

Expatriates Feel Lonely

"It's enriching and very exciting. After a while you recognize that people are the same all over the world, despite their apparent differences. Their culture - the way they express themselves, their art, their music, their food - may differ, but what's important for us is just as important for any human being: friends, family, hope and feeling of being part of something bigger."

(The Source Book, an Expatriate Social History, 1927-2007)

Loneliness, I believe, is a fundamental challenge, threat, and personal opportunity for expatriates in their social connectedness with themselves and with others. In this article I would like to share the essence and preliminary insights of my Ph.D. research on loneliness and sense-making in expatriates' everyday lives.

Own experience

Over the last thirty years, I have been working with people from different cultures, both in sports and business. My personal experience abroad with facilitating change processes in Eastern Europe, the US, Southern Asia and particularly in Thailand among other locations, has been one of a mismatch between what cross-cultural management has to say and what my colleagues and I have observed working in the field. Cross-cultural management focuses too much on success at the macro level, i.e. on organization and the (cultural) environment, and too little on the micro level, i.e. social interaction between individuals. The person(s) and her/his (their) autonomy, growth and/or uniqueness are often neglected in this literature.

Preliminary research

Before participating in the international part-time Ph.D. programme of the University for Humanistics in the Netherlands, I had done a preliminary field research on expatriates and their assignments. I had interviewed assigners (HR-managers) of Dutch multinationals in the Netherlands and expatriates of the same companies in South-East Asia. The main outcome of this preliminary field research was that the expats felt lonely. This loneliness concerned the personal as well the professional side of their lives, losing contact and a sense of connection with their home country and with company headquarters. Moreover, they did not really seem to be connected with others in their new environment(s). Furthermore, at the organizational level the assigners mainly seemed focused on the professional side of expatriates' lives, i.e. on reward systems and expatriate effectiveness. Interest in the personal side of expatriates' lives (e.g., in their well-being from a corporate social responsibility point of view) is relatively unstructured and ad hoc.

To get more insight on my topic, I also did preliminary literature research concerning lonely expatriates,

making use of the Expatriate Archive Center (Shell) in The Hague, to which I had been granted access. The main outcome of this research was that although a lot of, mostly quantitative, research has been done regarding expatriate life, covering such themes as culture shock, adjustment models, International Human Resource Management, cross cultural management, and even sense-making, little or no (qualitative) research has so far been done on the loneliness in expatriate life.

Research goal

My research goal is to explore sense-making at a micro level: i.e. as social interaction within (self-talk) the person and between (groups of) individuals.

The proposed empirical research, methods and techniques I use are based on the interpretative paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln). In short, this paradigm is about the belief that human beings cannot be studied by using models developed for the physical sciences, and that meaning/sense is produced by the social interaction between individuals in their real social context. My approach is ethnographic where the techniques employed are those of participant observation and in-depth (semi-structured) interviews.

Because I am a member of the Netherlands Thai Chamber of Commerce NTCC, I shall focus on the stories of expatriates in Thailand, on their everyday life and their relationship to sense-making & loneliness.

Loneliness

The reports on "loneliness" I have gathered have led me to examine this concept further. I have listed some first results of my literature review below.

The content of loneliness, a feeling of being, has changed over the centuries. Being 'alone' in medieval times meant completeness in one's singular being. Risks or negative consequences of being alone were not seen as they are now (Rosedale).

Loneliness can nowadays be defined as 'social disconnection'. Some of the most important studies in American sociology (Riesman, Slater) have argued that a deficiency or lack of connection to others becomes the defining characteristic of a particular

class, gender, race and/or even generational cohort, who are then perceived to be the exemplars of the relevant ordinary person under examination. Here, loneliness is a characteristic experienced at the individual level. Dumm states that loneliness is fundamental to the very constitution of our modern selves: "When the reach of ourselves to other(s) becomes so fragmented and confused that we find arrested, or halted, or otherwise blocked from contact with them and from ourselves we become lonely".

Loneliness in my research concerns the experience that expatriates have (had) with social disconnection, both on a personal and professional level: between I and other(s), and between I and self, and I want to explore how this affects their sense-making process(es), and that starts with the identification of I and the others. This is the subject I will now elaborate upon.

Identification of I and the others

Identification matters to social interaction because it is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively: "it is the 'baseline' sorting that is fundamental to the organization of the human world: "it is how we know who's who and what's what" (Jenkins).

To identify the expatriates' personal and professional lives in their sense-making process (Weick), I use the dramaturgical model of Goffman who defined two main stages; the back-stage as (personal) 'private image': how do I see myself?, and the front-stage: as the (professional) 'public image': how do I think others see me?

Looking at the similarities and particularly at the differences in the dataset that I have gathered concerning loneliness so far, I see two main categories related to Goffman's model at the social micro-level: 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – constituting a possible paradox.

Expatriate 'outsiders'

Expatriate 'outsiders' seem to be more or less socially disconnected with themselves and with others. They are not really in balance with their personal and professional lives. Personally they are wrestling with the well-being and education of their children and the possibilities of a (part-time) career for their spouses: "although all the convenience, I am living here in a golden cage". They are also busy with the question of how to deal with cultural differences: "personally I am in the middle of a huge cultural shock". Most of the outsiders are living in a compound that could isolate them further: "as an expat it is easy to build up relationships and friends here (in a compound) because you are part of a specific expat community. In that way you are not lonely. But in a certain way

it intensifies loneliness because you isolate yourself from local people".

Expatriate 'insiders'

On the other hand, expatriate 'insiders' seem to be social connected with themselves and with others. They are in balance with their personal and professional lives. They are living between locals, eating Thai food and are (very) interested in Thai culture. They see culture as a given fact: "to meet other people you have to be open yourself, to be flexible". Insiders have the ambition of leaving something behind for the people in their (new) environment: "in the weekends I am working as a volunteer". To meet yourself and others is as one of the interviewees stated: "to find the key to unlock people's boxes".

Preliminary conclusion

The preliminary conclusion at this stage of my research is that 'thee expatriate' does not exist. Every (individual) expatriate has his or her own identity: name, appearance, uniqueness that is reflected in (multi) social-network or communities, defined as the others. Some expatriates feel lonely, isolated and/or socially disconnected at a personal and/or professional level, and some do not. How this affects their sense-making process, I have to investigate further. I will probably also investigate how others look at the personal and professional side of expatriates' everyday lives. Therefore I have planned a third round of interviews in March.

As a Ph.D. candidate and member of NTCC, I would like to thank Mr. Bert Cesar and his staff for their support, and especially the expatriates and their companies who participated in my research so far. I am half way through my research course map and hope to finish in a few years. Once there, I would of course like to share my experience with you in the form of a book.



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