

**MANAGING THE REPATRIATION OF PROFESSIONALS  
FOLLOWING OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENT**

Master's Thesis

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<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b>  <p>Despite decades of research about culture shock, and latterly but not to the same extent, reverse culture shock, it seems that little is understood about how to manage the process of repatriation after an overseas assignment in the commercial world. Attrition rates of repatriates leaving their employers within the first year following their return continue to rise as those individuals consistently report feeling undervalued by their employers.</p> <p>This study is concerned with how best to manage the process of repatriation from the employees' point of view. It therefore looks at how a group of repatriating Finns from various professional backgrounds perceived the effects of reverse culture shock, and how both they and their employers prepared for the transition back into the home environment. This was achieved using eleven semi-structured interview during which three themes emerged that could be placed into affective, behavioural, and cognitive categories. An existing framework, matching those categories is offered as the basis for designing bespoke intervention programmes. It is contended that this framework might have made the transition back home a smoother process for the sample group and therefore it is recommended as a practical way forward in managing repatriation of professional individuals.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that there are a number of different groups of people who travel abroad for extended periods of time for work assignments. These groups are generally identified as international students (those who study abroad), business, technical and other professional workers, military personnel, and religious missionaries. This study focuses on the group of business and other professionals who, having completed an assignment abroad returned to their original organisations in Central Finland. It examines the process of repatriation which they went through in order to determine how the process was perceived. Using the returnees' narratives, a framework of intervention for managing repatriation will be offered.

As a freelance communication consultant and language trainer I work with adults mainly from business but also from the public sector, for example, local and national government entities as well as educational establishments. One of the key elements common to all these disciplines is the need to send employees on assignments abroad often for extended periods of three months or more. When organisations are planning to deploy their staff on such overseas assignments there are numerous providers in the market place who will prepare these individuals for living and working in any foreign environment. Problems arise though when the employees return home as there are seemingly very few providers of repatriation training to help facilitate as smooth a return to the fold as possible (Suutari and Brewster, 2003).

It is widely acknowledged that during the repatriation period culture shock reasserts itself but research has shown that it has a far more devastating effect on those returning home than it does on initial deployment. This is partly due to the anticipation that repatriates will be returning to an environment where the rules of the game are well known to them. Unlike the now commonly-held understanding by professionals that deploying on overseas assignments requires a degree of preparation, repatriates seem to be insufficiently prepared for the duress which accompanies their homecoming. When sojourners are due to return home, the assumption by both repatriate and employer often is that they will simply arrive back at their allotted workplace and carry on as if they had not been anywhere. Home, after all, is a known entity; a familiar place yet there have been changes to the repatriate as a result of the experience abroad. Also possibly, depending on the length of the sojourn, changes might have occurred at home in terms of both the natural and political environments. Such aspects have been well-documented in earlier research by, for example, Adler (1981), Black et al. (1992), Brewster & Suutari (2005); Callahan (2010); Paige, (1993), La Brack, 1993, Storti (2001) and Sussman (2001). Throughout this thesis I will use the term 'sojourn' and 'sojourner' to relate to time spent on, and actions occurring during overseas assignments and the professionals undertaking such respectively. Whereas the terms 'repatriation' and 'repatriate' refer to the process of returning to the home environment and the professionals involved.

Storti (2001) reported that 20 percent of managers who return to their home country after an overseas assignment leave the company within one year. The 2008 GMAC Global Relocations Trends (GRT) report cited by

Szkudlarek (2010) stated that this figure rose to above 50 percent within two years. Furthermore, the Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2015) report results show those figures have risen over the past decade or so to 29% leaving during the first year after return, followed by a further 26%, totalling 55% within two years. Although there have been many studies into repatriation, it seems that the continued rise in the rate of attrition is yet to be arrested. There would, therefore, seem to be a need to revisit and retest this phenomenon in order to try to identify a framework of management which may be useful in arresting and reducing this damaging trend. There could, of course, be a number of reasons for this continuing rise in attrition. However, the main reasons cited seem to be dissatisfaction with their new role in the organisation back home and that there have been changes, not only in the individual, but also in the company and/or the community to which they return. Both of which, if they have not been communicated to the expatriate while on assignment, can lead to these individuals feeling alienated; not being able to feel at home when at home. Such changes can be imperceptible to those who have remained behind and therefore may seem unimportant, but to the repatriate they can lead to frustration and even anger, as well as physical and/or mental illnesses.

In work concerning the repatriation adjustment of Finnish professionals, repatriation adjustment was found to be a “multifaceted phenomenon” (Suutari and Välimaa, 2002, p. 629). Nevertheless, it seems that this latter point has been largely ignored by companies and intercultural training providers for many years as interventions seem to have failed to reverse the increase in attrition rates. Attrition rates (the amount of repatriates

that leave the company which employed them for their sojourn following their return from overseas assignment) for 2014 as follows: within the first year 25%, within two years 26% and after two years 29%. To put that into perspective, historical averages spanning 20 years are reported as being 30% within one year, 25% within two years and 24% after two years. With the exception of the first year figures, that attrition rates are seemingly ascendant is interesting. Looking at these statistic one could argue that there has been little or no progress in this area despite numerous studies and countless commercial publications on the matter (Brookfield Relocation Services, 2015).

Some large companies, it seems, do take steps to alleviate this problem by putting their returning staff through a repatriation programme. Although Brookfield Global Relocation Services, a global mobility management company producing an annual statistical report, which appears to be accepted as the benchmark for the relocation industry, stated in their 2015 Global Mobility Trends Survey that 84% of 159 respondents, representing small, medium and large companies that have global facilities, responding to their survey reported having no formal repatriation strategy linked with career management and retention (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2015). A number of researchers (e.g., Ward et al., 2001; Martin and Harrell, 2004; Berado, 2006; Masgoret and Ward, 2006) suggest that a possible reason for this rise in attrition rates could be due to a large proportion of the limited re-entry training that is taking place being conducted using outdated theoretical models of culture shock. I will discuss this point in greater detail in the following chapter but it was this point that drew me to consider how companies perform when managing the repatriation process. Unfortunately a very small percentage



of companies globally have been found to be actively monitoring the success of overseas assignments. Seventy-two percent are reportedly neglecting this area of management, which arguably includes succession, career and repatriation planning, for whatever reason (Ernst & Young, 2016). Allied to this is the overall cost of despatching an employee on overseas assignment. When an expatriate's salary is linked to the pay structure at home, which is the most common policy currently adopted by organisations (Suutari and Tornikoski, 2010), it is reported to be up to five times more expensive than recruiting a local manager (Baruch and Altman 2002), which under the circumstances reported above would appear to be a poor investment in both financial and human resource terms if the outcome is that repatriates resigns due to inadequate repatriation management (Cox, 2004). Arguably this seeming lack of oversight would leave both the organisation and repatriating employee at something of a disadvantage.

I believe that repatriation should be dealt with as a process, approached systematically, and not as "the unplanned aftermath of a completed foreign assignment" (Guy and Patton, 1996, p.392). Existing research (e.g., Brabant et al., 1990; Chaban, et al., 2011; Gaw, 2000), suggests there are some elements which are common to the re-entry process and can therefore be arranged into three groups; affective, behavioural and cognitive.

This study aims to discover how re-entry management is perceived and experienced by those staff members returning to their original organisations and whether or not those experiences can be grouped according to the categories presented above. The study has both theoretical and practical aims, testing an existing, enhanced model of repatriation management in order

to provide a better training solution for organisations, thereby helping them to retain those all-important resources who return with valuable knowledge, both tacit and practical.

This thesis comprises six chapters, including this introduction. The following chapters will discuss background literature, methodology, the findings of the study and their implications. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and limitations of the present study and recommendations for further research will be discussed. In the next chapter, I will therefore review background literature concerning the theoretical ideas underpinning the evolving understanding of what culture shock is and how it can be managed, before moving on to the design of the empirical study.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will discuss the development of a theory, Anxiety and Uncertainty Management of Meaning (AUMM) that has been used within the intercultural communication discipline to explain what culture shock is, and how it affects people. I will discuss this theory and consider a framework which has been suggested by some researchers to be a credible alternative explanation to long-standing ideas of how culture shock can be explained and therefore managed.

There have been many studies focusing on the adaptation of various migrant populations who arrive into a new cultural environment for an indefinite period of time. Likewise, there have been several studies which have focused on temporary stays, and returns of sojourning students from study-abroad programmes. In their review of studies relevant to the many aspects of repatriation, Waxin and Panaccio (2005) found that 85 percent of their reviewed studies concentrated on students or U.S. Peace Corps participants rather than company managers or executives sent abroad on assignment to work on the company's behalf. Arguably, this could be explained by the proximity and thus the availability of the former target samples to particular academic researchers (e.g., Egenes, 2012; Young, 2014; Goldstein and Keller 2015). However, there are fewer studies focusing on professional repatriates, particularly concerning communities outside of the U.S. (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Black et al. 1992; Gregersen and Stroh, 1997).

In the context of this study, repatriates are individuals who undertake periods of work abroad, often for specifically predefined lengths of

time. The expectation is that at a certain point in the future, they will return to their place of origin once their assignment is complete. Based on this assumption, it is possible to understand that unlike migrants, who move abroad for an indefinite period and therefore need to learn to become functioning participants within their new homeland cultures, sojourners may be reluctant to become immersed in their new culture while abroad on assignment. Should that be the case, a number of theorists, (e.g., Suutari and Välimaa, 2002; Chamove and Soeterik, 2006; Maybarduk, 2008), have suggested such individuals will have less problems adjusting to the home environment on their eventual return. Other research suggests these two elements of adaptation might be inversely related, stating that the more successful the sojourn, the more problematic the return process is likely to be. They report a discrepant balance between a successful social performance during sojourn and a satisfactory return process (Kim, 2001; Sussman, 2002). Many of the studies mentioned above attribute difficulties encountered during the repatriation process as being based on three important differences from the expatriation process. The first is that returnees rarely anticipate experiencing adjustment difficulties during repatriation. The second difference is that the home environment will have changed somewhat causing discrepancies in held memories and the reality which an individual faces on return. The final difference is a lack of awareness of the extent to which their experience abroad will have changed a sojourner's attitudes, values and behaviour, and how this would affect their interactions with family, friends and colleagues back home.

## 2.1 Theoretical overview

The key theoretical concepts in the area of culture shock seem to have centred for many years on a model which states that the process of adjustment in a new or unfamiliar culture takes time and seems to follow a U-shaped curve. In other words, every occurrence of culture shock begins with an initial feeling of euphoria; marvelling at a new situation where everything seems exciting. This is followed by a period of crisis during which the adjuster feels lonely and less happy with their progress towards becoming an effective member of their new community. The final stage was reported to be one of increasing adjustment leading to being settled and happy in the new environment (Lysgaard, 1955). This model was later adapted to include a second U-curve, modifying it into a W-curve to take into account the effects of repatriation at the end of an overseas assignment. Accordingly, the repatriates' expectation that they would be returning home unchanged personally to a known, unchanged environment. That that expectation was proved wrong has been said to be the main difference between culture shock on deployment and reverse culture shock (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963).

These theories were adopted, adapted, championed and quoted by a number of notable scholars over time and used to justify and format intercultural training interventions (e.g., Guirdham, 1999; Hart, n.d.; Varner and Beamer, 2005). Yet these theories have their detractors, as Kim (2001, p. 20) reports: "research findings on the U-curve process have been mixed" with some researchers in favour of the hypothesis, while others declare their own findings did not match the model. For example, focusing on managing cross-

cultural transitions, it was argued that no empirical evidence to support the U-curve model had been found (Adler, 1981). Furthermore, a study on expatriate adjustment in Europe, found that the U-curve theory did not adequately explain some of the cases encountered during the study (Suutari and Brewster, 1997). However, none of these latter scholars mentioned finding any alternative theories to adequately explain their own cases.

The U- and W-curve models, as well linear models propounded by scholars and researchers such as Bennett (1998), are often depicted by simple visualisations representing a relatively predictive pathway. Additionally, Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions profound effect on communication has been criticised by researchers for its generality, its hegemonic nature, its flawed assumptions, its inconsistency and its lack of empirical evidence and transparency. Whilst such models can be a useful place for researchers to begin, they do not seem to provide a complete view of any given culture. Utilising such broad, macro-theory cultural assumptions could produce erroneous results leading to misinterpretation (Croucher (2013, 2016). Accordingly, the ever-increasing attrition rates discussed in the previous chapter, and based upon my own personal experience as a sojourner one might be forgiven for suggesting that such macro-level theories fail to encapsulate the flexibility that is required when human communication and behaviour variables play a part in the re-entry process. In a review of extant literature on the subject, those variables are documented into two categories; personal and situational. The personal category includes: gender, age, personality, religious beliefs, marital status, socioeconomic status, previous experiences of sojourns and re-entries. Contained in the situational category are: length of sojourn,

cultural distance between home and host culture, time elapsed since return, amount of contact with hosts, and with home while abroad, attitudes of those remaining in home environments to the repatriate, and housing issues (Szkudlarek, 2010).

Berardo's (2006) Master's thesis succinctly reviewed the research into the evolution of the U-curve and evaluated its use as a model in relation to current intercultural communications training. She reported that many other contemporary researchers (e.g., Bochner, 2006); Forster, 2000; Furnham and Bochner, 1986b; Kim, 2001; Ward et al., 2001; Sussman, 2002; Ward, 2004) have all criticized the U-curve theory, in all its iterations including the W-curve model, for being too simplistic, unable to withstand the rigours of empirical examination.

In summarising the way forward for intercultural training, Landis and Bhawuk (2004) stated that at the time of their writing there was almost no writing concerning the U- or W-curve. They suggest that scholars "should not waste their time chasing (sic) non-existent fluctuating curves of acculturation" (p.464) They continue with the hope that they are "finally buried" to be replaced by empirically based theories such as those offered in the same volume by scholars such as Ward.

## **2.2 Models of culture shock and adaptation in training**

In relation to repatriation training, the majority of studies assessed by Gregersen and Black (1990) were seen to treat intercultural adjustment as if it was unidirectional thus supporting the U-curve hypothesis. They considered

that training programmes based upon such models tend to be generally vague and ineffective. As a counterpoint they asserted that the process of adjustment is multifaceted, entailing issues such as adjusting to professional responsibilities, adjusting to the communication requirements in a new environment, and adjusting to the general culture.

Having a comprehensive understanding of the repatriation process has been seen to correlate significantly with a smooth and manageable return experience and yet it was the focus of less academic attention than expatriate preparation between the 1960s and the 1990s (Gomez-Meija and Ballin, 1987; Weaver, 1993; Storti, 1997). During this period a lack of a clear, comprehensive understanding of the processes involved and their outcomes proved a limiting factor in developing a single theoretical framework by which to measure repatriates' adjustment, leading to both a lack of credible conclusions (Cox, 2004) and vague and ineffective repatriation training (Black and Gregersen, 1991).

The crux of understanding repatriation in general is to comprehend the process of cultural adjustment, a concept which was initially constructed to exemplify coping with stress brought about by changing circumstances in one's life, and encapsulated in the term CULTURE SHOCK by Cora Dubois in 1951. Some nine years later the same term gained popularity when it was published in an article in *Practical Anthropology*, which included a speech given by Kal Oberg from 1953. In this article Oberg described culture shock as being an emotional reaction to a situation in which one feels disoriented when immersed in unfamiliar circumstances found outside of one's own cultural surroundings. It involves experiencing a lack of cues, which would otherwise be familiar in



one's home environment. It is not a singular event or experience but a process of learning through different stages of one's personal development, posing challenges to an individual's sense of self, cultural identity, and worldview. Similar perceptions of stress are experienced as sojourners return to their home environment and attempt to understand what changes they and their home environment have gone through, and how they can reintegrate their altered lives, with their new knowledge and skills, and changed self-perceptions back into that home environment (Paige, 1993; Dutton, 2012). Interestingly, McCaffery (1993) asked whether the terms such as culture *shock*, *survival* techniques, and *coping* skills found in cultural adjustment literature were too negative, creating the impression of a hostile environment.

Certain aspects of early research on repatriation focused on psychological health and perceptions of well-being of those returning home. It drew on Selye's literature (Cox, 2004) about coping with stress, defining causes of stress as well as both the negative and positive effects stress (Rice, 2012). Other research concerned the effects that certain causes produced based on societal norms (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) and according to the perception of individuals (Lazarus, 1993). More centrally, this drew attention to the skills required in coping and the setting of positive yet realistic expectations within an intercultural communication context (Martin, 1993; Martin, Bradford and Rohrllich, 1995).

Culture shock has also been described as an emotional response when faced with an inability to predict the behaviour of an unfamiliar other (Bock, 1970 cited in Gudykunst, 2005b). While this might be seen as a negative view, echoing McCaffery's (1993) point of view, another researcher

argued that the process of coping with culture shock laid a foundation for individuals to grow personally (David, 1971 cited in Gudykunst, 2005b). Many early perspectives of culture shock were associated with the U- and W- curves, which were used to describe the stages that sojourners go through as they adjust to an unfamiliar host country and during repatriation into their own home culture, although there is little empirical evidence to support such explanations. There is, however, extensive evidence that focuses on the stress and coping elements of intercultural adjustment that are necessarily faced by sojourners, as reviewed by Ward et al., (2001) (Gudykunst, 2005a).

Research also documented a difference between psychological and sociological adjustment. The former is said to relate to "feelings of well-being or satisfaction" during periods of transition, while sociocultural adjustment relates to "the ability to 'fit in' or execute effective interactions in a new cultural milieu" (Ward et al., 2001, p.414). These two forms of intercultural adjustment are "conceptually related, but empirically distinct" (p.414). Accordingly, psychological adjustment, being mainly related to affective outcomes, is seen as fluctuating over the length of a sojourn and being predicted by such variable as social support, personality traits, and changes in the individual's life situation. Sociocultural adjustment, on the other hand, being related to behavioural outcomes, is seen as being predicted by how similar the sojourner's culture is to the host nations, and the quality and quantity of contact between the two. This conceptual framework may involve employing affective, behavioural and/or cognitive responses when faced with the need to manage personal stress levels and acquiring culture-specific knowledge (Ward et al., 2001).

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, in a discussion about how underlying theory informs and supports intercultural training, Ward (2004) stated that those underlying theories had not changed significantly over the preceding two decades. Despite positive results that intercultural training brings including improving the job performance of a sojourner, reducing stress levels, increasing self-confidence in an unfamiliar environment, she stated that “it is widely agreed that long-term attitude change has been (sic) difficult to achieve” (p. 204). Considering the continuing increase in attrition rates, one might query whether that situation remains extant today.

A further avenue of research in cultural adjustment, social learning theory, explored appropriate social communication and behavioural skills within certain contexts. When used in connection with the concept of cultural adjustment social learning theory emphasised acquiring relevant social skills pertinent to a culture other than one’s own, and researchers created scales by which such acquisition could be measured (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Ward, C. and Kennedy, A. (1999). Amongst other things, research in this field focused on details concerning general knowledge about culture, the length of sojourn, frequency of contact with members of sojourners’ host communities, and intercultural training as being influential factors for cultural learning (Ward 1996).

A third avenue of research concerned social cognition, which looks at the way in which individuals perceive themselves and those around them. Just as social learning considered external factors affecting behaviour and social skills, social cognition focused on internal factors, for example, perception and attribution. Drawing on research from social and cognitive

psychology, the concepts examined in this area included perceptions and cultural identification (Ward et al., 2001).

Using these three general conceptualisations, through numerous literature reviews and studies scholars have described and measured cultural adjustment, identifying a host of outcomes. For example, pertinent measurements such as enhanced cognitive complexity, and increased self-awareness identified by Church (1982) were added to by feelings of satisfaction and acceptance, gaining behavioural patterns suitable to specific cultural groups, as well as being professionally fit for role (Ward, 1996). Furthermore, studies which focused on re-entry specifically used, for example, mental illness, social problems, anxiety (Rogers and Ward, 1993), and repatriation distress (Sussman, 2001, 2002) to describe the outcomes of their studies.

Factor analysis or systematic reviews based on theory have been used as a means of reducing this myriad of outcome measures. A study using factor analysis by Hammer et al., (1978) managed to reduce 24 outcome measurements into three dimensions, which the authors described as collectively defining intercultural effectiveness: coping with stress, communicating effectively, and creating interpersonal relationships. Relating specifically to the process of repatriation, Black et al., (1992) conceptualised their outcomes as work adjustment, communication interaction adjustment, and general/cultural adjustment. In the same time period as the latter group, other researchers advocated reducing the many outcomes into just two dimensions: psychological (affective), and socio-cultural (behavioural). The notion of a third possible domain, cognitive, including identity, attitudes, and values was

discussed in the studies, but rejected as such variables were considered to be included in the first two dimensions as they were considered to be mediating elements of cultural adaptation rather than outcomes in their own right (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Conversely, other researchers saw cultural or intercultural identity to be a core outcome in the cultural adaptation process and thereby supporting the notion of a third, cognitive domain (Kim, 1988, 2001, 2005; Martin and Harrell, 2004).

Although the terminology utilised by researchers when they have described adjustment outcomes has differed, the domains or dimensions they ascribed them to are similar. They contain components, however they are labelled, which refer to either stress (coping with stress, psychological adjustment, or psychological health), or social skills (communication and social adjustment, communication interaction adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, or functional fitness). As stated in the previous paragraph, certain researchers placed cultural identity, along with work-related behaviour, into a third domain, which they labelled cognitive. Echoing this approach, Liu (2014) adopted a similar three-pillared model in a study concerned with measuring the development of intercultural competence of journalistic and communications students. It is this three-domain outcome model of adjustment which Kim (1988, 2001, 2005) titled an integrated theory of cross-cultural adaptation to describe the changes in behaviour that people exhibit as they become more proficient in their interactions with an unfamiliar other, and was adapted for repatriation intervention by Martin and Harrell (2004) that I will use in this study. The outcome labels I will use correspond to those used by Ward et al.,

(2001) in their ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment: affective, behavioural, and cognitive and I will discuss this later in this chapter.

Combining these three elements, in essence being affective (stress and coping), behavioural (cultural learning), and cognitive (social identity) in a framework for intervention entitled the ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment, it is seen to be a maturation of the model of intercultural adjustment (Ward et al., 2001). It accurately depicts the complex and dynamic relationships between an individual's perception of their own identity, their attitude towards others and other locales, and the process by which they adapt, as well as socio-cultural adaptation from a behavioural perspective. These three pillars seemingly interact with each other and assume prominence according to an individual's situation and their responses to that situation. It may be that one element will be dominant during a particular repatriation episode but not on subsequent episodes. Seen holistically, it also allows an insight into what kinds of training and intervention might be effective once an individual's situation has been analysed using a combination of the constituent theories. To paraphrase Plato, to know what is ahead, is to know what to do about it. Imparting knowledge about the return process, as depicted by the dotted lines in Figure 1 below, is seen as means of empowering repatriates by helping them to set realistic expectations of the overall repatriation process (Ward, 2004). This point is in accord with Martin and Harrell (2004) who propose a re-entry integration training model based on functional fitness (cultural learning), psychological adjustment (stress and coping), and intercultural identity (social identity) and I will return to this particular model in the Discussion chapter.

### **2.3 The ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment**

Intercultural communication is an increasingly multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary subject of study. It can be approached from the perspective of communication, ethnography, linguistics, or psychology. The ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment is an outcome of many studies within the psychological area of intercultural study. As was introduced in the previous paragraph, it is a triadic approach involving three separate yet interwoven aspects that combine to address reverse culture shock holistically. The framework seeks to explain the complex and dynamic relationships between the perception of identity, the attitude towards others and home, and the adaptation process of repatriates, and would therefore help to develop a credible and effective training programme to ease their reintegration into the home environment (Ward et al., 2001). The model was highlighted in the Handbook of Intercultural Training (Landis et al., (eds), 2004) as being a credible model for intervention to manage culture shock. Furthermore, it was recently utilised to situate a discussion about adopting a psycho-synthesis approach to culture shock intervention, albeit in an international student context (Lombard, 2014). A schematic of the ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment is shown at Figure 1 below. Subsequent paragraphs will expand on all three aspects, discussing the relevant underpinning theory.

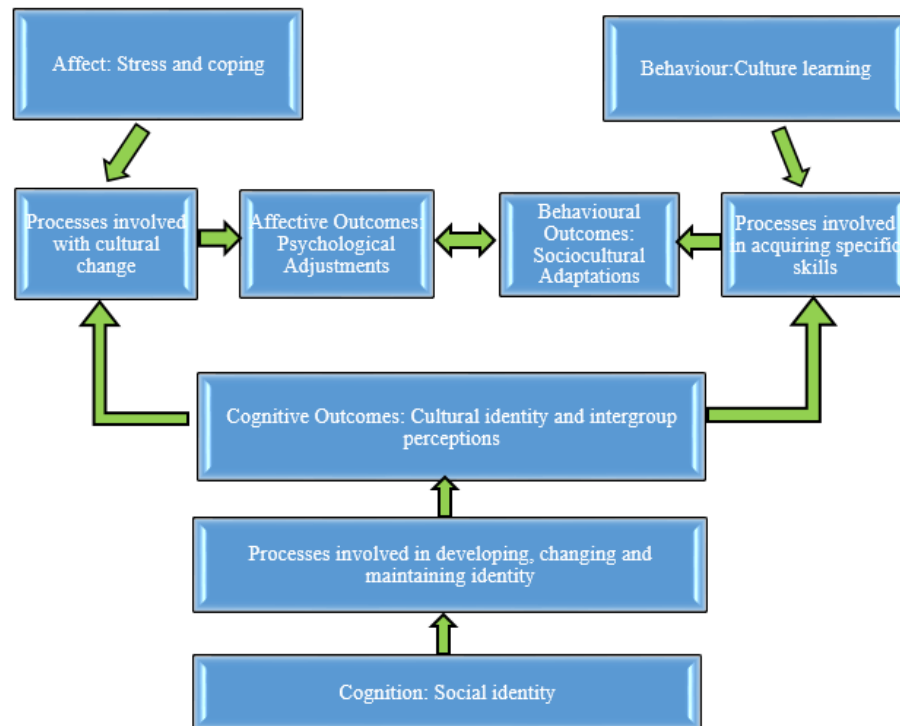


Figure 1. The ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment – adapted from Ward et al. (2001)

### 2.3.1 Key issues to be addressed during repatriation

The unpreparedness of a repatriate is the most significant barrier which prevents an effective transition back into the home environment. Repatriates expect to experience problems on deployment due to new and unfamiliar situations, but tend not to expect re-entry problems. After all, home is home; a familiar environment where it is expected that the repatriate still possesses all the necessary home culture knowledge. In preparing a repatriate for re-entry, communication between the home office and repatriate is vital. Those who were kept up to date with events in the home organisation are likely to experience less re-entry difficulties. Both positive and negative news should be communicated thus creating a positive psychological effect (Adler, 1981).



There appears to be little correlation between the expectations and the actual experience of re-entry thus creating uncertainty for repatriates. Reducing such uncertainty is a central tenet of success in the adjustment process. It has been suggested that when repatriates have been able to visit home frequently during their overseas assignment, uncertainty is reduced (Gregerson and Stroh, 1997; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, 2001). More recent research found that the importance of uncertainty reduction helped individuals through the adjustment process as it made them much more prepared for the process they were about to encounter (Sánchez Vidal et al., 2007). A number of other studies have reported findings which claim that the most important repatriation issue faced by repatriates is a lack of clarity and unfulfilled expectations in connection with career progression (Peltonen, 1997; Suutari and Brewster, 2003). Such uncertainty can lead to disillusion and demotivation and thus adds to the high attrition rates discussed above.

Behavioural issues are defined as the process of acquiring the relevant knowledge in order to be able to function adequately in a new culture. It is suggested that sojourners tend to be highly skilled operators in their own society's customs and, thus, ironically, find their sudden inadequacy in a new culture somewhat frustrating. Difficulties related to effective participation in a new culture tend to arise as sojourners experience problems in negotiating everyday social encounters if they have not been adequately prepared.

Experiencing an inability in predicting the behaviour of others increases anxiety and uncertainty levels (Gudykunst, 2005b). Companies generally seem to provide deployment training that encompasses acquiring the new or different

social skills required by sojourners in order for them to be effective in their prescribed role overseas but not for repatriates (Ward et al., 2001).

As a result of an overseas assignment, profound personal changes may occur to the sojourner and new skills will be learned. On return, however, it is possible that any number of skills related to home environments (both professional and personal) can, depending upon many variables (e.g., the length of stay abroad, the cultural distance between the home and the new environment, and the amount and quality of contact with home environments) be forgotten, replaced or adjusted leaving repatriates feeling like they are strangers in the own homeland. The result can then be seen to be “the hidden language of interpersonal communication” (Ward et al., 2001, p. 217) and be perceived as something lacking in the repatriates’ messages and thus be a source of misunderstanding leading to conflict, increasing levels of anxiety and uncertainty.

Those who have been more able to adapt to new environments on deployment will suffer less on repatriation because they will be able to re-use the same adaptive skills (Brabant et al., 1990; Ward et al., 2001) but there is disagreement with this point of view. Migrants who tried to return to Afghanistan after living in the U.S.A. for over ten years described feelings of no longer having the cultural capital to live in Afghanistan (Oeppen, 2013). Furthermore those sojourners who take time and effort to gain deeper and broader cultural knowledge seem to be better adjusted than those with a more shallow level of cultural learning. Indeed, those falling into the latter category tend to experience greater problems in adjustment and even suffer failure during assignment (Lowe et al., 2011). Of interest in this debate is that no-one

seems to have answered the question of whether or not those newly acquired skills obtained during a sojourn and related to operating successfully within a multicultural environment should be utilised after re-entry and if so, what is the best way to manage such transfer of skills from one environment to the next.

There is a possible link between physical pain and mental anxiety caused by social exclusion. Suggestions have arisen that should an individual feel they are not valued it can often lead to mental illness with the possibility to transform into physical health problems. Accordingly, new and improved skills which a repatriate comes home with that are ignored or not fully utilised by companies could lead to individuals developing an unconscious bias concerning their own ability and ultimately their usefulness to the company. Under such circumstances, repatriates may also experience feeling socially excluded in the workplace, as well as feeling undervalued, thus increasing the possibility of leaving the company, or even developing health issues (Eisenberger et al., 2006). A person's social identity is a cognitive construct that is related to the way in which they envisage their own place in a significant group. As such, social identities can include cultural as well as ethnic group membership and various other identities related to a person's gender, sexual orientation, social class, age disability and profession. A person does not develop a sense of self in isolation; it is a social process that occurs within and beyond our own cultural environments. Universally people long to be respected for the person they are, and the identity they choose to project, thus they seek approval for that identity whether in cultural, social or personal contexts (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Circumstances that arise that have a negative effect on a

returnee's self-concept will increase their levels of anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005b).

### **2.3.2 Underpinning theory**

Berger's Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) has been employed as a means of managing repatriates' difficulties upon return (Suutari and Brewster, 2003) as it is centred on increasing knowledge, reducing uncertainty in order to define a clearer understanding of how events are likely to occur (Griffin, 2012). Axioms 1, 3, 4 and 8 of URT can be seen as being directly related to the Affect aspect of repatriation. The crux of Axiom 1 (Verbal Communication) is in this context that the less communication there is the more uncertainty there is likely to be. In other words, repatriates will experience anxiety brought about by uncertainty during repatriation if they are not provided with the information concerning their immediate future that they require. Axiom 3 (Information seeking) states there is a positive relation between information-seeking behaviour and uncertainty. Contextually this means that if repatriates are not provided with the information they need, they might be forced to exhibit information-seeking behaviour, which increases feelings of uncertainty. Axiom 4 (Self-Disclosure) indicates that as levels of uncertainty increase the level of intimacy between interlocutors decreases. As the repatriate gets little or no information the closer to repatriation they get, the more uncertainty they will experience, the less likely they are to communicate their discomfort. On the other hand, Axiom 8 (Shared Networks) predicts that if information concerning

the repatriation process is given to the repatriate, it will reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Berger and Calabrese, 1975).

Building on Berger and Calabrese's (1975) foundations of URT, Gudykunst reformulated the theory of anxiety /uncertainty management, calling it Anxiety / Uncertainty Management of Meaning (AUMM) Theory of Effective Communication to explain intercultural communication and intercultural adjustment (Gudykunst, 2005a, 2005b). Through several iterations the focus shifted from anxiety and uncertainty reduction to anxiety and uncertainty management in the belief that maintaining anxiety and uncertainty levels between minimum and maximum thresholds produces effective communication. Griffin (2009) states that the lower threshold represents the point at which an individual is perceiving a level of apprehension which produces enough adrenaline to enable effective communication and the maximum threshold is the point at which an person becomes paralysed by fear and cannot concentrate on the message, or the sender, that communication is inhibited. Within these two thresholds, Gudykunst incorporated the idea of mindfulness. Griffin (ibid.) describes this as being a way by which interlocutors can manage their anxiety and uncertainty levels while consciously monitoring and adjusting their output in order to be more effective.

In his theoretical assumptions, Gudykunst argues that the underlying process of communication between individuals from different groups is the same as that between members of the same group. He considers the process of communicating with those unknown to us and in an unfamiliar environment, even in one's own in-group and located in the home environment, is therefore communicating with strangers. Strangers as members

of our in-group can therefore be representations being both physically near but yet being far in terms of their own values and beliefs. The author's work on these related theories expands on URT in a number of important aspects as will be discussed in the following paragraphs (Gudykunst, 2005a, 2005b).

AUMM goes beyond the interpersonal and cognitive level to include intergroup explanations arguing that a robust theory of interaction must include ideas such as social identity and cultural identity which can only be of value when considered in connection with group-level variables. Secondly, anxiety, an affective variable, is included as well as uncertainty, a cognitive variable. Anxiety is thought to be an omnipresent aspect of communicative events, which can be felt particularly strongly in intergroup and, more pointedly, intercultural interactions. Finally, Gudykunst's theory improves on URT by making intercultural adaptation a critical outcome variable. In other words, if anxiety and uncertainty are managed successfully, the outcome should be interaction which helps individuals in their transition from one culture to another (Miller, 2002; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). According to Gudykunst (2005a, 2005b), it should therefore be relevant for repatriates when communicating with their home office-based managers and supervisors.

Now a wide-ranging theory, the 2005 version of the founding AUMM Theory of Effective Communication included 49 axioms, statements that imply causality, 11 of which focus specifically on cross-cultural interaction, arranged as seven superficial causes. In AUMM, the axioms are not always applicable to every situation and have limiting statements which identify when each axiom is valid. Combining axioms and the limiting statements creates theorems; statements proved to be true by reasoning

(Gudykunst, 2005a). The same year saw the publication of the latest iteration of Gudykunst's AUMM Theory of Strangers' Intercultural Adjustment (Gudykunst, 2005b). I will now discuss that theory, highlighting those elements most relevant to the current study.

### **2.3.3 AUMM Theory of Strangers' Intercultural Adjustment**

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a difference in adaptation to an unfamiliar culture between immigrants and sojourners. The former, arriving with the purpose of permanent residency, often choose to change their cultural identity while the latter, arriving for a limited stay, may not do so. These separate groups clearly have different goals and therefore their respective adaptation to their new environment may differ. This version of Gudykunst's AUMM theory is limited to sojourners and while the author's assumptions are similar to those in the AUMM Theory of Effective Communication described in the previous paragraphs, the perspectives are slightly different.

Returning to the idea that strangers can be both physically near and yet far away in terms of values, Gudykunst sees the sojourner in an unfamiliar environment as a stranger who does not understand the society they experience around them, often perceiving the interactions with and of others as a series of crises. Arriving in an unfamiliar situation induces a certain insecurity leading to the affected sojourner searching for ways to deal with the ambiguity they are faced with. This involves information-seeking to manage the element of uncertainty, and reducing feelings of tension to manage the level of anxiety. This point is expanded by Berry (2004) saying that only when a sojourner feels

secure in their own cultural identity can they accept the differences they observe in unfamiliar others. Furthermore, sojourners returning to the fold after overseas assignment with altered values as a result of their experience, as has been discussed earlier, may perceive they have returned to a heterogeneous environment and thus perceive increased difficulties in communicating with their managers and colleagues (Bakir et al., 2004).

As sojourners arrive and begin to operate in an unfamiliar culture, one of the major challenges they must confront is how to predict the behaviour of host nationals. Uncertainty, being a cognitive phenomenon, affects the way in which people think about others. Being unable to make predictions about things such as attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and values increases a sojourner's uncertainty. In addition to this is the inability to explain such elements of life, which, in turn increases uncertainty further. If a sojourner's level of uncertainty is above the maximum threshold, as described above, then host nation behaviour is seen as being unpredictable and inexplicable. When the level of uncertainty falls below the minimum threshold, the sojourner will become overconfident and is therefore likely to misinterpret messages believing their interpretation cannot possibly be wrong. When the sojourner's level of uncertainty lies between the two thresholds, the sojourner can be reasonably confident in being able to predict host nationals' behaviour without being overconfident (Gudykunst, 2005b).

As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, anxiety is thought to be an omnipresent element of all communication acts. It occurs when people experience feelings of uneasiness, tension, worry, or apprehension about the situation in which they find themselves and what might transpire as they



communicate with unfamiliar others. In other words, anxiety is based on the expectation of negative outcomes from interactions. Very similar thresholds as those described earlier concerning uncertainty apply when considering the effects of anxiety on communication. If a sojourner's anxiety is below their minimum threshold, their body will not produce enough adrenalin for them to be concerned about effective communication with unfamiliar others. They simply do not care about the interaction or its consequences. When a sojourner's anxiety levels are above the maximum level, they feel so uncomfortable that they do not want to communicate with unfamiliar others. The cause of such high levels of anxiety may not be known or clear to the sojourner and this multiplies its effect to the point at which the feeling of being anxious is the dominant emotion, impeding the ability to adjust communicative patterns. (Gudykunst, 2005b) Gudykunst cites Schneiderman (1960) to clarify this point. If the sojourner's level of anxiety is within the two threshold levels, it can be "transformed into a type of useful highly-adaptive social response" (p. 161-162). Simply put, moderate levels of anxiety help the sojourner to communicate but low or high levels inhibit interaction with unfamiliar others.

Intercultural adjustment is assumed to be a process which combines feelings of being comfortable in an unfamiliar environment with the ability to communicate in a manner that is both effective and socially acceptable within that environment. Ward et al. (2001) describes this combination as being two distinct forms of adjustment. The first, being psychological adjustment, focusing on feeling satisfied or contentment, follows a different pattern and is affected by different variables from the other, which they term sociocultural adjustment, the perception of fitting in to an unfamiliar environment. The

former changes constantly over time and can be predicted by such variables as how little or how much social support is available, a sojourner's personality, and significant changes in their life's situation. The latter, sociocultural adjustment can be predicted by what Hofstede (1991) calls cultural distance; how near or far cultures are in terms of things like values, for example, and the quality and quantity of communication with the unfamiliar other.

Communicating effectively with unfamiliar others and adjusting one's own behaviour requires that people actively manage their levels of anxiety and uncertainty. They must be mindful of their own communicative output (Gudykunst, 2005b).

Being mindful of one's own communicative output involves not relying on commonly-used stereotypes but breaking them down and assessing people, their attitudes and values independently; accepting new information, seeing new aspects of one's own and unfamiliar others' behaviour; and being aware that more than one's own perception of the world, events and one's own attitude towards them exists. If mindlessness pervades a sojourner's communication, they tend to categorise people and events in broad, often stereotypical groups when attempting to predict behaviour. They are unable to accept new information, therefore, remain unaware that other opinions exist and can be just as valid as their own (Gudykunst, 2005b).

In relation to this study, these are important assumptions when considering how a returnee is able to communicate with their managers in their home organisation and vice versa. Keeping in mind, as was discussed earlier, that a sojourner will undoubtedly have developed both personally and professionally during their assignment abroad and that there may also have

been many changes which took place in the home organisation during the same period. Returning to the assumption that strangers can also include those belonging to one's in-group, when the theory discusses "treating host nationals with dignity" (Gudykunst, 2005b, p.440), we must be mindful that the same requirement applies to the sojourner as well as their managers in the home environment, therefore I have chosen to use the term 'unfamiliar other' synonymously with strangers in the following section quite deliberately to help keep these points in mind as I discuss how the theory is constructed.

#### **2.3.4 Theory Construction**

As can be seen in Figure 2, the AUMM Theory of Strangers' Intercultural Adjustment contains eight superficial causal categories which include 47 axioms and their accompanying qualifying conditions. All eight of these superficial causes have an effect on either uncertainty management, anxiety management, or both. Here we can see how both these management processes are moderated by mindfulness to facilitate intercultural adjustment, as described above. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the eight causal categories, beginning with Self-Concept.

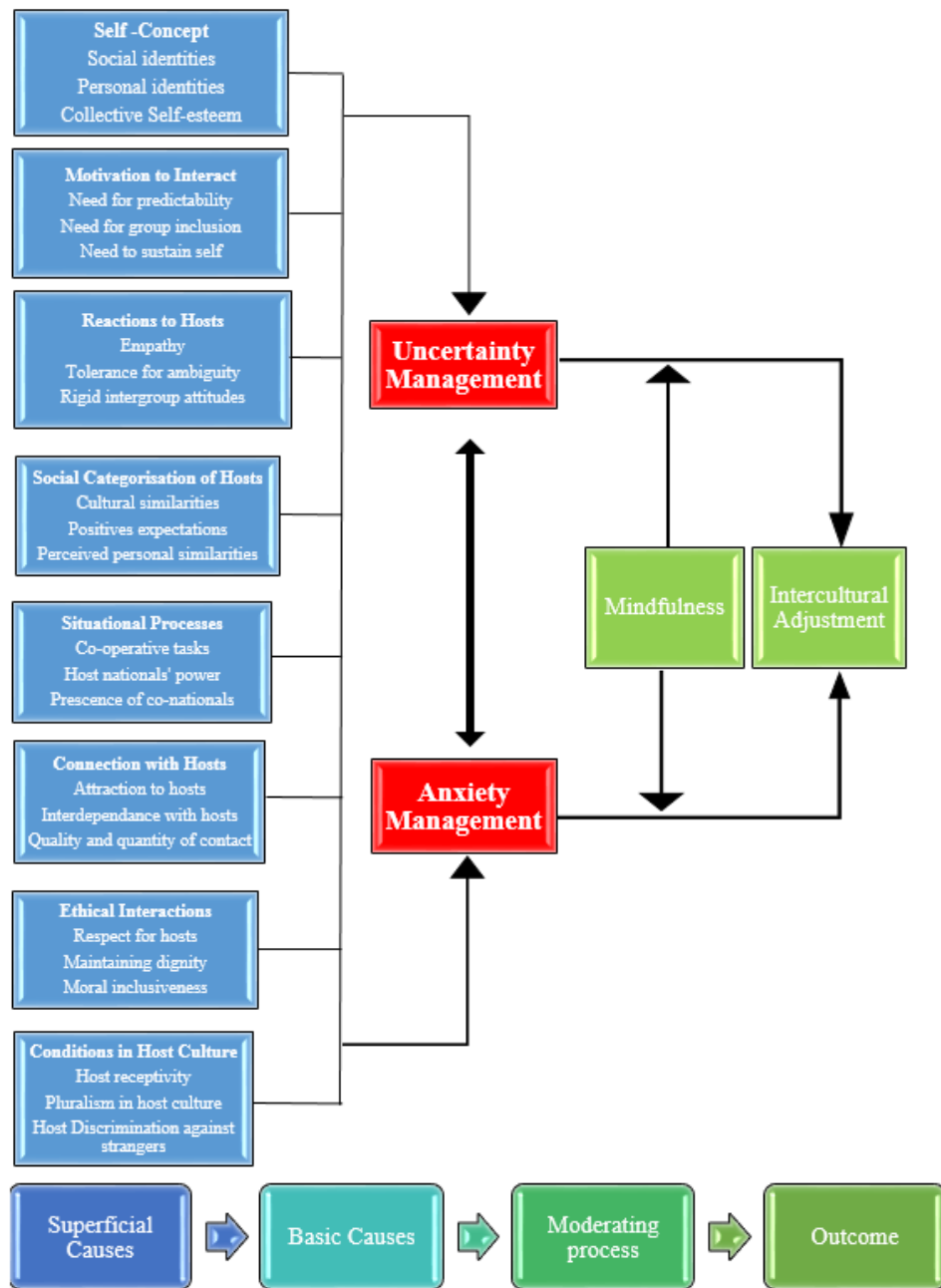


Figure 2. A representation of the AUMM Theory of Adjustment (Gudykunst, 2005b)

**Self-Concept** refers to the perception which an individual has of themselves and how they perceive that image of themselves in relation to familiar as well as unfamiliar others. Placing oneself in such social categories allows the individual to understand the society around them and their own place as part of that society. It therefore helps the individual to define their

social identities. A part of those social identities are the individual's cultural identities which are predominantly central in communicating with unfamiliar others although other social identities, e.g. related to occupation, gender or ethnicity and personal identities are brought into use when interacting with strangers. The strength of an individual's cultural identity enables them to manage their levels of anxiety and uncertainty but only when an unfamiliar other is seen to be a typical representative of their culture. When that same stranger is seen as being atypical of their culture, they are not treated according a perception of their culture but as an individual. Under the latter circumstances, interaction is guided by an individual's personal identities. How comfortable an individual feels in their own cultural identity is also important. Those who are insecure in their own cultural identity are more biased towards their own culture than those with secure cultural identities. The more secure a person feels in their cultural identity, the more anxiety they are likely to experience when interacting with unfamiliar others. Self-esteem is also seen to play important part in uncertainty and anxiety management. Low self-esteem leads to misinterpretations in understanding information about oneself and others, leading to anxiety about interactions with others. When self-esteem is high, on the other hand, information is processed objectively, even in times of increased stress. An individual's self-concept is therefore influential in their motivation to interact with unfamiliar others, while threats to these self-concepts lead to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about communicating with unfamiliar others (Gudykunst, 2005b).

**Motivation to interact** with host nationals occurs when our needs are met. There are four specific needs critically related to AUMM. Those are:

the need to know what behaviour to expect from unfamiliar others, the need for a feeling of belonging to a group, the need to avoid diffuse anxiety, and the need maintain our own self-conception. In any given circumstance the interaction of an unfamiliar other must be perceived to be trustworthy and expected. During interaction with a stranger, the individual's categorisations, or stereotypes, become active, providing expectations of behavioural patterns. When that behaviour confirms to the stereotype, the feeling is that behaviour is predictable. Conversely, if the behaviour does not match the stereotypical view, it is deemed unpredictable. In those instances when behaviour meets expectations, it helps to sustain an individual's self-concept. When a sojourner does not feel involved in a host culture, they experience anxiety and uncertainty. This is directly related to the individual's social identity, in particular their cultural identity, coming from the need to be seen as a member of a particular group and experience the feeling of fitting in. If an interaction is not successful, the need for group inclusion is not met, leading to anxiety about oneself and our standing in the community. Closely connected to this is the need for a sojourner's self-concept to be confirmed. When that happens, confidence in interactions with unfamiliar others is high. The higher the level of confidence, the more able an individual is to manage their level of anxiety. On the occasions when these needs are not met, motivation to communicate with strangers is adversely affected. How a person reacts affectively, behaviourally, and cognitively to interacting with strangers will influence how they can manage their anxiety and uncertainty levels (Gudykunst, 2005b).

In **reacting to host** nationals, if a person's attitudes are unwavering or prejudice in any way, they will tend to be intolerant of the other's

perspectives. Such rigid attitudes towards unfamiliar others are seen as being detrimental to intercultural adjustment as they cause those who hold them to have negative expectations and to avoid seeking new information about those with whom they interact. The more rigid the attitude, the less ability in predicting behaviour is evident. Empathy also plays a role in anxiety and uncertainty management cognitively and affectively. Cognitively, an empathetic person is likely to accept and understand the perspective of a stranger while affectively, an individual will identify emotionally with the feelings being experienced by the other person. Therefore, increased empathy correlates with decreased anxiety. A person's behavioural adaptability is connected with their confidence in being able to operate in new and unfamiliar situations. In other words, the more adaptable a person is in their behavioural approach the more flexible their thinking about an unfamiliar person is likely to be. An increase in adaptability leads to decreased anxiety and increased confidence in the predictability of others' behaviour (Gudykunst, 2005b).

**Social categorisation** is the means by which people order societies into groups, i.e. in-groups and out-groups, resulting in intergroup behaviour which itself is a source of anxiety and uncertainty. The categorisation process is informed by existing knowledge an individual has connected with a particular other culture. In order to predict the behaviour of members of another culture, a person must be in possession of related information. Inaccurate knowledge has a detrimental effect on intercultural adjustment whereas the more accurate knowledge a person possesses about a host culture, the less anxiety and uncertainty they will experience. Another result of gaining more knowledge about any host culture is there is likely to be less

generalisation and more individualisation when predicting stranger behaviour, therefore, an individual would be more likely to treat an unfamiliar other in a positive manner. This is more so when categorisations are born out of positive expectations rather than negative stereotypes or prejudice. Therefore, the manner in which social categorisations are made affects the levels of anxiety and uncertainty that are experienced during interactions, and those levels are influenced by the situations in which interactions take place (Gudykunst, 2005b).

**Situational processes** include the ways in which elements of a person's behaviour can be influenced by what is occurring around them. An important part of that are the scripts that interlocutors employ during conversations. Scripts can be thought of as frames onto which a particular conversation takes place. They are known to the speaker and the receiver and so fulfil expectations that the conversation will progress in a particular manner and thus anxiety and uncertainty levels are managed. When a sojourner entered an unfamiliar environment it can be that they do not have the luxury of knowing the script for that event and therefore levels of anxiety and uncertainty increase. The condition under which communication occurs between people is also influential. If the situation is one built on cooperation, there will be a positive atmosphere and therefore less anxiety will be evident. Working cooperatively also increases the ability to predict others' behaviour. The situation in which interaction takes place therefore will have an effect on the nature of the communication, which determines whether or not relationships are formed (Gudykunst, 2005b).



Sojourners will form **connections with host** nationals whether positive or negative. People tend to like those whom they perceive as being similar to themselves. If others are thought to be dissimilar, people may not want to form relationships with them; although connections can be created with unfamiliar others who are seen as being dissimilar as interactions occur. Connections created with unfamiliar others reduce uncertainty. Through these connections relationships develop over time and the quality and quantity of these connections affects the level of anxiety experienced by a sojourner during interactions. The better the quality and the higher occurrence of contact, the less anxiety will be experienced. The theory also supports Berger & Calabrese's (1975) assertion at this point in that it also reiterates high quality and quantity of contact with unfamiliar others brings lower levels of uncertainty. Implying that the more favourable contact between strangers, the more information they will glean about each other thus the better they will be able to predict the other's behaviour. Additionally, the level of uncertainty experienced is influenced by the amount of shared networks which are in use. The more social networks are shared with unfamiliar interlocutors, the easier it becomes to manage anxiety and uncertainty about them. The nature of these relationships do not affect intercultural adjustment directly, rather, it is the ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty as well as being able to make accurate predictions about the behaviour of strangers, if it is done in an ethical manner (Gudykunst, 2005b).

The behavioural patterns of unfamiliar others are often evaluated negatively by strangers, causing difficulties in interactions and problems for intercultural adaptation processes. This can be overcome by sojourners

choosing to employ **ethical interactions**. This involves treating unfamiliar others with dignity, showing respect for their opinions and points of view, as well as for them as individuals of parallel worth, as well as displaying and applying moral inclusivity, when the same rules of fairness apply to all. Treating unfamiliar others ethically will result in reciprocity and thus lead to lower levels of anxiety about interactions but it requires mindful moderation (Gudykunst, 2005b).

**Conditions in the host culture** can also be an important element in how much anxiety or uncertainty is experienced by strangers. The less open the host is to strangers, the more anxiety and uncertainty the stranger will experience. Conversely, the more open a host culture, the less negativity will be perceived and the lower the levels of anxiety and uncertainty the stranger will experience. Also to be considered is the difference between how much pressure is placed on a stranger to conform to so-called normal behavioural standards. This varies depending on whether the host society has an assimilative or a pluralistic ideology. Minor differences in behaviour in an assimilative society can induce high levels of anxiety, while major differences in a pluralistic society can produce low anxiety levels (Gudykunst, 2005b).

### **2.3.5 Operationalisation**

The preceding paragraphs discuss the superficial causes that can lead to both anxiety and uncertainty. In order to manage these emotional states a person must be mindful of their communication and behaviour. Interacting in an effective manner with unfamiliar others requires individuals to be able to

understand more than their own world-view. Understanding the perspective of an unfamiliar other requires mindfulness. That means a stranger must be open to new ideas, new ways of doing things, and be awake to their different possibilities. They must also be alert to, and be aware of the consequences related to different contexts, and how those contexts can be interpreted from differing perspectives (Gudykunst, 2005b).

Strangers who interpret unfamiliar others' messages via their own perspective, do so mindlessly and are therefore likely to communicate ineffectively. The greater the knowledge a stranger has relating to how to describe unfamiliar others' behaviour, the less evaluative the stranger will be and the more positive the stranger's communications will be received by the other. Being able to understand and use a host nation's language will help manage anxiety and uncertainty because it facilitates understanding of the host nation perspective. The more fluent a user of the language a sojourner becomes, the less anxiety and uncertainty they will experience concerning their interactions (Gudykunst, 2005b).

Experiencing anxiety and uncertainty affects a person's ability to process information about unfamiliar others. When a person's anxiety and uncertainty levels are above the maximum threshold, they process information in a simplistic manner; focusing on themselves. This causes the individual to be distracted from events happening around them and increases their inability to make differentiations about unfamiliar others. On such occasions, anxiety and uncertainty levels must be managed and brought back below the maximum threshold before any accurate prediction or explanation concerning the behaviour of unfamiliar others can be made. When anxiety and uncertainty

levels are between the minimum and maximum thresholds, and a person is mindful they can communicate effectively with unfamiliar others (Gudykunst, 2005b).

### **2.3.6 Applicability**

The AUMM theory outlined above can be applied in two ways. Firstly, it can be used to assist strangers in adjusting to unfamiliar cultural environments by suggesting that they should manage their levels of anxiety and uncertainty mindfully during interactions. Choosing to learn the hosts' language, forming social connections and developing friendships with those who are, at the outset unfamiliar, will reduce anxiety and uncertainty while increasing the ability to predict behaviour. Secondly, AUMM can be applied to inform the design of intercultural training programmes. The theory suggests that training designed to meet the following aims in turn; the second building on the foundation laid by the first and so on. Those aims are: 1) to help sojourners understand how their ability to manage their levels of anxiety and uncertainty could help their adjustment; 2) to help sojourners manage their levels of anxiety when interacting with unfamiliar others; and 3) to help sojourners manage their levels of uncertainty related to unfamiliar environments and others (Gudykunst, 2005b). Furthermore, affective, behavioural and cognitive outcomes are seen as being appropriate focuses to be used when designing intercultural training based on didactic and experiential methods (Fowler & Blohm, 2004).

Using Gudykunst's (2005b) AUMM Theory of Strangers' Intercultural Adjustment to underpin Ward et al.'s (2001) ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment, this study will add to the growing body of evidence concerning the effects of reverse culture shock by investigating the following research questions with a group of professionals from both the private and public sectors located in Central Finland, and then consider what interventions can be conducted to ease the process of re-entry.

The aim of the study is 1) to describe and understand professional repatriates' perceptions of reverse culture shock, and 2) to explore the ways in which interventions at the company level could be utilized in managing the repatriation process better. To this end, this empirical study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do professional repatriates returning to their parent organisations in Central Finland perceive the repatriation process?

RQ2: Which frame of intervention might have been utilised to manage their repatriation process?

In order to answer these research questions, both positive and negative experiences related to the repatriation process are explored. Relating the findings to the ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment, the study then proceeds to discuss a possible framework of intervention.

The next chapter will detail the methodology used in the study beginning with an explanation of how the data was collected including details of how the target group was selected and its demographic composition. A description of the data collection method and procedure will follow. Finally, a

description of the data analysis method is given before outlining the findings that the data revealed.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

In this study I set out to explore and understand the process of repatriation that a person goes through as they return to their parent organisation on completion of an overseas assignment. I wanted to know how they dealt with the various aspects of the return process and how those aspects, either singularly or cumulatively, were perceived to have had an effect on them.

This study adopts a constructivist approach to understanding human experience. The overall assumption of the constructivist approach is that people create understanding of the world around them as they interact with it based upon their existing experiences and knowledge. A researcher can use broad, open questions, the broader, the better, thereby allowing participants to narrate their understanding of any given situation. This can take a number of different forms: one-to-one interviews, telephone interviews, focus group interviews of up to eight participants. Such interviews commonly feature unstructured and open questions intended to bring out the participants' views. That such a worldview requires a researcher to employ open questions the favourable method to follow in this study was clearly qualitative research. Quantitative research is defined as being suitable for measuring variables in order for their numerical value to be subjected to analysis through statistical procedure while qualitative methods are used to uncover the meaning which people attach to particular life events in order, for example, to make sense of them. Accordingly, I recognised the need to use a qualitative as opposed to a quantitative research method because I wanted to discover how certain aspects

of the process were perceived by the repatriates themselves to have affected them and not how many people experienced the same aspect (Creswell, 2014).

I decided that the best way of gathering the data I required was through phenomenological research in which experiences of participants are examined, usually through interviews. This phenomenological approach used in interviews allows a researcher to conduct an empirical study that is centred on how participants understand their experience of any particular phenomena rather than the researcher's own interpretation (Creswell, 2014). As repatriates return home from assignment they undoubtedly have a construction of understanding of, for example, the home environment. The reality may well be different depending on how long they have been away and what influences their experience and the location of their sojourn has had upon them. Phenomenology would therefore be able to help the repatriate and the researcher to arrive at a common understanding of how the experience of re-entering the home environment was perceived to have affected the repatriate (Terian, 2003).

Accordingly, I chose to conduct interviews as the means of data collection in this study as it provided me with an opportunity to gather detailed information from participants about their experiences of the phenomenon in question. I deemed other methods of data collection, for example, issuing a questionnaire, or participant observation, to be inappropriate. Interviews are typically used in a small-scale enquiry, such as this one, where resources, including time, are scarce. Robson (2002) commented that telephone interviews were becoming more common-place. As technology has moved on even further, voice over internet protocol (VoIP) carrier programs can meet the



needs of today's researchers in this regard. Thus, for example, when the physical distance between researcher and participant was excessive and available time at a premium, a number of interviews were, pragmatically, conducted using such technology. Using digital video to record the interviews was also considered to facilitate gathering data through observation.

Observation is a direct means of gathering information. It allows a researcher to watch what people do and hear what is being said. From this point of view it may have facilitated cross-referencing what had been said by the participants with their non-verbal communication signals (Robson, 2002). Ultimately the technical requirements and ethical considerations of potentially limiting the interviewees' perception of their own freedom of expression due to the intrusive nature of such technology outweighed the possible gain using digital video would bring. The interviews were conducted in such a manner as to allow the interviewee to remain as relaxed as possible (Cousin, 2009).

The distinction of a semi-structured interview is that the order in which the questions can be posed can 'be modified based upon the interviewer's perceptions of what seems most appropriate' (Robson, 2002, p. 270). They can be described as being a search for facts and feelings. Regardless of their structure, or lack of it, they are, by their very nature, interactional events which construct a reality in order to determine meaning and understanding. Thus, the semi-structured format also allows the researcher to follow up any unanticipated lines of relevant enquiry that may crop up during the course of the discussion (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

### **3.1 Data Collection**

#### **3.1.1 Selection of participant population**

I selected the interviewees for this study purposively in order to ensure that I addressed the intended target niche. When research projects need to study people with certain characteristics there can be no definite list of participants from which one can select in a random manner. In such cases a non-random method of sampling must be employed. Non-random sampling is utilised when it is not viable to choose participants based on an equal probability of selection (Frey et al., 2000). Thus, I selected the interviewees for this study using a non-random purposive sampling method as the objective was to examine a particular phenomenon, which they alone have experienced, that being, to varying degrees, reverse culture shock. The sample I chose for this study was therefore selected from adult Finnish professionals who had returned to Finland after having sojourned abroad at some point for a minimum of 3 months.

The method I employed to discover and contact participants differed. In 2013, my initial efforts to contact repatriates through two facilities which form part of larger companies with multiple overseas assets met with negative results. Therefore, I made approaches to two individuals who had been on assignment abroad that were previously known to me. Using this method I had more success and it enabled snowballing which yielded a further three participants who contacted me and expressed a desire to be involved. Unfortunately, two of these latter interviewees found through snowballing failed to continue with the process for no discernible reason. Due to time

constraints placed on me by various factors, I could not conduct any more interviews until the following year.

Thus in 2014, I sent requests for access to repatriates to the gatekeepers within a number of smaller companies located in Central Finland which had multiple international assets. This method unearthed a further three volunteer participants. Additionally, a further acquaintance had returned from overseas assignment and agreed to be interviewed. Finally, a chance meeting in spring 2015 offered the opportunity of a further two interviews.

### **3.1.2 Demographic overview**

As can be seen from the data laid out in Table 1 Demographics below, the target sample showed a good deal of variation in its demographic makeup. Of the 11 participants, the gender balance was 6 male and 5 female. That the size of the sample is so limited is indicative of the fact that I set out not to make generalisations. Rather, I wanted to explore the perceptions of a small group of people concerning a particular phenomena, therefore achieving data saturation, necessitating a significantly larger sample, was deemed not so important. The participants' age at the time of sojourn ranged from 26 to 60. The time spent on assignment also showed a wide differentiation between 6 months up to 2.5 years and the time that had lapsed since their return was also vastly different, ranging from 1 month to 13 years. These variations were the only demographic variables taken into consideration during the analytical process. No data was gathered in relation to, for example, personality, religious beliefs, or marital and socioeconomic status. To omit these aspects was a conscientious

decision based on the belief that such variation would have little or no effect on the answers to the particular research questions posed by this study.

Table 1

<u>Demographics of the sample</u>				
<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age at sojourn</u>	<u>Length of sojourn</u>	<u>Time since return</u>
Aino	F	60	6 months	1.5 years
Ari	M	33	2 years	6 years
Helena	F	51	2 years	2.5 years
Ilkka	M	39	2.5 years	2.5 years
Irina	F	29	8 years	13 years
Juho	M	53	2 years	2.5 years
Rami	M	32	1.5 years	2 years
Rosa	F	26	9 years	2 years
Sami	M	38	2 years	1.5 years
Satu	F	56	2 years	1 month
Timo	M	51	2.5 years	6 months

### 3.1.3 Practical arrangements

Between 2013 and 2015 I interviewed 11 people on nine separate occasions as on two occasions respondents chose to be interviewed jointly. Once I had established contact with respondents, a date, time and suitable place for the interview was arranged to suit the interviewee. Four interviewees chose to conduct the interviews at work, five at home, of which one was conducted using VoIP technology and two in a public place. An instrument to collect demographic and background information was sent to each participant prior to their interview. I collected these documents from the participants prior to the

start of each interview and they enabled me to construct Table 1 Demographics of the sample above. I devised a discussion frame to ensure that each interviewee was subjected to the same questions. During the first interview I realised that I needed to adjust this frame so edited it accordingly and used it for the remaining interviews.

After each interview, I offered participants the opportunity to review the transcript but only one participant took up the offer. Review a transcript can provide a means of achieving inter-subjectivity whereby both researcher and participant arrive at a mutual understanding of the meaning of an experience, comment or explanation (Robson, 2002). I will return to this aspect in chapter 6 when I discuss research limitations. Each interview was recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed. As I was only interested in what participants said rather than how they said it, verbatim transcription was not required. I did not transcribe verbal fillers or hesitations, jokes, or irrelevant asides, for example.

### **3.2 Data analysis**

The data was subjected to analysis using phenomenographic qualitative content analysis. Phenomenographic data analysis can be processed using one of two methods. Either small sections of a transcript can be preferred to focus upon minute detail whereas a whole transcript can be used to gain a wider interpretation of the narrative (Kettunen et al., 2015). The approach I adopted was the latter. There were a number of reasons for selecting this approach. Firstly, this technique was chosen in preference to other analytical tools

because it enables the researcher to discover content which emerges from the text in relation to a given context, in this case, the many manifestations of reverse culture shock in the target sample (Krippendorff, 2013). Secondly, the data that required analysis was in a narrative form and from which details of various manifestations arose; how they affected the individual was important, not how many times each manifestation occurred.

The initial phase of the analysis focused on categorising each answer, description of an action, communicative interaction or a certain lack of such, feeling, perception contained in each transcript into one of three categories; affective, behavioural or cognitive. The data was re-read several times to ensure no information had been omitted. Once I was certain that I had discovered every piece of relevant information from the transcripts I divided each of the three categories into two sub-categories depending on whether the information supported the assumption that the proposed framework of intervention would have been helpful to this particular group of professional repatriates or not. I was not only interested in those descriptions of positive occurrences, i.e., when a participant reported perceiving a particular aspect of reverse culture shock, I also wanted to know about negative occurrences when interviewees either did not report such or categorically stated that they did not perceive such.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings that came out of my analysis in detail before moving on to discuss their relevance in terms of likely intervention strategies.

## **4 FINDINGS**

The results illustrate that most of the interviewees initially reported perceptions of having experienced reverse culture shock upon re-entry. Detailed analysis revealed that the others in the sample had also experienced reverse culture shock without necessarily being aware of it. Comparison of the data with the demographics of the sample revealed that, in this study, the personal variables of age and gender did not seem to be significant in either a positive or negative manner. Likewise, the situational variables of the length of sojourn nor the length of time since return at interview were not seen to have a discernible effect on the findings as even those who had been back in their home environments the longest spoke about their recollections as if they were still raw and sometimes painful memories. Three main themes emerged from the results; expectations of home being a familiar place, changes in communication and behaviour, and finally, personal changes and fitting in. Over the next pages, key results relating to these themes will be presented.

### **4.1 Theme one - Expectations of home being a familiar place**

All interviewees had heard of the phenomenon of not feeling at home on return but many did not expect it would affect them as it seemed to. Respondents reported perceptions of experiencing difficulty in their private lives and at work.

#### 4.1.1 Individual preparation

Most interviewees described the practical issues connected to the physical move. For example, Ari spoke about “applying for childcare and sending our stuff back”. Helena was similarly practically minded, “... we sent our stuff back - we had a lot of it”. Juho said that “mentally, we never thought about it at all”. Ari, on the other hand, said, “For me it wasn’t easy. I think it was harder for me to come back than to go abroad ... you think you are back home, right, but it’s all different and new again” and similar feelings were also voiced by Ilkka, “Maybe during the first few weeks or months I felt lost ... I was a little uncertain to go outside”. The amount of time given to preparing to return home varied between 2 months, as explained by Helena, “... they give you like two months warning to move” and one and a half years as explained by Rami.

*Actually for me it was clear from the beginning because when we made the contract for this project it was stated there that it will last for this and this long and then I would come back to Finland. So it was already written down and signed so it was quite clear.*

The tendency of the sample to concentrate on practical preparation indicated to me that very little thought was given to the need to prepare psychologically for the return process. Given that the majority of interviewees did not have the benefit of their return path being prepared by their employers, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs, this is not surprising.



#### 4.1.2 Employers' preparations for the returning employee

Participants reported differing situations connected with their role on return and all but one said they had not been offered any kind of repatriation training by their employers. Just four out of 11 participants reported that they returned to the same job which they had held prior to their sojourn, and all four said they were content to do so. Some accepted jobs with different employers for reasons that were unconnected to their experiences on assignments prior to the move back to Finland as Irina explained, "Coming back ... was something I was really looking forward to .... it was a really positive move". Three respondents were unhappy with their employer's plan for their future roles and resigned from their position to seek employment elsewhere as Sami explained, "... what they offered me was some sort of quality role and it was something that I had not done before and it was a demotion - position-wise". Sami described feeling disappointed with his original employer "because the purpose for me going abroad was to prepare for a bigger role with my employer at that time but that never materialised". A similar story was related by Ilkka who faced "organisational changes ... and other things that happened in the company" leading him to believe that there would not be "anything interesting to do" there. Timo returned to take up a position which he described as being "a progression" in his career. Finally, Rami returned to his former employer to undertake a significantly less prestigious role; "It was clear one month before I left [my position abroad] that I would be a shift supervisor". He said that this situation made him feel "like it was some kind of punishment" but he did not know what for.

As mentioned above, only one of the interviewees said that they had been offered any kind of repatriation training by their employers. Timo reported that he had received a questionnaire, through which he was asked to report what was good and what was bad about the assignment, and an invitation to a two-day seminar. During this seminar he was informed of the availability of doctors and psychologists if such were required but added that “nobody warned us about kind of influences [such an assignment] can have on you”, adding that such things were only discussed with more experienced colleagues. Although such discussions were arranged informally by individual returnees themselves rather than within an organised framework of mentoring, it supports the idea using those with similar knowledge and experience to assist in the return process. The lack of direction from his employers, he said, “surprised him”. Ilkka responded that he thought, “There is no general rule that managers have to think about what training or support individuals need”. Other participants reported negatively. Satu, for example, responded with a simple, no, while Sami’s answer was a little more emphatic, “None at all, zip, zero, nil”.

#### **4.2 Theme two - Changes in communication and behaviour**

This theme included descriptions of what participants thought were the most valuable skills they had learned during their stay abroad and whether or not they had been able to utilise them since their return. They also spoke about how and when they kept in touch with colleagues, friends and families during

their time abroad. Some said they had noticed changes in their own communicative behaviour when they finally returned to Finland.

#### 4.2.1 Skills

Nine out of the 11 interviewees described the most important skill they learned during their time abroad as discovering how to communicate with and consequently how to get the best of colleagues from other cultures. As Satu pointed out, she “learned to understand a different culture and leadership style...”. Timo concurred with this viewpoint and commented that because he learned to “co-operate with international colleagues he “managed to achieve a lot of progress”. Juho related how learning to communicate with colleagues from abroad allowed him to develop open-mindedness, a skill, he said, that brings benefits to his role back in Finland also. In addition to learning how to work with people of other nationalities, Rami spoke about the experience of learning how to manage large projects, thereby increasing his technical ability. He related that he had found it was possible to use these new skills in his new role in Finland with some success also. Rosa spoke about having to examine her own culture and its values to be able to understand those of the people with whom she had been living and working abroad. It had, she continued, helped her to respect other people regardless of where they were from or what their norms and values were. These thoughts were echoed by Satu, who said that the process of having to examine her own way of life as part of learning to live abroad had allowed her to see “what is good and not so good” from her own

culture and yet appreciate both her own values and those of others. As she said, “perhaps I have become more tolerant and that’s a good advantage”.

#### **4.2.2 Communicative behaviour**

Ten of the 11 interviewees spoke about how easy they had found keeping in touch with friends and family during their respective sojourns. They spoke about using email, telephone calls, SMS messaging and VoIP programmes such as Skype or FaceTime on a regular basis, sometimes as often as several times daily. Satu said, “it was very easy ... we had Skype conversations very often”. Moreover, Irina spoke about daily, obligatory SMS exchanges such as, “Are you OK? – Yes, still alive!”. The exception to this was Aino who spoke about the high cost of domestic internet services where she was assigned. This, she pointed out, meant that her contact with family and friends was limited, “... we didn’t have internet in our accommodation – only in [work]. Of course, some calls but only to our daughter”. Overall, frequent contact with family and friends was given as a reason for the interviewees not experiencing communication difficulties with these groups after repatriation. Communicating with colleagues, however, was sometimes spoken about in different terms.

A number of interviewees had deployed overseas without bringing privy to a credible plan for their future role in the company once their assignments were over. They related experiencing various difficulties in establishing and maintaining meaningful communication with their supervisors and managers while they were abroad. Sami, for instance, said that he tried to

call them as often as possible in an effort to keep himself up to date with what was happening, what changes had occurred, and crucially, what the plans were for his future. The majority of these calls were instigated by Sami not his employers. This lack of pro-activeness on behalf of his employer made him decide to leave the company on his return. Rami described receiving newsletter type emails informing him of changes in working practices, departing and arriving colleagues but said that there was no single manager whose responsibility it was to maintain communication with him during his time abroad. This point in particular, he said, created difficulties for his return as there was no-one in Finland with whom he could speak about his future role. He described returning to work and having the feeling that things were no longer the same as they were before he went abroad. Supervisors and managers spoke to him differently, it was “not as relaxed as it was” even though he had known them for many years. Timo discussed that he also mainly instigated communication back to Finland but received very few calls from his employer of a supervisory or managerial nature.

On the other hand, some participants reported positive effects of being in constant touch with colleagues albeit mainly via emails with the occasional Skype meeting in Satu’s case, so it was “not a problem” and Juho described having contact “on a daily basis”. A common idea with these three interviewees at this point was a feeling of still belonging to their parent organisation and that that feeling was valued by them. Once she was back in Finland, Aino said, that so many of her colleagues were very interested in hearing about her exploits and asked her a lot of questions but in the process it stuck her how different the politeness rules were compared to Finland. She

found herself being overly polite according to Finnish communicative norms, for which, she added, she received a number of rye comments.

On the negative side, Satu lamented what she perceived to be worsening of communication among the general population in Finland, remarking that she thought that the situation was becoming “sadder” all the time. She explained that in her opinion either people seem to be afraid of each other or are too preoccupied with what the other might think of them. Although she considered herself still to be a caring person, her experiences abroad, she said, had taught her not to be overly concerned about what others might think about her and her changed communicative style; “If I’m polite, if I respond to them that’s fine. For my part, if they do not want to respond to me, so what? I leave those people alone”.

#### **4.3 Personal change and fitting in**

The final emergent theme included aspects of how participants perceived themselves to have changed during their sojourn and why. Some also spoke about how they viewed perceived changes in their home community and work environment, and how they felt about such, and as a result of this, how they considered they had fitted back in to Finnish society, personally and professionally.

### 4.3.1 Personal change

Each of the 11 interviewees stated that they believed they had changed as a direct result of working abroad. Sami said “Absolutely, ... I have a broader view of things; I no longer see things as black and white. There are grey areas as well”. Ari agreed with this point of view and added that he thought “we all change all the time anyway ... but [living and working abroad] widens your perspective, ... you become more open ... you see you can do things and you don’t have to stay in Finland”. Rami thought that he had become a “better person”, which he expanded to mean being more able to listen to and take into account others’ points of view. Echoing these comments, Juho colourfully described his earlier approach to management as being “a stupid rooster”, believing that his ideas were the best and therefore the only solutions to any given set of challenges but as a result of his experience he is now able “to try and figure out how to solve problems with others”. Timo discussed how his experience had caused him to re-evaluate certain aspects of his own thinking.

*The circumstances [there] are quite different to here, there are no middle class people, there are only very rich and very poor people. That changed me a lot because I started to think about why should I spend time and money buying, for example, gadgets I don’t need and I should be happy with things and relationships I already have and good health. If you have health problems [there] the hospitals are not as good as they are here and things like that. My way of thinking has changed a lot. I respect more what I already have.*

Aino also reported feeling “more confident” about communicating her own expertise and professional competences. This, she explained, has enabled her to expand her professional network more easily.

### 4.3.2 Feeling at home in the home environment

The second aspect in this theme revealed whether or not repatriates perceived changes to have occurred in their personal or professional home environments. Sami spoke about it being “being easy to be back” in his own home among family and friends. He also talked about being excited to be back in Finland and yet missing the people, the role and the place in which he worked on assignment. Coming back to a new position with more responsibility yet within the same industry, he felt he did not perceive any changes and thus did not feel that he had to prepare for the transition; “I just jumped it – it’s not always the best approach but I did it”. Satu spoke about her personal home environment not having changed and attributed that to being able to maintain contact through the internet. At work things though were a little different. She described how she felt welcome to be there while feeling that “there is something like them and me. It’s like being in no-man’s land”. In her own words, she has come to realise that she is “a little different” and that it is fine to be so as it helps her to guide her colleagues without feeling any bias from pre-existing working practices and relationships. Both Ari and Ilkka commented about feeling disconnected at home because of being unfamiliar with the popular culture (celebrities, etc) of the day. It took Ilkka two- months to get over this until he felt “normal again”, he said, while Ari stated that he felt like he “didn’t belong [in Finland] ... it was weird ... it took a while to get back into the Finnish community”.

Helena described how she had been disappointed at how little change she perceived when she arrived back in Finland. While she recognised that there



had been discernible change, it was “not as much as I had hoped”. Even with an increasing immigrant population, she spoke of seeing Finns as still being “very insular ... not wanting to go outside Finland”.

For Timo, returning to the home environment was “the most difficult part” of his assignment. His first two weeks at home were fine, he said, but then his problems began. He began thinking about whether or not he should go abroad again and consequently had great difficulty sleeping. He mentioned that he had discussed his situation with a colleague who had experienced similar events and told him that he had experienced the same things. Rosa’s perceptions of being back in her home environment were similarly negative. She described a place where, in her opinion, people had become less caring, less respectful, and less responsive to each other’s needs.

*... you come to somebody’s home, you don’t really care about their place, you just walk with your dirty shoes everywhere or if you call customer service, there’s no such thing, or if there is, gosh, it’s rare and you get all happy when somebody does something for you. I’ve heard these comments from people from outside saying, oh, Finns are this way and that way and now I’m living it and I’m seeing what it’s like and I’m like, why don’t we see that we are actually doing this in a way that we are losing the plot.*

She went on to talk about how she needed to adjust herself to think about and analyse situations positively. Not to dwell on the negative feelings that she may have as a result of missing the life she had abroad.

In the following chapter I will discuss these findings in relation to the literature presented in Chapter 2 before moving on to make my conclusions.

## 5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will discuss the three themes that emerged from the findings of this study; 1) expectations of home being a familiar place, 2) changes in communication and behaviour, and 3) personal changes and fitting in. I will situate them within the wider discussion on this topic while relating them to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 above, and offer a suggestion for future intervention as a way forward.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, empirical research into repatriation and reverse culture shock has been lacking. In the first decade of the current millennium, researchers (Athanassiou and Nigh, 2000; Bonasche and Brewster, 2001; Kostova and Roth, 2002; Riusala and Smale, 2007) began to create a competence-based view of repatriation. In reality, this meant that organisations should make sure that returning managers are reintegrated into their home organisations so as to enable them to fully utilise the newly-acquired skills, knowledge, relationships and experience to the fullest extent. This seemed to be a bold new start on the right path one could suggest but, at the end of that period, Furuya et al., (2009) reported that the new beginning had “engendered little empirical investigation or theoretical development”. I would argue that based on the findings of this study, little has changed to date. Clearly, the large majority of interviewees in the current study believed that coming home was going to be easy. That is evident by the way in which so many only thought about and planned the physical aspects of moving back home while not considering, for the most part, or not being aware of the psychological preparation which might be required. Yet all respondents

reported perceptions of culture shock on return. Some were stronger than others. With this sample, that neither the personal or situational variables were seen to have any significant effect on the perceptions of the return process and the problems they experienced supports the widely-acknowledged belief that every repatriate will experience difficulties in some form or another, and that the likelihood of two individuals perceiving the same problems is very remote. Researchers (Suutari and Brewster, 2003; Griffin, 2012) have suggested that maintaining an open and meaningful channel of communication between the home organisation and the sojourner. Creating such a channel would allow the sojourner the opportunity to ask pertinent questions about their future role. Being in possession of the answers to such key questions would enable the sojourner to manage their levels of anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 2005b) and thus lead to a smoother transition. Without adequate advice, support and infrastructure, where appropriate, the employee is left largely to their own devices. This can result in them not being in possession of the knowledge that would arguably make their transition back into their home environments smoother, whereas those who have the benefit of such information are more likely to experience successful self-adjustment (Black and Gregerson, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

As I discussed in the literature review chapter, organisational practices to date do not seem to have been successful in improving the rate of attrition of returning managers during the past couple of decades. Indeed, only four out of the eleven interviewees in this study considered their appointment after sojourn to be satisfactory. In other words, over half of the participants in this study did not consider their new position satisfactory, citing a lack of

communication, supporting the findings of Peltonen (1997) as well as Suutari and Brewster (2003) detailed in Chapter 2. The new roles bore little or no relation to the repatriates' sojourns, they were not perceived as advancing their careers (indeed some interviewees voiced the impression that their return was either unexpected or inconvenient as little thought was perceived to go into their future role within the company). This figure is clearly worse than that reported by Adler and Gundersen (2008), who reported that just under half of their responding managers were unsatisfied with their new position. I would argue on this point alone that ineffective managerial support to repatriates exacerbates the reintegration process.

One of the reasons quoted by interviewees for their dissatisfaction with their new role was that their newly acquired skills were not fully utilised or, at worst, ignored upon return. The majority of participants believed that the most important new skill they had learned during their sojourn was how to communicate better in order to lead teams from different cultures, thereby achieve improved results. At the individual level this is indeed a tremendous achievement, one which is clearly identifiable as highly desirable and transferable and yet only two out of eleven new roles allowed the incumbent to utilise this skill on return. The support of the home organisation has been seen to correlate positively in a significant manner and is crucial in facilitating knowledge transfer on return and therefore contributing to self-adjustment in and reintroduction to home environments (Furuya et al., 2009). Those cases where the new skills were not able to be utilised, I would concur Eisenberger et al. (2006), that those people felt socially excluded from the personal perspective and professionally undervalued as employees and, as a

consequence, a large proportion of the sample chose to seek employment elsewhere. Whether this particular aspect led to any form of diagnosed psychological distress, or related medical problems in the sample was outside the scope of this research.

Regular, meaningful communication between the home office and the repatriate during assignment is seen to be a crucial aspect of managing the return process. Arguably, it does not matter if plans for the employee change during the assignment – they frequently do in current business climate of continual restructuring. The key here is for managers to communicate these changes and to discuss options with individuals while they are abroad. Matters concerning career path planning and job clarity, along with positive recognition and a willingness to utilise international experience including an increased and often wider skill set can be seen to be effective. This is entirely in line with the finding that “successful transfer of previously acquired competencies to a new position will increase self-efficacy” (Furuya et al., 2009, p. 210). Such support was available to the four individuals who returned to satisfactory positions but unavailable to the majority who did not. This lack of communication between managers and repatriates violates Gudykunst’s (2005b) AUMM therefore increasing uncertainty, adding to the discomfort and unease felt by the individuals, and raising the likelihood of attrition.

Furthermore, the organisations’ perspective concerning the need to create and maintain a line of communication with their expatriate employees remained unknown. It is widely understood that according to the systems theory of how an organisation functions if a single element is removed (e.g., when someone is sent abroad on assignment) the organisation will reform and

continue with business as usual. Accordingly, whether it was desirable from the organisations' point of view not to facilitate such a line of communication regardless of whether the employee had attempted to maintain a social presence in the home office or not, was not investigated.

As the participants recognised the new skills they had learned, it clearly became obvious to most of them that as part of that learning process they had changed as individuals. As reported above, all 11 participants discussed their perception of having changed as a result of their sojourn. Of particular note here is that that perception was, in each case, positive. They each projected their belief that they had changed for the better, were better equipped socially and professionally to achieve higher results, in line with Gudykunst's (2005b) first superficial cause, Self-Concept; how the repatriate sees them self in relation to those around them is very important. If, through the behaviour of a manager, a returnee feels that their social identity is undervalued, it will lead to increased levels of anxiety.

All of the constituent aspects which emerged to form the three main themes are directly linked to how successful readjustment is or is not. In turn, readjustment is reliant on effective management of each transitional period and in order to do that, each aspect of the return process must be considered. I would argue that in this study each of these aspects are connected to another in part of a different theme, for example, perceiving that one is appointed to an unsatisfactory role on return is related to poor communication from management staff during the assignment period. Not recognising or undervaluing/underutilising newly acquired skills can be related to poor career path planning. Furthermore, each of the three themes can be seen to be

representative of one of the three pillars, affect, behaviour and cognitions, of Ward et al.'s (2001) ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment as described in Chapter 2.

Keeping in mind that research, as discussed in the Introduction chapter, has revealed the cost of sending an individual on assignment can be as much as five times higher than keeping the employee at home, in order for any company to achieve the best return on its investment (ROI), therefore, it should create policies and instigate practices which address all three emerged themes. There are undoubtedly several ways of achieving this and I will now outline one of them as a suggested model for managing repatriation.

### **5.1 A possible solution**

There would seem to be direct relationships between the three pillars of Ward et al.'s (2004) ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment, the three themes that emerged from the current study as well as aspects of reverse culture shock that are able to be addressed by Martin and Harrell's (2004) Re-entry Integration Training Model and I contest that it could conceivably be utilised as a framework of intervention to manage the return process in the follow manner.

The first theme to emerge from the findings, Expectations of home being a familiar place, can be clearly seen to relate to Ward et al.'s (2004). Affect pillar as it details the participants' perceptions of how they experienced stressful changes in their lives, which required a number of different coping strategies to adjust successfully. Martin and Harrell (2004) suggest an approach that addresses psychological health issues by introducing different coping

strategies as required and in which realistic expectations are set and managed. The second theme, Changes in communication and behaviour, is related to the Behaviour pillar as it revealed social skills, communication and behaviour changes that had occurred while on assignment abroad which were perceived to have caused difficulties on return and those were managed at the personal level in order to lessen the likelihood of clashes. Within the Re-entry Integration Model framework, intervention focusing on understanding and managing those changes could be valuable in supporting the repatriate to adjust to functional fitness for their new role. Personal changes and fitting in, the third theme in the current study's findings, reflects the Cognitions pillar of the ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment as it highlighted the relationship between adjustment and identity, and how the latter is affected by interaction on return to the home environment (Martin, 1984). In order to address all three of these elements interventions offered within the Re-entry Integration Model should be designed with communication as a means of managing anxiety and uncertainty levels at its core. I would strongly suggest that a bespoke programme of intervention, tailored to the needs of each individual repatriate, designed in this manner would be likely to have a positive outcome in managing the return process.

I will now use Martin and Harrell's (2004) Re-entry Integration Model to discuss how it might have made the return process easier for the sample of the current study. According to the Re-entry Integration Model, there are four phases to manage; pre-departure, overseas deployment, pre-re-entry, and repatriation and re-entry. Throughout each of these phases aspects of the three ABC pillars must be addressed as they become relevant.



### 5.1.1 Pre-departure Phase

The process of managing repatriation should begin at the start of the pre-departure phase by selecting the right person for overseas deployment in order to fulfil a specific role. The functional fitness for role must be considered and training given as appropriate but it is equally important to consider and discuss how the company plans to employ the individual after their assignment. Implications for career development should be discussed openly while setting realistic expectations and professional goals. Having the opportunity of discussing all parts of an assignment with other colleagues is seen as being crucial to setting realistic expectations of what will happen during subsequent phases particularly repatriation and re-entry. Additionally, allocating a specific managers and colleagues with whom the repatriate can communicate throughout the assignment, including a mentor and a future supervisor provide an open line of communication that alleviates feelings of isolation and exclusion from the home work environment. It is through this communication that employees will receive up to date information about changes in the organisation and their future roles. During this initial phase, managers also need to provide information about social and psychological change issues which repatriates may experience during their assignment. Advice should be given about how this can affect their cultural identity on return. All these actions should be undertaken three to six months prior to departure.

### **5.1.2 Overseas Deployment Phase**

Throughout the period of the assignment when the sojourner is abroad, open and regular communication should continue between the individual and their managers in the home base. Any visits back home during this period should also include face-to-face meetings in order to discuss relevant issues; keeping the employee informed of changes which have occurred or are planned than may impact on any future role. Changes to individual's social and professional identity should be discussed simultaneously, even if they not yet perceived by the repatriate themselves. Including repatriates in the distribution of newsletters, briefing documents or online informative webcasts is highly recommended. These measures will arguably support the repatriate's psychological well-being by enhancing feelings of remaining part of the home-team during their time away.

### **5.2.2 Pre-Re-Entry Phase**

During the month or so immediately preceding repatriation both the repatriate and management need to focus their collective attention on setting realistic expectations for the return. This should include a clear understanding of the overall process, both from a practical and psychological perspective, what new functional competences will be required and when and how they will be maintained in order to fulfil the new role. In short, effective career planning must occur. This may take the form of formal briefings, meetings and/or interviews either in person or online as required. Just as in the preceding

phases, identity development and change is an essential element in this part of the return process and thus must continue to be included throughout.

### **5.1.3 Repatriation and Re-Entry Phase**

It is paramount that a repatriate is made aware of the employer's expectations for their professional role as well as how the repatriation process might affect them. Aside from financial issues, which will be a part of any repatriate's concerns, repatriation is seen as a dynamic process involving altered perceptions about a repatriate's own culture, their cultural identity as well as their professional identity and expectations for the future. It is therefore not sufficient for managers to assume that someone can simply return their old desk and carry on as if they had not been anywhere. Managers must be made aware of the need to provide repatriates with the possibility of evaluating their experiences and negotiate how newly-acquired skills can be utilised to benefit both the individual and the organisation. Such can be achieved through formal briefings and more informal channels using mentors and employees who have experienced similar processes. Professional development should continue as required by the new role and maintaining a network of contacts, including new and existing colleagues, both at home and abroad should be actively encouraged and supported. Finally, discussions concerning social and professional identity development and changes must continue until such time as the repatriate is satisfied that they feel at home again.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS, STUDY EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 Conclusions**

This study has found that despite decades of academic research advancing our understanding of the process of managing expatriation, the same cannot be said of return process as it remains a thorn in the side of repatriates. Relatively little rigorous research has been conducted into repatriation and how best to manage the whole process. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the current study found little or no evidence suggesting a systematic approach in those organizations connected with the sample to managing the return of employees to their home environment.

To briefly answer RQ1, How do professional repatriates returning to their parent organisations in Central Finland perceive the repatriation process?, the current study revealed participants perceived reverse culture shock in different ways. While all interviewees were found to have experienced the phenomenon, some participants described perceptions of experiencing difficulties in the affective, behavioural and/or cognitive elements of culture shock but not always all three, supporting the widely-held view that reverse culture shock is perceived in a unique manner by each repatriate. A lack of preparation for the psychological process of repatriation by both individuals and their employers brought difficulties for most participants in the affective element. It often meant that expectations that home was an easy place to return to were not met. In the behavioural element, new skills that had been learnt on

assignment were reported as being under-utilised as returning roles were not perceived to be at the expected level of responsibility and while communication via computer-based technology helped families to keep in touch, a lack of communication from home offices gave rise to perceptions of career planning and management being ignored, which led to feelings of being under-valued. All participants reported their perceived personal change in positive terms but some revealed they felt those changes were seen not quite so positively by their colleagues on return, increasing the levels of anxiety and making them feel uncomfortable and unsure with their revised cultural identity. Arguably, an accumulation of deficiencies, in whole or part, led to a substantial proportion of the study's sample to seek alternative employment within a very short timeframe after completing their assignments abroad. This situation can be seen to reflect the trend documented by Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2015) that attrition rates of repatriating sojourners are not decreasing. From a business perspective, the return on investment for those companies can be said to be virtually zero - a situation no company can afford in the current business climate.

The three themes which emerged from the data, 1) expectations of home being a familiar place; 2) changes in communication and behaviour; and 3) personal changes and fitting in, were seen to correspond with the three pillars of Ward et al.'s (2004) ABC Model of Cultural Adjustment. I therefore suggest that, in response to RQ 2, Which frame of intervention might have been utilised to manage the repatriation process?, Martin and Harrell's (2004) Re-entry Integration Training Model provides a credible framework of intervention. Had it been used to design bespoke, individual training

programmes aimed at managing anxiety and uncertainty levels, beginning in the pre-deployment phase and continuing throughout the deployment until after repatriation as required, it might have helped the transition for this study's sample. Given the small size of this study, it would, however, be too simplistic to generalize such to a larger group, although one could suggest it is entirely possible to achieve a positive result.

Using Gudykunt's (2005b) AUMM Theory of Strangers'

Intercultural Adjustment to analyse the findings revealed the suggestion that using regular and meaningful communication between the home organisation and the sojourner might have brought forth positive results; a lower attrition rate. This is therefore seen as the major conclusion of the current study.

## **6.2 Study evaluation**

The small sample size and the narrowness of their selection criteria may be seen as limitation of this study. The fact that certain participants were previously known to the researcher could view as being invalid; a non-random purposive group of interviewees may be seen by other researchers as a bias sample. That said, the findings are comparable with other studies conducted in different target niches then, based on this particular situation, one can speculate that similar occurrences might be found in other parts of the sampling frame. Therefore, on that basis, the current study contributes to the growing corpus data on the subject of reverse culture shock, and how to manage its effects on professional sojourners returning to Finland (Frey et al., 2000; Robson, 2002; Krippendorff, 2013).

There were a number of obstacles which impeded the smooth conduct of this research project. For example, one of these was identifying a sufficient number of professionals for the sample group to take part. If the number of participants is too small, a study will undoubtedly not have the desired credibility. As stated earlier, conducting a similar number of interviews that have been included in other studies within the same discipline ought to have alleviated this problem. Furthermore, the current study intended to investigate how the phenomenon of reverse culture shock was perceived by returnees and the number of times a particular manifestation arose, it did not require reaching data saturation and therefore a relatively small sample was seen to be sufficient. In reality, identifying the requisite number of individuals was not the main issue. Finding the time and the opportunity to conduct the interviews was. Those identified were mostly employed in very active, highly responsible roles and therefore their time was at a premium. On occasions it took several attempts over periods exceeding six months and a number of frustrating last-minute cancellations, to find a mutually acceptable time for an interview. Allied to this was the ethical consideration of trust and anonymity. A number of participants expressly stated they did not wish their identity to be revealed as it may compromise their position within their professional environment. Therefore, all interviewees were assured that all reasonable steps would be taken to ensure their anonymity through the use of pseudonyms but at the same time, were reminded that their data was likely to be published as part of this dissertation and therefore, it might be possible that colleagues could be able to identify them due to the nature of the subject under research and the relatively small working communities they belonged to. Despite all the best efforts in

striving to maintain their anonymity, a research cannot be expected to avoid revelations under such latter circumstances.

The English language skills of some of the interviewees also caused some difficulty. Therefore, there was potential that they will either not understand the questions, or misunderstand them. In the absence of any formal guidance on this matter, common-sense prevailed and that meant providing them with a copy of the discussion frame a number of days prior to the interview in order to help them prepare. An alternative solution could have been to employ the services of an interpreter. This was discounted on economic grounds.

There was also the Hawthorne effect and the matter of false reporting to consider. Peoples' behaviour can sometimes be influenced by their awareness of the intentions of the researcher and that may lead to a change in their behaviour (Frey et al., 2000). Such changes are called the Hawthorne effect derived from a 1939 study about the relationship between perceived light levels and productivity in a factory in the U.S.A. An example of such behavioural change could be false reporting; participants reporting what they think the researcher wanted to hear in the misguided belief that they were being helpful. This may have been the case in this study due to the provision of a copy of the discussion frame to the interviewees as described in the previous paragraph. Such a threat to validity was hopefully combated by each interviewee being told of such concerns before the interview begins and reminded that only their own honest opinions and feelings were being sought. Furthermore, taking inferences from the data is subject to interpretation on behalf of the researcher. If a sampling plan is too rigid it could be suggested



that the researcher found only what they were looking for or expected to see. "Where texts and images are involved, or, more generally, where the phenomena of interest to analysts are social in nature, mechanical instruments have serious shortcomings that only culturally competent humans can overcome" (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 127). Yet even such cultural competence is susceptible to the researchers own influences brought about by their own life experiences and education. My own perspective as an immigrant, albeit one of many years' experience working in the geographical area, of the findings is etic and therefore may not be seen as being a "best fit" solution to the situation in Central Finland.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

In the light of this study, I would make the following recommendations for further research. A larger empirical study should be conducted using Martin and Harell's (2004) Re-Entry Integration Training Model to validate its worth practically. An alternative would be to identify an organisation already using the model and validate its success. As this study is about how repatriating employees perceive the return process and what managers can do to improve that perception. One of the key findings was that repatriates did not perceive that management valued their overseas experience when assigning new roles and tasks. Future research could therefore investigate actual transfer of newly acquired knowledge and compare results against perceived outcomes thereby adding value to the data empirically. A further interesting point of study would be to investigate the phenomenon of repatriation communication from the

organisation's point of view; how an organisation manages its communication with those employees working away on assignment, what the management's perceptions of the phenomenon and the process are, what resources can a company allocate to repatriation and why. These are all valid points that deserve further investigation but were beyond the scope of the current study.

Finally, I would suggest that with increasing globalization managers of those firms in Central Finland, and beyond, who need to deploy staff internationally, would be wise to invest in creating sound policies to support their staff and not simply to leave them to sink or swim – it's a harsh world out there.

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