature of their position until international experience is achieved. An instance of this is the designation of International Product Manager to personnel that did not really have international job experience. We discovered that most of our narrators wanted responsibility and job challenge and what followed ultimately is autonomy.

BMS: “At that time, we were very strong in the Swedish and Nordic areas and I told myself that we didn’t have much of international experience. So, I really questioned myself, how could I be an International Product Manager without international experience?”

BVA: “As for the UK, we were so to speak, three volunteers and were asked to go there, look into port operations to ensure that we had the standard that we wanted to have in the future.”

AES: “I counted about three building cranes here in Gothenburg and over there in..., I counted hundreds and I knew that this is not the place where things are happening. They are happening somewhere else and I wanted to be part of it.”

We note that many of our narrators’ behaviour correlates with Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) theory of reasoned action. In some instances, people who liked relocation had prepared themselves so much as learning the culture, language and geography of the particular region of the world that they wanted to live and work. Therefore, it would have been very frustrating for this kind of personnel to be denied the benefits he or she foresees in overseas assignments. Definitely, an employee who has the intention to relocate will have a positive view of working abroad and it is most likely that he or she will have successful expatriate experiences:

BMK: “I speak Spanish and also took some Latin American classes at Gothenburg University. I was looking forward to going and was prepared to learn about the culture.”

AEA: “Anything you do of your free will, has a chance of success. I must say that it was a positive experience...I found out that if you interact with different people from all over the world, then it is possible to have a better world. If you are deeply rooted in your country or village, you read headlines, read newspapers, read sports and watch

television, you don't care about what is going on in the world or in the Middle East and so on. If you hear from somebody, for instance, that Saddam is a bad guy, then everybody believes it without question. If you go to that part of the world, then you have the opportunity to judge things yourself."

BMS: "The first time that I went to Germany, I had some two weeks of intensive German language course."

AES: "If you want something to happen, you have got to do something to make it happen. You did not come here because the government of your countries paid you. You came because you wanted to have something. It's very much the same."

Closely related to the aforementioned is the theory that states that the strength between career-related variables and willingness to relocate have bearing in part on career enhancement. None of our narrators believe that their relocation decision had relevance to their career ambition, more so, as some see their relocation bid as purely adventurous. Even though our narrators would not admit this career issue, it is our view that, notwithstanding their posture, while thinking about working overseas, some would have projected consciously or otherwise, to what extent the assignment would affect their career prospects.

On the suggestion that, employees who are dissatisfied with their work, consider relocation as an alternative. Notably, none of our narrators had a reason to leave their employment on account of dissatisfaction with their job.

3.1.2. Mix of Organisational & Individual Motives

In a few cases, both organisation and employees can have the same motive. The organisation may have a motive for expansion or acquisition of other lines of business. Likewise, the individual in the organisation may also be interested in working in the country where the organisation wants to expand and also the type of functions to be carried out in the overseas company or subsidiary. This

situation serves as a contributor to expatriation success:

AEA: “The initiative was both mine and the organisation’s. I went there in 1981 and I was told that the company was proposing to set up a business and apparently as I did a good job, so they asked my availability. A few months later, I was called.”

MMA: “It was a choice made by the company and myself.”

3.1.3. Benefits and Cost of repatriation

A few of the narrators agree with the view that the process of repatriation can be rewarding for both employee and the organisation. According to this narrator, it all depends on how the process is handled:

BMK: “I think there are pros and cons when you are sent out.”

It is very important for organisations to prepare well in advance for the repatriation of expatriates. There has to be a good come back position for these employees. While ignoring the fact that fellow employees at the head office, especially those who have made their career position there, may see returning expatriates as a threat. If an expatriate returned to the head office and was not properly absorbed by way of a new and challenging position, then it is most likely that such employee will leave the company out of frustration. For some of the narrators, (BMK, BMS, AEA) their organisations did prepare for their coming back while for a few, their organisations did not take account of this (AES, BVA):

BMK: “The Head Office made a smart comment; “we think it’s very good for you to come back to catch up, to know where we are heading...I have indicated the areas that I am interested in and that are seen as important to the company.”

BMS: “One good thing is that we have been a positive developing company and therefore, there has been some room for some sort of expansion.”

AEA: “Yes, the company prepared for my coming back in a practical way”

AES: “No, the company did not. Since my going was at my instigation, so was the case when I came back, I had to use my initiatives to do a lot of things.”

BVA: “When I returned from the, it was difficult here to find a position because I had been through all the positions within the company in Sweden.”

Notwithstanding the issue of comeback position, non-recognition of expatriation knowledge by organisations and even fellow workers can be a major source of frustration and can lead to the exit of expatriates. Quite often, organisations are not really interested in new ideas. These types of organisations see these expatriates as dreamers and not realistic. In the case of co-employees, they may derive pleasure in hearing tales about expatriation experiences, but they may not consider those experiences as anything to reckon with.

BVA: “You could be seen as a dreamer or not realistic enough. You are a little bit suspicious and the knowledge that you bring in is not seen as good enough or not really needed.”

Sometimes, the issue of a comeback position may be beyond the purview of the organisation. An instance of this is when an organisation is engaged in a merger or an outright acquisition. One of our narrators once had this experience:

BMK: “So, I was offered a position that wasn’t according to my expectations and at the same time, there was a merger between my company and another company, which ended in a position that was initially offered to me. In that case, there was never a good come back position for me.”

In the same vein, an employee can make repatriation beneficial for himself/herself. Since some organisations do not prepare for the repatriation of their expatriates thus, they are left alone to find their feet in the scheme of things. A non-proactive expatriate will ultimately become frustrated while a proactive one would put his experience into good use and devise new working methods and also influence cultural practices in the organisation, given the latitude. We observe that most of our narrators fall into the category of proactive expatriates as they have come out successfully. One striking dimension to the adjustment of expatriates on return to the head office is the role of mentor. According to one of the narrators, his mentor played a significant role in his adjustment back to work strategy:

AEA: “I think success depends on the type of guidance and mentors that you have. I had a good mentor with a very clever personality. He is an Irishman and has a political mind...I got advice from my mentor... to keep my mouth shut for at least six months when I returned to the head office. In those six months, I had fitted back into the organisation.”

3.1.4 Problems Inherent in Expatriation

It is widely recognised by many of the narrators (BVA, AES, AEA, JVL) that many expatriates feel reluctant to repatriate basically because a lot of them lose autonomy and certain privileges that were hitherto enjoyed by them in the course of their overseas appointments. Some of the privileges recognised are enhanced pay packages, use of domestic servants for household chores, company cars with drivers, to mention but a few:

BVA: “Even in some countries where the salary package of an average worker is low, the package of expatriates is much more. For example, I know that, they have a driver, a cleaning lady and cook. If you have three people working for you, when you return to Sweden, you will have none.”

AES: “The local Managing Directors are like kings. But when they return to the head office, they are cut down to size. Aside from this, they lose all privileges.”

AEA: “...live comfortable life and enjoy high income, and all these things which are part of expatriation situation, that makes it tough to come back.”

JVL: “In Sweden, you know we very seldom have people helping you at home ironing clothes or doing daily chores. You know that we can find this kind of service everywhere else with a small amount of money and we don't have it in Sweden. So, when people come back, they expect to be able to live to that standard...”

One other important repatriation problem identified by the narrators is relationships with social and family situations. In the observation of the narrators, the society that they left would have changed, as there could have been new rules and regulations, soaring crime rate and even some members of the family and friends could have relocated. Of course, the inconducive weather (especially in Sweden) could be another reason. Also, the family could have been disoriented about homecoming, as the children who most often attend international school would have made new friends and even the husband or wife, new acquaintances. These issues have the immense potential of generating despondency in the individual:

AEA: “A lot of things happen in the society if you have been away for five years...All these things make you isolated.”

JVL: “Sometimes, its more easier going than coming back because you think that you will arrive into a society that was exactly the same as your memories only, to discover that your society and culture had changed ... since you left.”

BVA: “...the children are used to international schools, they are used to having friends from different parts of the world and in some countries, they are treated differently depending on colour, background etc. So they have easier lives.”

A fundamental issue that has bearing on repatriation difficulties is the innate tendencies of expatriates to always be on the move i.e. to move from one country to another. This category of people is restless and it is the opinion of one narrator that they have tendencies comparabile to railway builders.

BVA: “When railway workers have finished building rail tracks, they want to go ahead and build new ones, as they are not always willing to stay back and do the maintenance.”

Staying too long overseas has been viewed as another reason that people find it hard to relocate. Often, prolongation of stay abroad can be at the instance of the employee or the organisation. The narrators opined that this situation could lead to expatriates having difficulties in coming back:

BVA: “If you are away for too long, you lose contact with the realities of the home country.”

JVL: “If you have people out there for more than six years, they will never come back.”

BMS: “I read about these things, not from our company, that having been away for a long time, there could be problems with coming back.”

3.2 Training Vis-à-vis Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Training has been identified, at least theoretically, as a critical factor in aiding the process of cross-cultural interaction and adjustment. Nevertheless, impressions from the narratives suggest that negligible or no training at all is given to the employees before embarking on their foreign assignments. Indeed, none of the narrators suggested having received training at least in the sense portrayed in most literature.

What organisations normally do is to give the expatriate employees a briefing regarding practical issues concerning the assignment and what is generally required in the performance of the duty. The organisations are constrained in this aspect due to the fact that, in most cases, there is general lack of in-depth knowledge about, but also little interest in, the nitty-gritty of cultural issues surrounding the assignment at hand. This impression is summed up thus:

JVL: “We thought ...it should be more of technical knowledge.”

We further observe that, to a great extent, based on the narratives, the necessity for training is always forestalled by the fact that many of the narrators took up the assignments at their own instigation. More so, some even encouraged their respective organisations to start up the assignments in which they finally played a major role. A typical reflection on this situation is:

AES: “If you want something to happen, you’ve got to do something about it.”

Such employees therefore turn out to be the link between the organisation and the host culture. This situation therefore forestalls the necessity for such employees to receive some kind of training since he/she is deemed knowledgeable enough about the situation by virtue of his/her interest in working on the assignment.

The experiences of most of the employees also question the potency of training with regard to cultural interaction. The significance of this concern is underlined by the fact that, by and large, interaction with another culture has an emotional aspect to it. That the feeling people experience when they interact with another culture cannot be trained into a person:

BVA: “It is difficult to be taught how to feel about another culture.”

Feelings are generated through direct interaction with the culture rather than hypothetical statements made about how it is to interact with the culture physically.

From the experience of the narrators and in consonance with Fish and Wood (1994), what seems useful is the possibility of a reconnaissance trip prior to the actual appointment to enable the prospective expatriate to “get a feel” for the new environment. In which case the employee then has the opportunity to physically interact with the environment and experience the culture from within even before moving for the assignment.

3.3 The Question of Adjustment

One distinctive feature of the expatriation experience lies in the fact that success in the assignment requires adjustment to the new culture as well as to the new tasks. We found out from the narratives that many of the narrators perceived their adjustment as conforming to the various levels identified by Black et al. (1991): adjustment to work, to interacting with host nationals and to the general work environment.

3.3.1. Cultural Distance

It became very apparent from the narratives that the issue of Cultural distance has a very important role in determining the ease of adjustment or otherwise. Cultural distance refers to the extent to which the host culture is different from the expatriates' own culture. This is especially crucial at the initial stage of interaction with the host culture. Narrators BVA, BMS, JVL, and BMK who started their expatriate experiences in Europe were very positive about their initial interaction with the host cultures. The general mood of the narrators is summed up in the following statement:

BMS: "Probably it would have been a different story had my work been, say in Africa, where you come from. Otherwise, I cannot think of anything that I felt negative about."

This view reflects the fact that there is a perceived nearness and similarity between cultures in Europe and the relative differences that emerge when compared to other parts of the world. It therefore means that working and adjusting to cultures in a different part of the world could have been somewhat problematic.

On the contrary, AES and AEA, had assignments in a rather different kinds of atmosphere and this meant that it was not easy for them to adjust initially as the people above. Their experience was mainly in the Middle East and Asia:

AES: "Of course, at the beginning we had a problem of understanding each other, the way we do things.. The society is also based on a caste or class system. In that sense, there was a problem."

Coming from an egalitarian society like Sweden it was difficult for this narrator to deal with the employees differently depending on their caste or class. This was a unique experience for him as he later intimated:

AES: “The society is heavily influenced by religion. People are very religious. You know in Sweden we do not consider religion very much in our dealings with people... it takes time to adjust to this situation.”

It can be suggested therefore that, from the above juxtaposition, it is not far-fetched to deduce that the further the distance between cultures the less easy it is to adjust to the host culture.

Nevertheless, it can also be maintained that, from their (AES & AEA) subsequent experience, it appears that the very issues that seemed to create preliminary problems of adjustment, in the long run served to make the narrators understand and relate with the general environment. Acknowledging that they were different, the society treated them with enormous respect and due care. This probably explains why they served for comparatively lengthy tenures in their respective locations.

3.3.2 Language as a facilitator

The importance of language in facilitating the adjustment process cannot be over-emphasised. From the narratives, when we talk about language, there should be a clear distinction between the local language of the community and the business language. It was much easier for some of the narrators to adjust to their work because English is the language mostly used in business:

AEA: “The business transactions were conducted in the English language.”

AES: “...the official language of business is English.”

They therefore did not have a lot of problems in that particular area. However, it was considerably difficult becoming more familiar with the greater environment because the local language was different in the two respective

cases. Interaction at the societal level therefore required that they at least have some working knowledge of the local language.

Most of the narrators, who happened to undertake their assignments in Europe, did not report any problems with interaction arising out of the problem of language since they either knew or were familiar with the local language of their respective stations of work.

The question of language is therefore an important one considering the experience of the narrators. Nevertheless, this is one issue that has not received adequate attention in literature and this is an indictment on the part of researchers in cross-cultural studies.

3.3.3 On “Irrational” norms and rituals

Certain norms and rituals of a culture have the potential tendency of emasculating conventional wisdom and understanding. This can be a particularly sobering experience in the process of adjustment. A degree of organisational resources and attention may be channelled to deal with “real” or perceived, if superstitious, issues that the local employees not only feel strongly about but also believe in.

The narrative of AES to this effect is of immense significance. It involved the hiring of the “good services” of an exorcist to rid the company of the “disruption and mayhem” caused by the “ghost” of a woman who apparently died within the vicinity of the company premises. This ghost was in the habit of tampering with company equipment and machines. The exorcists’ ritual resolved the problem in the eyes of the local employees and the ghost was never heard of thereafter. This narrator contends that:

AES: “of course I did not believe in the whole thing but I had to respect their feelings. It is a problem that had to be solved.”

This has implications to the extent that, occasionally, in a cross-cultural setting, managers go out of their way to appease the local employees as a means of creating a positive work environment and portraying responsiveness to the requirements of the local culture.

3.4 Learning in cross-cultural interactions:

A basic characteristic of cross-cultural interactions is that it involves the confluence of diverse paradigmatic tendencies on the basis of the interacting cultures in terms of meaning, thinking, feeling and acting. This therefore implies that when individuals interact, they bring to the situation one kind of paradigm and in the process of interaction encounter a different paradigm. What is important here is whether this process, often challenging, generates some experiences that could be said to constitute learning. Learning has become a plausible mechanism substituting for, or augmenting, calculative rationality not only in the pursuit of intelligent organisational action but also individual action. Raelin, J.A. (1997), suggests that *one learns through work at an individual level*.

Henceforth, it is our interest to delve into the experiences of the narrators in an attempt to explore the kind of learning that takes place, that is, if learning takes place at all. It is worth noting that many of the narratives point to the fact that the kind of learning talked about is associated with the routine tasks of the respective assignments, that is to say, through interaction (or “inter-action”) with other people; acting in relation to other people. This conforms to the jargon of learning in action. Furthermore, it is akin to what Diedrich and Targama (2000) refer to as *knowledge that is emerging in actions and routines, and finally meaning systems or understandings resulting from communication, interpretation and sensemaking*.

It is imperative to observe that, the narratives exhibit the popular explicit – tacit knowledge categorisation:

BMK: “I had never before worked inside a factory. This assignment gave me the opportunity to work in a factory...I learnt quite a lot. I understood better how a factory was run and also the so-called problems the factory might have while negotiating with the head office.... I think that was a good experience for me.”

It is clear from this assertion that the narrator learned some basic skills that he did not possess before and can talk about in a more precise way. This experience falls within the bracket of explicit knowledge and is the most predominant perspective of learning in the narratives. Of course, it is important that a distinction is drawn between learning as going through an entirely new experience and learning to do the same thing differently.

On the contrary, the narrator below is hard-pressed to talk about her experience:

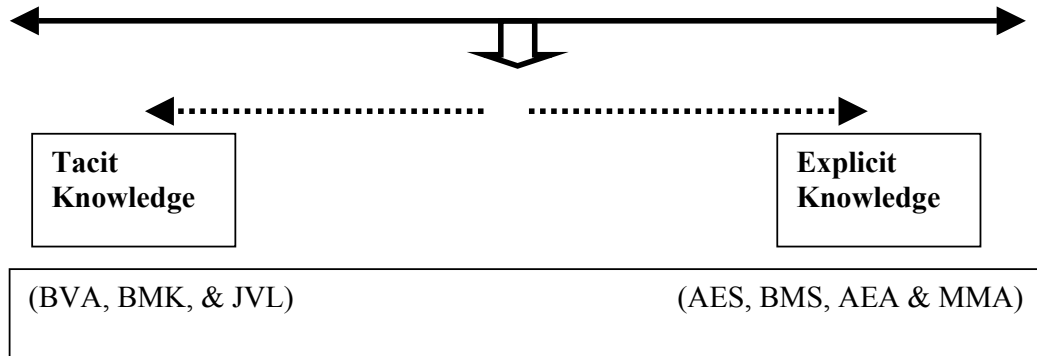
BVA: “You learn a lot of things.... it is very difficult to say what you have learned... to show that you have broadened your knowledge.”

The narrator in this case is certain that she has learned something but has difficulty stating that which she has learned. We can deduce that this experience conforms to the tacit knowledge outlook, which *designates all kind of knowledge that a person is not capable of formulating explicitly* (Diedrich and Targama, 2000).

It means that if you place the experiences of the narrators along a continuum of knowledge (tacit-explicit), then it is likely that most of the narrators will fall in the explicit end of the continuum. This is not surprising given the nature of their assignment, which determines to which kind of issues the individual gives precedence and therefore treats as important to the accomplishment of the assignment. At one extreme end will be those individuals whose

experiences conform to the acquisition of explicit knowledge and on the other, are individuals who are at pains to explain the kind of knowledge they acquired but believe they learned something. We can illustrate the scenario thus:

A Continuum of Knowledge:



It is interesting to note that the reason why the narrators fell on either side of the continuum are not entirely inexplicable. Our observation suggests that the nature of the tasks these individuals were involved in has a lot to do with the kind of knowledge they exude in the narratives. BVA, BMK, and JVL, were involved in assignments in which their respective designations were mainly managerial in nature. Unlike their counterparts, these narrators were involved in general managerial work and not specific technical project assignments:

BVA: “You learn a lot of things... it is very difficult to say what you learn. For the hard knowledge about the product, it is possible to talk and write about. But things to do with behaviour, and so on, it is good that you use it yourself. By changing your behaviour, for instance, then you show other people that there are other ways of doing things to show that you have broadened your knowledge.”

BMK: “I was in charge of our business areas and always checked the financial performance of our factories. I had never worked inside a factory before. This assignment gave me the opportunity to work in a factory. I learnt quite a lot. I

understood better how a factory was run and the so-called problems the factory might have while negotiating with the head office... I think that was a good experience for me. Its good to have in the future.”

JVL: “When you work on projects, it is possible to document certain things regarding the practical aspects. But what you learn in the process of interaction is very difficult to tell.... Let me throw this question back to you. Do you think that it is possible for you to tell people explicitly about what you have learned here in Sweden? May be if you have a dialogue you can easily exchange knowledge.”

Therefore their experience is not reducible to concepts that are capable of explaining what they learned. This kind of learning is not necessarily mediated by conscious knowledge. It conforms to what Hayes and Broadbent (1988) christened complex knowledge that takes place without the learner’s awareness that he or she is learning. Nevertheless, this kind of knowledge would be apprehensible and observable in use, even though not articulated.

Conversely, the other category of narrators are those who worked on specific technical assignments like R&D, implementation of new processes, setting up a new factory, integration of subsidiary to the headquarters, product development to mention but a few. It is therefore conceivable that they can talk about their experiences in rather explicit terms. Dretske (1981) calls this learning acquired in the midst of action and is dedicated to the task at hand:

AES: “When I was working ... in Sweden, I did not have any knowledge about what goes on in administration. I had no way of knowing VAT (value added tax), import documentation, etc.... However, I have come to know all about these issues. That is a good thing to know.”

BMS: “In more general terms, I think we acquire knowledge that the company can make use of. However, there is no formal way that I can talk about this.”

AEA: “ Well, I can say that I have acquired a lot of experience not only about the market but also the region. I know the people, a lot of customs, and some contacts in the political hierarchy. It has become natural that in matters to do with this region, my input would be required by the company.”

MMA: “This has been a great experience and I have learned a lot both professionally and about myself as a person... It will be very useful to the company as well as for myself.”

But what is it that the individuals learn explicitly or tacitly? Does learning actually take place in cross-cultural interactions? It might seem strange and outrightly contradictory to pose the above questions given that in the foregoing paragraphs, we have pointed out instances of learning on the basis of the perception of the narrators. We take cognisance of the fact that knowledge undergoes construction and transformation, that it is as much a dynamic as a static concept. Our intention here is not to negate the claims in the narratives, rather to critically examine how learning could be constrained or aided by the intersection of aspects of culture, individual, organisational, and situational.

The issue to raise, from the outset is whether interactions in a cross-cultural environment can be demonstrably said to inexorably lead to learning or the acquisition of “new knowledge.” Indeed, all the narrators, in varying ways, claimed to have learned from the cross-cultural experience.

We wish to observe that, more often than not what employees’ perceive as learning could be a mere adjustment of practice but not the thinking behind the practice. This conception of learning is to a large extent superficial and does not address the salient issues that explain why people do things in a certain way and not the other. Levitt and March (1988) somewhat touched on this issue and conceive of it as the updating of routines on the basis of interpretation of experience. Most of the narrators identified their learning experiences with the

respective tasks they performed and how they changed their way of doing things on the basis of the local requirements. We are therefore very sceptical about categorising such adjustment as learning.

From a cross-cultural perspective, learning presumes the interpretation of experience. However, experience is clouded by the interactive complexity of history, particularly by the way experience is shaped by many actors' simultaneously learning. Thus, if one's actions are embedded in the ecology of actions of many others (who are simultaneously learning and changing), it is not easy to understand what is going on. It is therefore untenable to talk about learning under the circumstances.

There is also a fundamental problem with presenting learning as something they acquired and possess. We take the view of Sims and McAulay (1995) who suggest that learning is preferably a "process" rather than a "product". In this conception learning lasts only when it is still alive or in transition. By the time it is assimilated, it is dead. It can therefore be stated that individuals do not learn anything new in most cases. They simply revise knowledge on the basis of the experience they are undergoing. They get to know things as they work. Knowing therefore becomes a more appropriate term to use.

It is critical to observe that, from the perspective of fulfilling organisational goals and objectives, employees are more inclined to approach their assignment with a disposition to teach rather than learn. It is perhaps not extraordinary that all the narrators, quite frequently, expressed what they opined were the virtues of the Swedish management approach in relation to the methods they encountered. In fact, this is one issue upon which we observe conspicuous unanimity:

MMA: "In Sweden, the employees are active in decision making, however, here, the managers make the decisions. The Swedish approach empowers the personnel a lot more than what is experienced here."

BMS: “The ... have an extremely hierarchical structure... in Sweden we work as a team and make the team as strong as possible. This is what I brought to the office.... requesting that this hierarchical structure should be broken down by our local subsidiaries... so that this type of arrangement is not within our company.”

JVL: “I talked directly to a manager and asked him to start up a project. A day later, his boss called me and yelled at me never to talk to his subordinate on such an issue before talking to him. So I learnt that in other cultures, you don’t do things with the subordinate without consulting the boss. *We are not so hierarchical in our approach here in Sweden and we don’t really understand that much.*”

BVA: “I realised that there was a lot of distance between the boss and the lower level worker. We worked towards reducing this gap...”

BMK: “We had to make sure that we work as a team not as bosses and so on. That to me is more important...”

AES: “Well, you always ensure that people *work in a way you believe* is effective. I think the Swedish way of managing is quite good.”

AEA: “The Swedish management style is appreciated all over the world. I always look at things from the Swedish point of view.... You always do things in a way you are more used to....”

We wish to assert that the configuration of such deep-seated assumptions regarding what is viewed as good or not in management approach is derived from national culture. It should be noted that this feature is common to all people irrespective of where they come from. It reinforces very specific ideas and practices, which are exceedingly ethnocentric and considerably parochial. Thus, the perception of the narrators regarding the superiority of their style of

management and the ardent implementation of such practices could be construed as reflecting a fundamental deficiency in relation to the local culture and practices.

In a cross-cultural interactive situation, this tendency is far more than a normative or neutral process but one that bears highly “political” connotations. This not only conforms to the teaching-learning dichotomy between cultures but could also be viewed as “imperialistic” and aimed at subjugating the local culture but, *moreso*, the way of doing things in the host culture. This therefore suggests that there is no reciprocity in such interactions but one side influencing the other in a very subtle way that leads to the attainment of the metaphorical “high ground” of control.

3.5 Implications.

It is important to realise that, based on the narratives analysed, experience from cross-cultural interactions have significant implications, not only to management in general but also to the management of cross-cultural interactions.

- Individual and organisational motives for the assignment are seldom in consonance. The organisations more often look for competence and individual interest as a prerequisite for undertaking the assignment and achieving the organisational objectives. On the contrary, employees are more driven either by curiosity or individual objectives to undertake the assignment. Clearly there is a gap between organisational expectations and individual objectives. This divergence not only creates problems in the accomplishment of the assignment but also in terms of individual learning. Reconciling the two divergent positions is a necessity for a successful tenure and also in terms of a clear direction both practically as regards the assignment and in terms of meeting individual expectations without the inconvenience of disharmony.

- Often, employees are sent to ensure the implementation of the organisational culture from the headquarters, to integrate and harmonise activities and also establish control measures that are more in tune with what is prevalent at the head office. This gives the assignment and the subsequent interaction a uni-dimensional outlook in the sense that the employees' capacity to learn is substantially diminished from the outset. It implies that the onus is on the local employees to imbibe more of the culture advocated by the expatriate employee(s) without recourse to reciprocity. Such objectives have the effect of limiting the employees' readiness and therefore motivation to learn. It is fundamentally important that the expatriate employee has a disposition towards learning. This can only come from the way the organisation communicates its objectives regarding the assignment and the individuals understanding of the objectives. The organisation should therefore ensure that there is a "meeting of minds" on this issue since it contributes substantially to the learning disposition of the employee in the assignment.
- It is futile to attempt to offer training as an antidote against the uncertainties that the individual expects to encounter in another culture. This is a highly emotional aspect that can only be felt on interaction with the actual situation. In fact, in a more general sense, it should be questioned whether it is practically possible and technically feasible to train people how to feel about a situation without necessarily experiencing or rather physically interacting with the situation. A physical expedition in the respective environment seems to be a more useful approach to employ in terms of giving the employee a feel for the culture.

4. CONCLUSION

This chapter constitutes a concise presentation of the most important phenomena in this study and ends with a short discussion of some key issues in cross-cultural learning.

In the final analysis, it should be stated that the subject of cross-cultural learning is exceedingly important in light of the expanding horizons of business today. Indeed, the experiences of the narrators underline very significant issues with regard to cross-cultural interactions in the work setting. Of all the array of issues that emerge from these experiences, it is interesting to point out what is of enormous importance in this study.

Whereas there are individual and organisational motives and expectations for the expatriate assignment, the latter seem to supercede the former in exerting influence on the actual performance of the task. Thus, individual motives hinge heavily on organisational motives that ultimately determine individual dispensation towards learning.

The extent to which one culture is different from the other has a direct bearing on the extent to which individuals from different cultures will understand each other. We observe that, the nearer the “distance” between cultures, the better the understanding and the reverse is true, at least, during the initial phase of cross-cultural interaction.

Knowledge, not only, of the business language but also of the local language (where a distinction exists between the two) is very crucial in facilitating the process of cross-cultural adjustment. We hasten to add that, this fact is not sufficient in itself to ensure successful adjustment.

It is apparent that, as far as the assignment is concerned, individuals learn a lot of new skills and techniques to improve their work. At a deeper level, however, we are short of indications that the interaction yields any substantial experiences that are beneficial for the employee at a personal level and useful outside the confines of work.

We wish to infer that, from a learning perspective, the objectives of the assignment(s) and the rationale behind these objectives need to be re-examined if the individuals and the organisation are to reap the full benefits from the assignment. Our observation is that significant emphasis is invested in the technical aspects of the assignment and its accomplishment and this seems to be what matters most. It is important to reiterate that tasks are accomplished within a social context and a network of individual relationships. Understanding these issues is as fundamental to the assignment as the technical aspects of the assignment.

At the rhetorical level, the importance of cross-cultural learning seems to be at the forefront of organisational objectives, practically, however, efforts in this direction appear ad-hoc and haphazard at best.

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Appendix

Structure Of The Study Process

