

# Sensemaking in Expatriation—A Theoretical Basis

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## Executive Summary

*Contemporary thinking and research into expatriation has fallen into two clusters: a macrostrategic level and a micropractice level. Some theoretical tension exists between the clusters, and calls for the reframing of understanding gained from the theoretical basis of past acculturation studies to address global management in volatile business environments. This article explores the theoretical concept of sensemaking in expatriation. Two sensemaking elements, Sense of Coherence and Socio-Cultural Brokerage, are introduced as potentially contributing to expatriation responses, together with the implications of sensemaking theory for research and practice in the management of overseas assignments. © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

## INTRODUCTION

In a global economy, people live and work away from the place they consider “home.” The varied way this experience translates into management practice means people experience living and working abroad with widely differing mandates and support infrastructures. A growing body of literature and an international relocation industry feed the interest and requirements of strategists, human resources personnel, line managers, expatriates, and their partners and families to offer advice and information about expatriation in all its guises.

Thinking and research into expatriation has undergone transformation, responding to emerging issues and associated areas of interest. Two major clusters of contemporary research into expatriation have emerged that apparently address very different global business realities: (1) macro-organization issues and strategy and (2) micro-organization issues and the management of expatriates.

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### **Macro-Organization Issues and Strategy**

The first cluster of research covers macro-organization issues in internationalization, with an emphasis on the management of knowledge, structure, and resources (e.g., Perlmutter, 1969; Doz & Prahalad, 1986; Mayrhofer & Brewster, 1996). This is a result of more and more global organizations being forced to cope with the uncertainty of less stable environments (Pauwe, Williams, & Keegan, 1998). "There is not one future but hundreds . . . Getting to the future first is not just about outrunning competitors bent on reaching the same prize. It is also about having one's own view of what the prize is" (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994:9). Such literature encourages players in the field to develop an understanding of the flexibility required in addressing multiple views of the future.

### **Micro-Organization Issues and the Management of Expatriates**

The second cluster of studies considers the way organizations manage their pool of international assignees and forms the basis for recommended practice procedures. Expatriate research to date in this cluster has been reviewed and summarized by Furnham and Bochner (1986), Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991), and by Brewster and Scullion (1997). Creative management of expatriation arises from the need to accommodate the ever-increasing people and assignments that do not fit "standard" expatriate profiles. Complex alternative assignment structures are evolving constantly. These now include, for example, locally employed foreigners, dual-career couples, people working freelance on contract, split and commuter families, and group moves. The intricate nature of working globally includes multinational teams, extensive travel over large regional areas, and international staff who have no clear "home country," and where the relationship with "local" employees is complex. Definitions of expatriates as "employees assigned to live and work in a foreign country for a period of time (not permanently)" (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 1999:iv) have become usual in studies legitimately concerned with the premium paid for such "added-value" employees. These do not reflect current diversity. A definition acknowledging the business interest of an organization or the career interests of individuals would be "people and families who move internationally in pursuit of their occupation."

Research into the management of expatriates may map such diversity descriptively, but retains a theoretical basis (Oberg, 1960; Harris & Moran, 1991) that prizes integration and adjustment for individual expatriates as goals. It is difficult to divorce the prevalence of such incremental adjustment models from traditional forms of expatriation, i.e., the sponsored limited term assignment. Theory concerning

individual and family responses to expatriation should mirror existing organizational theory responding to unstable environments. We need to reframe the understanding gained from the theoretical basis of past acculturation studies in the light of the changed global business environment where today complexity and disorder is the norm. A sense-making model may meet this requirement.

## THE CONCEPT OF SENSEMAKING

Making sense of situations is an understandable concept in everyday speech. In academic terms, sensemaking considers how active agents “structure the unknown” (Waterman, 1990)—a concept that provides a workable framework for the uncertainty and unstable environments encountered in international expatriate experience. Black et al. (1991) have already noted the relevance of the concept of sense-making to expatriation, quoting the work of Louis (1980) on newcomer socialization.

### The Role of Surprise

Louis’ concept of sensemaking is that it is a thinking process that uses retrospection to explain surprise. Individuals act on the basis of programmed scripts. In new situations, especially when meeting circumstances that appear similar to previous experience, they draw on those scripts as a resource to determine action. On occasion, a novel situation will not conform to programmed scripts based on past experience, resulting in unmet expectations or a confusion between past and present understanding, i.e., surprise. Sensemaking is the recurring process whereby conscious rational thought is used to reanalyze and bring order to surprise and “interpretations of discrepancies are developed. . . as an output of the sense-making process, rather than arising concurrently with the perception or detection of differences” (Louis, 1980:241).

Louis suggests attempts to place stimuli into frameworks become most visible when predictions break down. Weick (1995) says this leads to the assumption that sensemaking is partly controlled by expectation. In expatriation, it appears that rather than the expectation of relocation itself (Coyle, 1986), a mismatch of expectation (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 1998:34—“The most common cause of assignment failure is attributed to a mismatch of expectations by 60% of companies”) may be significant. As far as a sensemaking model is concerned, the actual areas where these predictions break down is immaterial . . . whether they concern cultural differences or job fac-

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tors, family issues or organizational differences, the result is that the sensemaking process is triggered.

### **Sensemaking Elements in Expatriation**

What elements can influence the way people deal with this breakdown in prediction? Louis lists four major inputs as instrumental in the sensemaking process: general personal characteristics, past experience, influence of others, and local interpretation schemes.

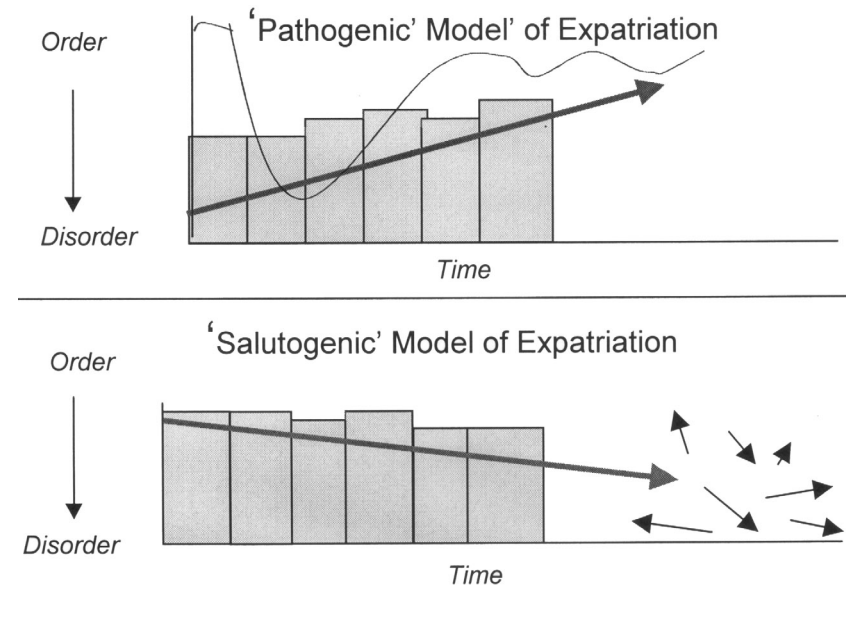
Aspects of these four inputs have been investigated in previous expatriation studies. Factors studied relating individual characteristics to expatriation outcomes include those that may relate to general personal characteristics (empathy: Reuben, 1976; self-confidence: Ivancevich, 1969; initiative and intelligence: Guthrie & Zetnick, 1967; possessing effective communication and listening skills: Abe & Wiseman, 1983). Past experience (Church, 1982; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) has also received attention. By and large, these have produced partial explanations of a complex phenomenon. Similarly, authors have noted the concept of the influence of others via social networks (Brody & Chrisman, 1991), within the family (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, & Bross, 1998) via social control by networks or socialization (Evans, 1991; Harzing, 1999) local interpretation schemes, particularly the use of training schemes (Tung, 1981; Reeves-Ellington, 1993; Brewster & Pickard, 1994), “buddy” systems (Aryee, Wyatt, & Stone, 1996), informal supervision, and mentoring (Feldman & Bolino, 1999).

We propose two sensemaking elements—sense of coherence and sociocultural brokerage—could operationalize the concept of sensemaking in expatriation. Sense of coherence offers to integrate Louis’ general personal characteristics and past experience inputs, and sociocultural brokerage offers to integrate the inputs of influence of others and local interpretation schemes.

### **Sense of Coherence**

In his work on health, Antonovsky (1987) adopts a salutogenic perspective. He recognizes people are dying, and this is accepted as the natural order of things. Health then becomes the product of a series of measures prolonging well-being on the route to death, rather than attempts at “cures” toward immortality. A salutogenic approach to expatriation would see all moves as subject to disorder and change, but containing the seeds of order, as opposed to seeing all moves as organized, containing the seeds of disorder (Figure 1). Change, challenge, and flexibility become inevitable.

**Figure 1. Different Perceptions of Natural Order in the Pathogenic and Salutogenic Model of Expatriation**



Antonovsky suggests a salutogenic model admits certain “pathogens” can be beneficial, i.e., coping with certain stressors may have positive outcomes. This contrasts with the way stress has been treated in the expatriate theory (Zeira & Harrari, 1977; Harvey, 1983; Coyle, 1986) as negative rather than neutral. Antonovsky suggests stressors should not be seen in the context of mitigators, buffers, and moderators, but can also be seen as motivators, movers, and so on. This addresses Coyle’s (1989) observation that models of stress (e.g., Holmes & Rahe, 1967) sometimes do not address the high levels of stress predicted in an expatriate situation that do not result in negative outcomes.

A great deal of adjustment literature concentrates on emotions arising from the breakdown of controlled, predictable environments on expatriation (“culture shock”). There is a debate as to whether anticipating such emotions may help with adjustment, as these emotional responses have been considered problematic and unhelpful. Weick (1995:46) adopts a “salutogenic” approach in considering the emotions associated with interruptions in general. “Interruption is a signal that important changes have occurred in the environment. Thus a key event for emotion is ‘the interruption of an expectation.’ It

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makes good evolutionary sense to construct an organism that reacts significantly when the world is no longer the way it was.” What is commonly known as culture shock can be seen as the emotional manifestation of sensemaking in operation. A study by Hawes and Kealey (1981) of Canadian expatriates in Africa found some of the persons who experienced intense culture shock were ultimately the most effective in their work sphere of technology transfer. Using Antonovsky’s concept of stressors as motivators, movers, and so on, an interpretation can be forwarded that confronting these differences may have contributed to eventual understanding and effectiveness on the assignment.

Antonovsky states “Confronting a stressor . . . results in a state of tension, with which one must deal. Whether the outcome is pathological, neutral or salutary depends on the adequacy of tension management.” Factors determining this are described as “generalized resistance resources” such as money, ego strength, cultural stability, and social supports. Stressors and resources run along a continuum so, for example, lack of peer support is a stressor, good peer support is a resource. All generalized resistance resources facilitate making sense out of the many and varied stressors affecting someone. Antonovsky (1987:19) suggests three intertwined but separate components (comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) build how the patterning of life experiences may affect responses. These result in an individual’s Sense of Coherence, i.e., “a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected.”

Antonovsky believes the most significant feature of a strong Sense of Coherence is the variety and the number of coping strategies available. He says Sense of Coherence is not a trait, or state, but rather a dispositional orientation. Behavior cannot be predicted, although the quality of behavior can. The attraction of using Antonovsky’s Sense of Coherence concept to examine expatriation is that it attempts to bring some predictability to the way individuals meet uncertainty, including the continually changing, unstable business environments described above.

### **Sociocultural Brokerage**

Sensemaking is essentially a social process. Weick says, “Those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate

that shapes interpretations and interpreting. Conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present.” How people are influenced by others, and local interpretation schemes, are essentially the most social dimensions of sensemaking in expatriation. Availability of and accessibility to various types of social contact govern these two inputs. For this reason, sociocultural brokerage (explained below) may act as a vehicle for these inputs and provide a useful second element in a sense-making model.

Where the future is unknown, organizations and individuals become pioneers in novel territory, and in this regard the work of Rogers (1995) on the diffusion of innovation is of interest. He describes the role of individuals who can stand in two camps and provide clarity and interpretation as crucial to the diffusion of innovation. In dynamic fluid environments, such intermediaries may provide the catalyst for the distribution of knowledge. The business advantage of this within organizations has already been noted by Janssens (1995:165). She suggested that in the conduct of global business, “organisations . . . will need mediating persons able to respond to other culture influences by selecting, combining and synthesizing the appropriate features of these respective social systems without losing their cultural cores.” This is not simply a cultural issue, but may be applied to all aspects of expatriate life.

In investigating mediators in an international context, the early anthropological base of the concept is of interest. The term “culture broker” is known mainly in the area of action anthropology to describe people who are able to bridge cultures, acting as agents of change. The anthropologists first advocating brokerage (Wolf, 1966; Bailey, 1969; Long & Roberts, 1984) understood culture as being constantly created and renewed, to be viewed as a process rather than an entity, with man seen as a manipulator. Action anthropologists look not only at how a culture broker influences and interprets between cultures, but also why he does so, and what he gains from the interaction. In many ways, this active concept transfers easily to the environments of global business and complements the employee as an interactive player in learning organizations.

Dennis (1994:303) gives an insight into how the concept relates to expatriation in a very personal account of culture brokerage. “What is it like to actually be a culture broker? From 1989–1991 I directed a Latin American study abroad program for a consortium of U.S. liberal arts colleges. My job involved living in San José, Costa Rica, with

my family, and directing the daily operation of the program. I also visited the colleges and the central U.S. office regularly. I had read about culture brokers, dealt with some of them in different cross-cultural situations and written about them. Now I was one, acutely aware of the role I was playing, all day, every day.” His article is important first because Dennis makes obvious the link of culture brokerage with expatriation. Second, he does so in a way that Weick (1995) advocates in sensemaking studies, using stories and personal input. Dennis concluded: “The most important thing I learned about culture brokering was very simple: that promoting positive personal relationships between different groups allows problems to be worked out successfully.”

Such mediation or brokerage exists within expatriate experience first on an economic basis. Crosscultural training and relocation assistance by professionals have become incorporated as best practice for expatriate provision whether provision is outsourced as with intercultural training (Brewster & Pickard, 1994) or in-house, for example, Reeves-Ellington’s (1993) role as a trained “insider” anthropologist working for Pharmco. In these cases, the tariff is clearly commercially applied. However, informal brokerage has long played a role in expatriation where the tariff is paid in intangible rewards, and indeed, the global relocation industry has largely grown from attempts to offer consistency of help based on informal aid provided previously by volunteer institutions and individuals. The establishment of a support and reference organization such as Shell Outpost has been heralded as a major combination of company resources and the volunteer efforts and expertise of Shell expatriate partners (Soloman, 1994).

Boissevain (1974:7) examined social brokerage as part of network theory to look at “the range of social forms usually dismissed as informal organization. Instead of looking at man as a member of groups and institutional complexes passively obedient to their norms and pressures, it is important to see him as an entrepreneur who tries to manipulate norms and relationships for his own social and psychological benefit.” To some extent, all men in Boissevain’s model are potential brokers, and social configurations are networks of choice-making persons competing for scarce and valued resources. By suggesting all men might be brokers, Boissevain avoids the hermeneutic problems otherwise inherent in the role of culture broker (Geertz, 1984).

Boissevain’s (1974:148) concept of a “social broker,” perhaps particularly appropriate to expatriate networks, is as follows: a social broker “places people in touch with each other either directly or indirectly

for profit.” The profit motive may be latent or manifest, and the reward may vary in type. A broker’s capital consists of his network of relations; his tariff is the value a broker derives from the transaction in goods, information, status, personal satisfaction, etc. This tariff is rarely paid at the moment of transaction, and is rarely specified. Boissevain says a person may become a broker depending on the structure and content of his social network (including centrality, time, and power) and his willingness to use this for personal gain.

We suggest people able to adopt a brokerage role in an expatriate situation may accelerate sensemaking in such situations. This is because through their actions they influence access to and availability of the social properties of sensemaking. Although the social property of sensemaking can be carried out with imagined actors and audiences, greater access to real-life social contacts provided by brokerage can be expected to aid sensemaking.

### Acculturation Responses and “Outcomes”

A number of attempts have been made to describe how an individual’s reaction to expatriation appears in practice. Expatriate literature has identified “transfer archetypes”—in terms of assignment orientation after 10 years (Borg & Harzing, 1996), “modes of acculturation”—in terms of relative contact with home and host countries (Berry, 1992), and “expatriate allegiances”—in terms of the parent firm, the local operation, both, or neither (Black & Gregersen, 1992).

Such categorization helps us to understand and make sense of responses to expatriation. These categories are already understood to be generalized terms made up from the interplay of complex factors. Brett (1980), for instance, pointed out that adjustment to a foreign posting does not necessarily mean that people like their situation. In fact, in the complexity of a sensemaking model, it is to be expected that a range of responses and referents will be in operation at any one time. It will be the way these intertwine that, for the moment, determine a more general framework like those above.

We are interested to consider whether, if expatriates are able to make sense of their experience, this aids their satisfaction, social integration, adjustment—their “general comfort” or their willingness to repeat the experience of expatriation? Previous work on uncertainty reduction in expatriation would suggest this would be the case. However, what we do not know is if sensemaking proscribes acculturation. Louis says newcomers are ill equipped to make sense of the myriad

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surprises that potentially accompany entry into an unfamiliar organization, and suggested they would benefit from a greater understanding of the nature of entry experiences; the implication being that making sense of a situation is to be encouraged. There is, however, a word of caution in this. Sensemaking applies to complex fluid situations precisely, because it can accommodate complex fluid responses. A good example of how sensemaking in practice results in responses that are not always seen as helpful is given by Richards (1997) examining “expatriate paranoia and the dynamics of exclusion.” He says, “It has been argued that the expatriate feels and indeed is excluded from interaction with the host community, and this exclusion contributes to the development of mild or serious paranoid patterns of behaviour. This is a largely rational response to the ambiguous experiences that expatriates encounter, and to the perceived threats that the host culture provides to the identity of the sojourning expatriate” (Richards, 1997:567). An expatriate who sees difficulties and problems as residing in others may be making as much sense for himself as the expatriate who is struggling with what he sees as his own shortcomings in trying to integrate.

We recognize that in making sense of their situation expatriates come to understand aspects that could both increase and decrease happiness with an overseas assignment. They may come to make sense of the situation through learning the ways and structure of a new country, modes of operation at work, new techniques and abilities, different modes of learning and thinking, the benefits of improved financial status, and of relationships with others of different backgrounds. Alternatively, they may sense their expected promotion will not occur, the demands of their family can no longer be accommodated during an overseas assignment, colleagues at home are progressing more quickly, or present travel demands are such that they can just as easily live in their home country.

In sensemaking, people are seen as very much a part of their own environments. Through their actions, they create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face. Weick (1995:20) suggests “the sensemaker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which ‘self’ is appropriate. Depending on who I am my definition of what is ‘out there’ will also change.” In this way the frameworks we employ serve to define and construct what happens to us. If expatriates regard themselves as, for example, “global nomads,” “trailing spouses,” “dual career couples,” or “third culture kids,” this will affect future actions and color recol-

lections of past experience. But this general frame will be subject to further review when expectations are challenged by new input over the course of expatriate (or possibly repatriate) experience. A “free agent” may well change to become a “heart at home” expatriate in the face of serious illness, for example. A “heart at home” expatriate may experience repatriation in a way that leads them to seek further terms abroad; an “assimilated” expatriate might find their allegiance questioned in a situation of local conflict or security problems. Using a sensemaking model expatriates can be seen to be continually reassessing their circumstances in the face of new experiences. This, in turn, may lead to their redefining their satisfaction with their current situation and their future requirements and expectations. Sensemaking allows for complex changes in adjustment and acculturation, not just as more information, understanding, or ease of living becomes available, but in response to the meaning given to such stimuli by the expatriate.

To understand sensemaking it is necessary to try to use multiple gauges (Weick, 1995) to gain some understanding of frameworks in use. Responses in sensemaking terms are the stages in the process when interpretative schemes have found some sort of expression in action and attitude. The resulting enactive environments are constantly in the state of becoming. Disconfirmation of an existing interpretation requires a revised scheme to take its place, and this, in turn, will affect actions. Weick accepts the methodological problems this causes but suggests noticing, manipulation, interpretation, and framing are all legitimate ways of helping others understand the actions of people in everyday life. Referents and accounts are given when a moment in the process of evolving is frozen. What is captured as an “outcome” of sensemaking is just such a frozen moment.

### **A Dynamic Process**

Following a salutogenic model of expatriation, certainty about an overseas experience appears greatest at the start of the assignment. This is in contrast to the perspective of adjustment studies where assignments are seen to be most uncertain at the start. Although it may seem that these two perspectives are diametrically opposed, rather, they are expression of adopting differing levels of abstraction.

For new expatriates, the start of a single assignment will usually be accompanied by a day-to-day lack of certainty, and it is this that is highlighted in adjustment studies. More experienced expatriates are likely to build expectations of a period of settling in which they project will include confusion and bewilderment. This day-to-day uncer-

tainty is predictable, even though the process of living through it can be extremely uncomfortable.

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At a higher level of abstraction, the further we move from the present, the less predictable the surrounding world will be. At the start of the assignment, there is some given understanding about what the contract says, the home and family position as currently constituted, and the expatriate's existing hopes and wishes about what the position will bring. There will often be a real or imagined idea about length of placement, tasks involving what the placement will be like, and any future with the organization. The decision has been made on the basis of present understanding, and this represents a level of certainty in sensemaking terms. Over time, it can be expected that the assignment will be subject to the influence of random unpredictable factors. The resulting disorder should not be equated with the assignment breaking down. It could equally be seen as a promotion to a new assignment, the departure of the employee from the organization, assimilation within a group move, a change in the structure of an assignment to accommodate a split family, or paradoxically, the assignment becoming permanent. The crucial factor is that the end result is accepted to be uncertain at the start of the assignment, and subject to random unpredictable influence. Such disorder and uncertainty is reflected and authored by the diversity of individual expatriates, their families, and their relationships with employing organizations.

Sensemaking differs from the way models of social learning and uncertainty reduction have been previously applied to expatriation. Rather than seeing the experience of expatriation as incremental, moving toward some distant ideal goal, sensemaking allows both for such incremental learning and for situations where all previous learning might be overturned in the face of new input. The model constructed by Gioia and Chittipedi (1991) in relation to organizational sensemaking in strategic change initiation emphasizes how phases in a sensemaking cycle correspond to periods dominated by understanding and influence, respectively. Crucially, the model contains a review mechanism that implies a continuous, ongoing process. Weick (1995:15) says "to talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment." An expatriate will constantly be building understanding of reasons and implications of that experience, based on inputs that he or she can also influence. The expatriate extracts clues to build frameworks that explain their circumstances and may accelerate revelation. These, in turn, produce their frameworks for prospective action.

### **Hypothetical Model**

Integration of all the suggested relations in the previous sections enables us to construct a hypothetical model, schematically represented in Figure 2.

Distance and difference factors creating Surprise are the independent variables. The sensemaking elements (Sense of Coherence and Sociocultural Brokerage) serve as intermediate variables. The dependent variables are acculturation responses, for example, social integration, adjustment, satisfaction, and the preparedness to repeat the experience.

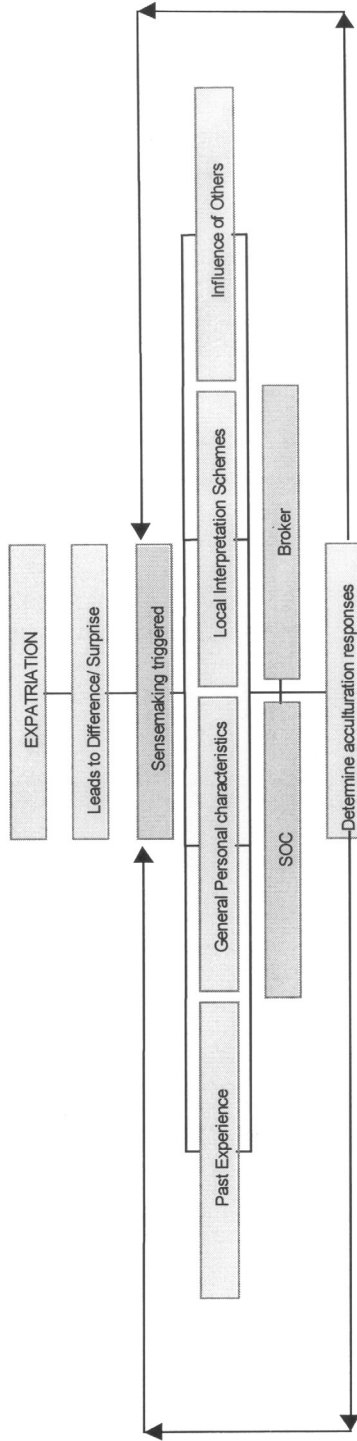
## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF EXPATRIATES**

In this section we will distinguish between implications for research and implications for practice.

### **Implications for Research**

This article suggests that the concept of sensemaking in expatriation will be challenging methodologically. As the concept builds on and to some extent questions adjustment theory in contemporary business environment, it would be useful to employ methodology familiar in such literature. The lack of hard data in the area of expatriation research is often observed, and the opportunity to test theory quantitatively would be welcomed. This could provide a baseline methodology against which to test alternative means of research. The possible shortcomings of quantitative methodology for an investigation of sensemaking are, however, recognized. Difficulties involved with crosscultural research (Tayeb, 1994) become exacerbated by the attempt to apply crosscultural measures to individual meaning. Essentially an internal process, the quicksilver nature of sensemaking has meant that sensemaking studies in other areas have concentrated on self-reporting techniques, critical incident analysis, and storytelling. Weick himself advocates storytelling and its analysis. Expatriation is a special case. Alongside of increasing academic research literature there is a growing body of handbooks, biographies, and “eyewitness” documentary evidence seeking to offer advice and information regarding the expatriation process to interested parties. This parallel literature may well provide a source of examining sensemaking in expatriation. Of major importance in this field is the growth of information, advice, and recollection of experience available via the Internet. In an international field where geographical boundaries are particularly important, a resource that

Figure 2. Hypothetical Model—Sensemaking as a Dynamic Process in Expatriation Determining Acculturation Responses



crosses those boundaries with impunity now provides a major input in preparation for and experience of expatriation. Its academic relevance with regard to expatriation has not yet been fully explored, and it is suggested that the methodology associated with other studies in sensemaking, such as the analysis of diary material, may prove fruitful in this area. Although quantitative methods are required to serve as an initial attempt to explore the relevance of sensemaking theory in expatriation, sensemaking as a process may be elusive using such methods and alternative qualitative methods or combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods may prove more appropriate.

### **Implications for Practice in the Management of Expatriates**

Essentially an internal process, sensemaking does have organizational implications. Personal development and learning programs address the more individual aspects of sensemaking, but it is the social inputs of influence of others and local interpretation schemes—the brokerage element—which is perhaps most accessible to an organization. To what extent do organizations massage brokerage? Many organizations organize mentor programs or other support systems within their expatriate provision. These are most tangible and explicit in the organizations providing family support such as Shell Outpost, Unilever Expatriate Network, The World Bank Volunteer Services, and Schlumberger's Internet initiative. Other organizations use outsourced training and relocation provision representing avenues of brokerage. If surprise consequent on expatriation leads to a review of "mental maps," brokerage can help act as a guide in reconstructing our understanding of the terrain. In this regard, availability of brokers, access to and openness for brokerage should all affect the ability to restructure understanding. In their research into expatriate training, Brewster and Pickard (1994) noted that training appeared to be more effective in places where there were large expatriate communities. They point out this may be because training is directed to operating in such communities. It may also be that in large expatriate communities brokerage is more easily accessible to both interpret and to validate training.

Organizations attempting to provide positive emotions associated with interruption (expatriation) for employees within the sensemaking model are facing an uphill task. Weick (1995) suggests that in a relationship, positive emotions are generated in two ways over time—either by the removal of interrupting negative stimuli, or by the ability to accelerate completion of plans. Although both of these appear within the grasp of an organization, to generate positive emotion, these interventions have to be unexpected. "The implications of these

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propositions about positive emotions for the development of relationships is sobering. As the other person (party) in the relationship becomes more predictable, and as a partner expects that person's (party's) help, there should be fewer occasions for positive emotion to occur" (Weick, 1995:47). This implies some tension between the suggestion that constant, regular expatriate provision may well contribute to an expatriate's comfort, but over time, the ability of this alone to produce positive emotion will reduce. Organizations will have to learn and bring about systems that can engender unexpected intervention to accelerate plans or remove negative stimuli.

There are also implications for timing. Forster and Johnsen (1996) point to the emphasis in the management of expatriation being placed on preparation and arrival, while literature suggests that the most difficult times for expatriates occur some months after arrival. Predeparture provision may help foster the concept that the employing organization has the best interests of its expatriate workers at heart. However, the sensemaking theory would tend to suggest "anticipatory adjustment" is unlikely to be possible, as it is in the nature of the sensemaking process to be retrospective. Reflection is required to bestow meaning. Helping expatriates develop realistic expectations may well be helpful. One aspect should be guarded against, though, and that is to suggest to prospective expatriates themselves that "culture shock" can be avoided. This is sometimes forwarded in marketing literature for courses and predeparture provision. To do so is to set up an expectation that if unmet, according to the theory above, will actively contribute to discomfort. A salutogenic perspective illuminates some dangers of unrealistic expectation. Taking language provision as an example, with a pathogenic model, inadequate provision delays the path to comfort. In a salutogenic model, it increases the path to disorder. For some people, wrongly timed language provision may increase feelings of alienation and failure, and their sensemaking response may be that language skills required for the work are beyond their grasp, and will never be sufficient to be happy on assignment.


As far as sensemaking is concerned, the mechanism itself does not proscribe either accuracy or desirability. Plausibility is more important than accuracy in influencing action. Weick (1995:153) says "if we return to organisational settings we can assume that the changing mix of people solutions and problems through constantly changing decision opportunities thrust up by an unstable competitive world, means that most people, most of the time cannot afford the luxury of accuracy. Instead their goal is to establish some sort of stability and pre-

dictability under conditions that work against this goal.” If someone has made sense of the situation inaccurately or in a way that is undesirable to the organizing body, that’s just the way it is. In the absence of accurate information, sense will be made on the basis of available information. The accuracy of input for others is immaterial until such time as the knowledge of others becomes manifest to the individual. On becoming aware that the understanding of others is different, creating a dissonance in understanding, an individual’s process of sense-making is triggered once more.

If no surprise is encountered, people have no need to review their “mental maps,” and will continue to make sense of their situation based on existing understanding. If inaccurate or inappropriate understanding remains unchallenged, organizations bear some responsibility for the consequences. Thus, it may well be to the advantage of organizations to attempt to influence the input of others and local interpretation schemes to enable people to make sense of their situation in a way that actively promotes the company’s ethics and values and makes these explicit.

What does this mean for the individual expatriate? A recipe for individual action in fluid business environments is summarized by Colville, Waterman, and Weick (1999:135) discussing Peters and Waterman’s (1982) book *In Search of Excellence*. They quote: “You cannot change other people nor can you really change outcomes. Instead, the best you can hope for is to be able to change yourself and have some control over inputs, both of which are likely to happen if you show up and ask, what next?” Sensemaking strategy for individuals and organizations relies on an alert appraisal and use of inputs together with continuing flexibility in meeting future uncertainty.

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