Letter from Euroland: caring for the temporary migrant

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The international movement of traders, political envoys and soldiers is not new. But the late 20th century has seen an unprecedented growth in the activities of at least the first two groups. Increase in international mobility has been accompanied by growing interest in the psychological problems faced by these temporary migrants. It has prompted the development of specialised services for preparing expatriates before departure, and supporting them during their sojourn. Brussels is an example of an international centre with a huge expatriate population, and a demand for a dedicated telephone crisis service. This is the oldest, and one of the largest, services of this kind in Europe.

Mental health in temporary migrants: the problem of 'culture shock'

Unlike refugees, temporary migrants move for their work. They are usually given financial and practical help with relocation. They are frequently screened by their companies, who are eager to avoid health insurance costs: they are usually healthy and (relatively) young. Severe mental illness appears to be rather uncommon in this group.

However, international relocation can cause 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960), a common, perhaps normal, reaction to cultural change (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 49). Culture shock can often cause distress, particularly if relocation is frequent (Stokols & Shumaker, 1982), and may be severe enough to result in an adjustment disorder. The process of adaptation to a new culture has been described as a U-shaped curve (Lysgaard, 1955): initial optimism, a subsequent low or crisis, and a gradual coming to terms with the new culture. The shape of the curve, the stages gone through, and the universality of the process have been disputed (see Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 131–136): the process may be no different from coping with any life event change.

A wide range of factors appear to influence adaptation and the success of a temporary sojourn. Situational factors may be more important than personality characteristics (Parker & McEvoy, 1993), and include support provided by the job, the degree of adjustment of spouse and family, and the novelty of the host country ('culture toughness', Medenhall & Oddou (1985); or 'cultural distance', Babiker *et al* (1980), Church (1982)). Changes in support systems may have a greater negative impact than changes in the physical and material environment (Alston & Nieuwoudt, 1992). Furnham & Bochner (1986, p. 138) argue that the most important variables are the sociocultural skills and information needed to participate in the new society (including knowledge of the local language), and the social support systems that enable these skills to be acquired, rehearsed and deployed. Thus advance preparation can be useful: there are now commercial centres that specialise in providing predeparture briefing for employees. But despite increasing awareness of the importance of providing training for international assignments, many international employees complain of being under-prepared (Dunbar & Ehrlich, 1993; Giacolone & Beard, 1994). Socialising with host nationals may be the most effective way to acquire and practise sociocultural skills. Interaction between the sojourner and host nationals appears to be important in promoting long-term adjustment (Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 128–136).

The capital of Europe

Over 1% of Brussels' population of one million come from the UK, the USA or Ireland. Almost one-third of Brussels' population is non-Belgian: half of these are from countries of the European Union. The majority of these expatriates stay only 2 to 5 years. They work for the institutions of the European Union, NATO or the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), for delegations associated with these institutions (from states, regions, trade organisations and charities), for international companies, or for support services: the international staff and their families require relocation and accommodation services, specialist shops and schools. The six international schools, with 12 000 pupils between them, experience a turnover of about 30% every year.

Since most of the expatriate (as opposed to immigrant) movement to Brussels is from within the developed world, the cultural distance experienced by these temporary migrants may not be great. This should make it easier to socialise with host nationals and integrate. But the large expatriate community offers an enclave, particularly for English-speakers. While this ensures that newcomers can find a social group to 'belong' to, and to maintain home values, it can also reinforce a sense of isolation by increasing distance from the host community (Church, 1982). This appears to be especially true in Brussels: expatriates are commonplace, and their transience and privilege can promote local resentment (Taylor, 1995). The short-term benefits of isolation from the host country may make long-term integration harder.

Services for the English-speaking migrant

English was not one of the original languages of the EEC, and English-speaking expatriates were much less numerous in Brussels in the early days of the Community. But NATO's move from Paris to Brussels in the mid-1960s, and EEC membership for Ireland and the UK in 1973 brought both a substantial influx of native speakers of English and a large group for whom English was the principal foreign language. In 1969 the International Protestant Church in Brussels established an English speaking service modelled on The Samaritans, to provide support to those in emotional crisis. Since then, the Help line has become a telephone crisis and information service, supported by charitable donations, largely from international businesses. (There is an economic incentive to support services that promote employees' adjustment: the cost of early repatriation has been estimated at 2.5 times the employee's annual salary (Ory et al, 1991).)

The need to protect client confidentiality prevents the Help line from collecting detailed statistics. However, the affiliated English-language counselling service has patients not just from the UK, North America and Ireland but from 50 different countries. Many who cannot find a service in their own language prefer to seek help in English rather than in the local languages of French or Flemish.

Slightly over half of calls are for information and practical advice on living in Belgium. The other half are for emotional help. In 1994 there were 1751 distress calls; 31 calls per 1000 estimated English-speaking expatriate population, per year. This compares with an overall Belgian call rate to the four Belgian French speaking and Flemish telephone help lines of 21 calls per 1000 population (Befrienders International, 1995). Figures for telephone calls to UK Samaritan centres for 1994, in cities of comparable size to Brussels, were 26 telephone calls per 1000 population in Birmingham and 22 telephone calls per 1000 population in Manchester. (London and Greater London regions receive a range from 22 to 106 calls per 1000 population.) So the expatriate call rate for emotional help appears relatively high. This may reflect difficulties in adjustment or lack of access to more familiar support systems, whether informal (family and friends) or formal (general practitioner, social worker and other help lines).

The international need

In 1953 The Samaritans were established to provide support to those in emotional crisis; over the last 20 years Befrienders International, "The Samaritans Worldwide", has grown to include befriending centres in 28 countries. In parallel to this movement telephone support/help lines have been set up for English speaking expatriate populations, not just in Brussels, but also in Paris, Madrid, Rome, and The Hague. English-speaking counselling centres have been established in many other capitals, including Manila (which also has a telephone helpline), Cairo, Bangkok and Jakarta. Even the UK has an information service for English-speaking expatriates, aimed at aiding expatriates in adapting quickly to living and working in the UK.

Comment

The growth of the global village is seeing an increase in a new form of ethnic minority. Although usually economically privileged and free from discrimination, expatriate communities demonstrate a need for emotional support and information, perhaps reflecting difficulties with adjustment to their new environment and the lack of access to other sources of support. There is a demand for services for ethnic minorities, not just for immigrants and refugees, but also for temporary migrants.

Acknowledgements

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