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# **A Stranger in a Foreign Land: Identity Transition in Blogs about Transnational Relocation**

## **Abstract**

Moving to a different country has become an established part of a globalised economy, and such transnational movement has engendered a rich genre of writing describing this phenomenon. The internet has provided a new means of making sense of this experience through ‘expatriate’ blogging. In these blogs the experience of dislocation and relocation, of moving from the taken for granted to uncertainty, is described from the position of being an ‘expat’, a ‘non-local’, or a ‘stranger’ (Schuetz 1944). Relocation provides a point of reflection as once familiar routines are questioned and initially unfamiliar ones are becoming more established. Whilst this transition is often experienced as a personal one, in the genre of expatriate blogging individuals relate their experience through personal and public self-reflection. Afforded by the chronological nature of these blogs, individuals draw on time as a resource to document their transition, highlighting an evolving identity. In this paper we use Membership Categorisation Analysis to examine expatriate blogging as a discursive practice, and we explore analytically how to approach social identity as fluid and evolving where transnational relocation is framed as categorial transition.

**Keywords:** blogging, expatriate, identity transition, membership categorisation analysis, transnational relocation.

## **1. Introduction**

When individuals move to a different country and embark on life abroad, they find themselves cast into a new environment where they are confronted with unfamiliar cultural practices and expectations. This experience of being foreign or a ‘stranger’ in a place impacts individuals’ sense of identity, which in turn is a rich source for negotiating such experience in letters, novels, plays and songs. Whilst this genre has a long history (cf. Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-1920), the internet has provided a new means of describing this experience through ‘expatriate’ blogging (Walz 2018), a discursive practice where individuals document and reflect on their transnational relocation by keeping a personal blog about their experiences. Whilst much of the research in this area has been conducted through the functionalist paradigm, with an emphasis on being of value to organisations, recent research has called for a realignment of emphasis towards understanding the view point of ‘self-initiated expatriates’ and their experience of transnational relocation (McKenna 2010; McKenna and Richardson 2016). For McKenna and Richardson (2016: 161), this means drawing on and analysing naturally occurring data of individuals’ described experience, for example in their single case of correspondence documenting the transition and providing a “narrative of mobility”. In this paper, we build on this emerging research direction through examining ‘narratives of mobility’ through blog

posts where people discuss and describe their experience as identity in transition during transnational relocation.

Our discussion begins with an overview of approaches to identity transition in the social sciences. We then argue that expatriate blogging communicates the experience of both personal identities and social identities within a process of transition, before offering a brief explanation of key concepts of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) drawn on for the analysis. Following the introduction of the data and method, the subsequent analysis consists of three parts: firstly, we discuss how before relocation individuals begin to reflect on their current environment in the process of leaving the taken for granted. Secondly, we examine the experience of relocation with regard to three aspects: how bloggers deal with its practical consequences, its emotional consequences, and how they express ownership of their experience as time goes by. Finally, the analysis explores individuals' negotiation of visiting home and how this adds a new perspective to that which was once familiar.

## **2. Identity transition**

The study of identity transition has a particular lineage in the social sciences and has been explored by a number of prominent social theorists. For instance, the concept of *liminality* was introduced by Van Gennep (1960 [1909]), and through the work of Turner (1967, 1969) it has made an impact on the social sciences (Szakolczai 2009). It conceptualises identity transition as three stages: the abandoning of a relatively stable social identity, the liminal phase of being “betwixt and between” social positions, and finally the reintegration into a new social identity (Turner 1969: 95). Liminality is thus a transformative process. In its original conceptualisation it is a finite phase with a clear outcome, although recent research has argued that liminality can extend into a permanent state of enduring transition (Szakolczai 2014).

Other work has focused on the *loss* of social identity (Garfinkel 1956, 1967; Goffman 1968; Foucault 1977). At the heart of this interest is the way in which social identity is transformed, often under duress through the stripping away (conceptually as well as physically) of a person's social identities, to be replaced with just one overarching identity. Goffman (1968) and Foucault (1977) focused on the process of mortification of the social being within total institutions away from the public gaze, whilst Garfinkel's (1956, 1967) work examined the transitioning of social identity in public. In one of Garfinkel's (1956) earliest studies he discussed the stripping away of social identity as part of the public spectacle of degradation ceremonies. The process of public degradation involved highlighting the flaws in the moral character of the person as part of the process of reduction and transformation of the person's social identities into one of ‘wrongdoer’.

Yet probably Garfinkel's most well-known study of identity transition is that of ‘Agnes’ (Garfinkel 1967; see also the short documentary *Framing Agnes*, Joynt and Schilt 2019), who was seeking genital realignment surgery. In what is considered the

first sociological case study of a transitioning person, Garfinkel describes how Agnes was learning to ‘pass’ as a female in public. Agnes’s awareness of how to pass and the managed achievement of passing to avoid the risk of public exposure highlighted the way social identity was managed in and through the routine norms of interactions that were largely unquestioned.

Whilst Agnes’s transitioning occurred within a familiar cultural frame, in his famous essay ‘The Stranger’, Schuetz (1944) describes the mundane experience of relocation to a different culture. In this process, the person becomes a ‘stranger’, whose own patterns of thinking and doing things differ from that of the approached group. As a consequence, what used to be “an unquestionable way of life” (Schuetz 1944: 507) no longer holds true and requires the stranger to adjust. The experience of being a stranger in a foreign place is thus traced through the mundane problems of, for example, not knowing how to use buses or post letters. The transition is also experienced as occurring over time, as the unfamiliar becomes more familiar and finally evolves into the new taken for granted.

Geographical and sociocultural mobility in connection to transition have been explored from a range of perspectives. For instance, within the field on privileged migration such as expatriation, there is a strand of research that predominantly explores ‘adjustment’ from a psychological, quantitative angle (van Oudenhoven et al. 2003; Lee and Sukoco 2008), or with a view of how human resources can cater to the needs of such transnationally mobile individuals (O’Reilly 2003; Gertsen and Søderberg 2010). Furthermore, studies in the field of lifestyle migration generally take an ethnographic approach and are concerned with identity and integration (O’Reilly 2000; Benson 2011; Lawson 2016). Finally, geographical mobility has been explored in the sense that leaving the familiar and getting into contact with the foreign is seen as a transformative experience, and such transformation is indeed what is sought and welcomed by individuals, be it through an encounter of risk (Bosangit et al. 2015), a sense of freedom (White and White 2004) or more generally ‘the other’ (Noy 2004), an experience frequently negotiated through the medium of blogging (Kluge 2011; Frank-Job and Kluge 2012; Snee 2013, 2014). In this paper, we focus on the experience of transnational relocation and of identity in transition through the analysis of expatriate blogs.

### **3. Expatriate blogging as an individual and categorial practice**

Blogs offer an opportunity for self-expression, which has been identified as an important motivating factor for blogging in general (Puschmann 2013: 88). This paper supports this view, in line with the strand of research that conceptualises blogging as “identity work” (Heyd 2017: 164). In the context of transnational relocation, blogging provides an online platform through which people can describe their experiences in a new place and their personal reflections on their sense of identity (Kluge 2011; Frank-Job and Kluge 2012). Similar to a small diary entry (Rettberg 2014), expatriate blog posts contain descriptions of and reflections on the writer’s experience of the

mundane social encounters. As more posts are added over time, the blog becomes a cumulative body of texts and the individual experiences become placed within an expanding and evolving cultural context. Blogging as a form of communication is therefore inherently chronological, affording individuals to post with certain regularity, whilst building up an archive of previous posts and thereby visibly establishing a trajectory of leaving, settling into life abroad and becoming over time. This form of data provides a rich resource, containing the blogger's own analytic insight into experiencing identity in a state of transition. Whilst blogs are often initiated by individuals to keep family and friends 'back home' informed about their life abroad and to document their progress for themselves, they may also reach a much wider readership, including people unknown to the author, as the blog is public. Indeed, some bloggers show themselves surprised and pleased to have attracted a readership far broader than anticipated (Walz 2018) and may shift the framing of their blog from personal to public, for instance in providing advice for other people who are about to move to a different country (Walz 2020). Their personal experience is thus given a wider-reaching relevance.

At the heart of the blogs examined below is the individuals' experience of dislocation and relocation, of moving from a taken for granted culture to one of uncertainty in their everyday encounters. In these encounters, they are confronted with the experience of a new culture and the business of how to negotiate this, of how to actually get things done. Through this process, the unfamiliar gradually becomes familiar, and what was previously familiar becomes overlaid and melded with the new familiar. Within this form of blogging, the individual experience is often seen through the experience of social identity, of a social category of 'stranger', 'foreigner' or 'non-local'. This occurs through individuals' own personal reflections on their experience of being in a new place, seeing new landscapes and meeting new people. This frame of reference oscillates between a personal identity experience and a social identity experience of being a member of the category 'expat' (Sacks 1992). Moreover, this is also experienced as a category in transition: being a member of the social category 'expat' entails experiencing transformation as a routine part of membership. Expatriate blogs then provide a description not only of what is encountered, but also of a personal and social reflection on the journey of identity in transition.

#### **4. Membership categorisation analysis**

Given the rich identity and categorial work within expatriate blogs, we draw on Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) to explore how the bloggers negotiate their and others' identities in describing their experience of being foreign or non-local as they move through the different stages of becoming, if not a 'local', at least comfortable with the routine working of the new society they live in. MCA is based on the original work by Sacks (1992) and was developed further by Hester and Eglin (1997a), Watson (1997), Housley and Fitzgerald (2002), Stokoe (2012), and

Fitzgerald and Housley (2015). It provides a rigorous approach particularly suitable to the study of social organisation and social identity through its focus on social-knowledge-in-action and the categorial resources people use for sense-making in their everyday encounters and interactions.

Sacks' (1974, 1992) classic example taken from the beginning of a child's story illustrates the working of *membership categories* as a resource: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.' Whilst the story would seem straightforward, making sense of the characters and actions draws heavily on taken for granted knowledge, or the assumed common sense, of the reader. That we may understand that the characters (membership categories) are connected, and that the first action leads to the second action, is based on assumed taken for granted sociocultural work, where social categories perform actions with other social categories due to their perceived routine category-based relationship. For example, despite the categories of 'baby' and 'mommy' appearing in two separate sentences, we may read it that the mommy is the mommy of the baby. That is, the reader treats the two categories as connected, as category members of the *device* 'family': the 'mommy' is the mother of the baby, and 'picking it up' is a *category-bound activity* in the sense that this activity can expectably be done by a mother with her baby. In developing Sacks' original work, research has also expanded the concept of category-bound activities to *predicates* more generally, including activities, but also "rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competencies" (Hester and Eglin 1997b: 5; see also Reynolds and Fitzgerald 2015). Members' use and assemblage of sociocultural knowledge in understanding the story provides a glimpse of the *in situ* methods of making sense of this story as *culture-in-action*. MCA then provides a way to analytically explore the ways in which social knowledge is organised and invoked as culture-in-action and as normatively organised.

Whilst this written story provides an illustration of the basic concepts of MCA and the routine work of categories, devices and predicates, Sacks' analytic focus was primarily on how members use these categorial practices in everyday situations. For MCA, members' categorial work is always treated as locally occasioned, as invoked for the purpose of its use in any particular instance, rather than being fixed or unchanging. Moreover, membership of categories does not remain static, but may also undergo transformations in the very occurrence of their use and over time. For example, in one of his lectures, Sacks (1992: 330, vol. II) discusses a conversation between a couple and an older relative where, in the course of being offered food that the older man is reluctant to eat, he eventually becomes categorised as a 'stubborn old man' (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010). Such "reality-in-the-making" has also been examined in rolling news coverage, where the initial descriptions of events and people change as new information comes to hand (Stokoe and Attenborough 2015: 61). Our discussion below is similarly concerned with the phenomenon of categorial transformation, here, where a person living in one culture moves to and settles into a new one, and in the process reflects on their changing social and personal identities.

## 5. Data and method

The expatriate blogosphere consists of personal blogs written by individuals who have relocated abroad. They are online spaces in which bloggers discuss their experiences of everyday life in a different country. They are situated in the context of relatively privileged migration (Amit 2007; Croucher 2012), with individuals having chosen to relocate for reasons such as work or relationships, but not out of hardship. This is reflected in the term *expatriate* with which several bloggers self-identify. The term is not without problems, as it connotes “classed Western whiteness” (Leonard 2010: 2) and suggests a distinction from individuals referred to as *immigrant* (Koutonin 2015). Differentiating between these terms has been shown to impact on individuals in various national contexts (Leinonen 2012; Vora 2012; Yeung 2016), although both are encompassed in the United Nations’ (1998: 10) definition of *long-term international migrant* as “[a] person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence”. Yet whilst pointing out its challenges, this research adopts the term *expatriate* because it is a members’ resource for making sense of their experience of relatively privileged migration.

As outlined above, the audience of expatriate blogs is diverse, ranging from the bloggers’ family and friends to other people who have moved abroad or simply enjoy reading about it. To enable this form of engagement, bloggers can include their page in expatriate blog directories, which link to a multitude of blogs about life abroad, sorted by country of residence and indicating the bloggers’ country of origin.

Two directories were surveyed in April 2015, yielding 381 accessible blogs by expatriates in England. The selection of blogs was narrowed down according to the following criteria: they were active at the time of data collection, written in English by a single person for non-professional purposes, featuring content related to life abroad, were begun around the time of the blogger’s relocation to England and orienting to this, and continued for at least one year of life abroad. This resulted in a sample of 30 blogs, whose authors were then contacted. 12 gave consent to be included in the research, with only one expressing a wish not to be considered, and no response from the remaining bloggers. The data collected from the 12 blogs consist of all posts from the beginning of the blog up to one year beyond relocation, all of which had already been written at that time and were thus not influenced by this research. Overall, a total of 568 posts containing 273,586 words were analysed.

Of the surveyed 381 blogs, 302 (79%) were written by women. This prevalence of women in the expatriate blogosphere aligns with early research on blogging, which has found that personal blogs are mostly written by women (Nowson and Oberlander 2006), and it is mirrored in other types of blogging, such as the so-called mummy blogging (for example, Orton-Johnson 2017). This gender distribution is also reflected in the analysed data, where 11 of the 12 bloggers are women. Whilst this

paper presents extracts from three of these blogs, an engagement with identity in transition occurs in all analysed blogs, and all were analysed in equal depth, as outlined below.

The posts were imported into the qualitative data analysis software *NVivo* and were grouped into four sets depending on when they were produced. The first set comprises all posts before relocation, and the second the posts during relocation and up to one month after, capturing the earliest stages of individuals' process of settling into life abroad. The third and the fourth set contain posts from two to six months abroad, and seven to twelve months respectively. This subdivision served to explore what bloggers discuss at which stage of relocation, whilst of course acknowledging that human experience and its discursive negotiation is complex and cannot be grouped neatly into chronological stages. Nevertheless, the division is based on the insight that posts are particularly frequent during the early stages of life abroad, when bloggers write about their multitude of impressions and new experiences, or in Schuetz's (1944: 499) words work towards identifying the established "cultural pattern of group life" in their new environment.

All posts were read and scrutinised repeatedly whilst taking analytical notes. From this it was clear that individuals routinely engage in and relate their experience through their categorial work. Such work was found to comprise two broad phenomena: a negotiation of whether individuals saw themselves as fitting into a category and what such a category might entail, hence its predicates, and an engagement with how they were changing category membership, for instance by becoming a member of a new category (Walz 2018). From this it transpired that bloggers were conceiving the experience of being an expatriate as one of transition over time. The analysis then focused on instances of these reflections and how bloggers oriented to them through a categorial lens to express their new and evolving sense of foreignness. Within the blogs, individuals draw on a wide range of options to convey this phenomenon, and choose different descriptions in different instances and over time. However, whilst the particular categories used could differ, such as 'expat', 'tourist', 'other', 'resident', national categories or a contrast to 'natives', the experience conveyed in the blogs was framed within the device of transnational relocation, and the experience across the bloggers was categorially similar. It is not then the particular category they selected from the collection that is at the heart of the analysis, but how they conveyed their experience of transnational relocation through categorial work. This is one of the strengths of MCA, as negotiations of what it means to be a member of a category, such as a 'expat' or 'resident', can be achieved without an explicit mention of the category; for instance, one blogger was listing category predicates under the heading 'You Know You Are Living In England When...'. Thus, whilst explicit category work is routinely used within the blogs, the analysis is also able to explore categorial work through predicates and actions where explicit category terms are not used (Sacks 1992: 292-299, vol. I; Stokoe 2012: 282; Housley and Fitzgerald 2015). From the analysis of such negotiations emerged an understanding that along with the use of category descriptions for their personal experience, the



bloggers display awareness that their experience is not unique and that relocation constitutes a broader phenomenon of individuals negotiating cultural ‘foreignness’.

In the analysis that follows, we begin before the move abroad, where individuals orient to the impending move by beginning to reflect on what they are about to leave behind. The second section discusses the experience of being in a new environment, a new culture, which involves practical and emotional matters as well as an orientation to time and ownership of the experience. Finally, we examine posts about visiting back home and how a re-encounter of the previously taken for granted cultural pattern now leads to a sense of estrangement from what used to be familiar and unquestioned.

## **6. Leaving the taken for granted**

Several expatriates begin their blog before they relocate to a different country. In this respect, expatriate blogs differ from the traditional ‘letter to home’ written from abroad. Blogging allows expatriates to begin telling the story of their move before it actually happens. This shapes the way the story is told and allows conclusions to be drawn about the intended audience of such blogs. The pre-relocation posts contain stories and reflections on the preparations for moving abroad, encompassing practical matters such as obtaining the necessary documentation and making travel arrangements, as well as reflections on the emotional side of transnational relocation, the leave-taking and heading into the unknown. The sharing of such matters in turn indicates that the intended audience of expatriate blogs is potentially wider than friends and family, and that the blog is of potential interest to other people who are also moving abroad, as a form of sharing an experience.

In the stages before relocation, and anticipating the change ahead, bloggers reflect on their soon-to-be-‘old’ identity as a person who is leaving. A marked example of this is Megan’s opening post to her blog.

### **Example 1 [Megan]**

#### **Going Afield**

1. abroad; away from home.
2. off the beaten path; far and wide: to go afield in one’s reading.
3. off the mark: His criticism was totally afield.
4. in or to the field or countryside.
5. beyond the range or field of one’s experience, knowledge, acquaintanceship, etc.: a philosophy far afield of previous philosophical thought. (dictionary.com)

My original plan was to name the blog [Megan] Abroad, but the domain name was taken, and this seems more fitting. I am moving away from home, away from the beaten path where my life to date has led me and definitely beyond the range of my current experiences. I suppose I am also

moving literally to the field or country side as well. The blog name is appropriate.

I will be moving from New England, where I have lived my entire life, across the pond to England in the fall. It was a difficult and complicated decision, but I am confident it was the right one.

More details to come.

Cheers!

Megan's first post entitled 'Going Afield' sets out to explain her situation. Drawing on a dictionary definition of *afield*, Megan relates this to her upcoming move. She emphasises away-ness: not only is she physically moving away from home, but this in turn takes her away from established routine and familiarity and into the unknown. She frames this as so central to her experience that it warrants the name of her blog. In moving abroad, Megan becomes a person 'afield'. No longer is she 'Megan who lives in New England', but she is becoming 'Megan who now lives in England'. Indeed, the original name she has intended for her blog, 'Megan Abroad', points to both that she is no longer going to be 'at home', and that 'Megan' abroad is somehow different from 'Megan' at home.

The process of being taken out of familiar contexts and removed from previous routines and identities is also visible in Leah's reflections roughly one week before her move abroad. The anticipated change already impacts on the present, shaping her day-to-day life as a person who is about to leave.

## **Example 2 [Leah]**

### **Onward!**

I am getting into the week of Lasts. Of course there's the big obvious ones like Last Time to See Friends and Family, Last Chance to Find Something Important I Need, or Last Experiences in [US state]. However, there are also the little ones like Last Laundry Day, Last Night of Cat Purring on My Head, or Last Time Just Sitting in the Living Room with Family that seem to make me even more emotional. The big things you can mentally prep for – it's the little things that will get you unexpectedly.

Leah reflects on her final week before moving as a series of 'lasts' involving gathering everything she needs for her relocation and saying goodbye to people close to her. Reflecting on this as a stage of transition, she writes about this making her aware of previous unremarkable routines, such as doing laundry or interacting with her family and her cat, which she will no longer be able to do once she has left. For both Megan and Leah, the reflection on the currently familiar as soon to be in the past indicates a first shift in identity into a stage of pre-relocation, where the previously unremarkable is made remarkable, and where the previous routine takes on a significance not

experienced before. For Leah, the ‘last time’ device then provides a point of transition by making these events into a collection of ‘last times’. Of course it is not so much that it will be the last time Leah will ever see these people and do these things, but the last time she will do so before she moves and is no longer in the familiar ‘scene’ of these events.

In these examples, through the anticipation of relocation, separation is already in progress. This begins to make the familiar strange, something to notice and reflect on as part of the experience of separation. Whilst the bloggers do not invoke explicit membership categories, through collecting and reflecting on what they now associate with their soon-to-be past, they are already beginning to treat this as a device to collect and therefore bracket their once familiar and unquestioned scheme of reference.

## **7. Arriving and living abroad**

### **7.1 Practical matters**

Relocating and settling into life abroad requires adjustment and learning on multiple levels. First and foremost, individuals need to address practical matters of everyday life, such as finding accommodation and establishing new routines. In a post just over three months after her relocation, Megan reflects on where she finds herself in this process.

#### **Example 3 [Megan]**

##### **Going Native**

I would like to think I’m finally getting the hang of life here. I’ve got a few favorite pubs, I know that when someone says the first floor, they really mean the second floor, I bought some British clothing items (intimidating because of the size difference but I survived!) and I got a British hair cut. This is progress right? The haircut was a bit of a struggle because finding a new hair dresser is never easy, even at home. [...] I just wish I’d thought about it a little more, and realized that when she asked me if I wanted fringe, she was asking if I wanted bangs. I’m not sure how I feel about them yet.

Megan reflects on her new surroundings and on setting up new routines. She has tried out the ‘pubs’ (public houses) in her area and demonstrates this by both adopting the local term and reporting that she has been to a few and has found her favourites. Her transition into life in the UK also includes finding a regular hairdresser. Finding a pub and a hairdresser is not simply finding one for one occasion, say as a tourist, but finding one that she will visit frequently, meaning that she has found ‘her’ *local* pubs and hairdresser.

Through recounting these experiences, Megan highlights a stage of transition, how she is gradually ‘getting the hang of life here’. For Megan, this reflects a developing scheme of reference that involves both the physical landscape of pubs and hairdressers, and how to engage with people in the new local situation. In the process, she still encounters some difficulties, such as that some things are called differently – ‘bangs’ in the US are ‘fringe’ in the UK. This barrier she unexpectedly meets with at the hairdresser’s has physical consequences in the form of an unintended hairstyle. It is not the case, however, that everything she used to take for granted has ceased to be useful; rather, her scheme of reference is gradually adapting and being mapped in relation to her experiences in the new environment.

Moreover, the process that the title of this post sums up as ‘Going Native’ does not so much involve *becoming* a local, but rather gaining local knowledge, the common-sense knowledge that Megan relates as ‘getting the hang of life here’. The established expression ‘going native’ itself involves a juxtaposition of the dynamic, the process of attaining a new membership category, and the static, the fact that ‘natives’ by their nature are local by birth and so naturally possess local cultural knowledge. The idea of ‘going native’ then functions similarly to category “puzzles” (Silverman 2001: 151), which involve unusual combinations (Stokoe and Attenborough 2015: 66) of membership categories and category predicates and can be used to produce humorous effects (Stokoe 2012: 281). The juxtaposition highlights that Megan needs to learn local knowledge to understand potentially strange situations, such as the wrong haircut that she comments on somewhat humorously. Megan uses the formulation of ‘going native’ to draw attention to the transition she is undergoing as she is learning to navigate her new environment.

## **7.2 Emotional matters**

Whilst Megan describes how she has dealt with a number of practical matters during the process of becoming more familiar with her new surroundings, relocation is also experienced through the emotional consequences of the transition. Bloggers devote extensive reflections to what relocation and being in a new place feels like, as the following extracts from a post by Jessica illustrate.

### **Example 4 [Jessica]**

#### **Expatriate Life – Holding on to your confidence**

##### **Confidence**

When the newness and excitement of an overseas move wears off and you begin to settle in, there is a strange feeling that may overcome you, or maybe it's just me. It's a little uncomfortable, kind of awkward and I've been trying to figure out how to put it into words. Trying to figure out how to explain to my friends and family what it's like to live in a foreign

country. Because I should be on cloud nine everyday, right? And most of the time I am, but what are these feelings of being uncomfortable and awkward actually affecting in me? Well....

It's confidence.

And there it is. Living your life as an expat can truly shake your confidence in ways that you never thought possible. Living in America for 29 years, no matter what city, I have always felt confident in my daily decisions, like where I grocery shop, what lane I need to be in while driving, how to communicate with people, how to dress, how to buy movie tickets, HOW TO CROSS THE STREET, etc, etc. Having never lived as an expat, I've never thought twice about how to do daily activities and have felt confident in my decisions. I have had almost total confidence in myself.

To further dive into this I need to give you some examples of just how my confidence has been tested. [...]

Jessica posts this reflection after roughly five months in England, at a stage where her initial 'excitement' about relocation is subsiding and she is reflecting on what living as an 'expat' feels like. She feels that she does not quite fit in with her surroundings, that they are 'strange', somewhat 'uncomfortable' and 'awkward'. Her feelings of awkwardness are compared to how she thinks others back home perceive the generalised category 'expat' and the experience this entails, assuming that she should be very happy. Because this is not the case, her feelings of unease become accountable. Whilst it is not clear how Jessica's friends and family actually feel about her being an expatriate, Jessica invokes the category and associated predicates to highlight her own perceived category disjuncture, which consists in the dilemma that she *is* an expatriate, yet is not feeling like one *should* feel. She identifies the issue as 'confidence', before then relating the things that she took for granted in the US, which is now no longer possible in her new environment. Not doing routine things in familiar surroundings is a constant challenge to her thinking-as-usual, and therefore for Jessica, confidence is a necessary attribute to develop as part of 'Expatriate Life'.

Jessica then goes on to provide examples of the way in which her confidence has been affected.

#### **Example 5 [Jessica]**

Shopping in general has been interesting because I never know what I am supposed to be doing at checkout. Some places make you bag your own groceries and some don't, and I just always feel awkward when asking. And then comes paying. The chip and pin cards are new for us and I usually manage to mess up the transaction. Or if I am counting out my

British coins, it takes me forever. I feel like a 7 year old counting out his pennies at the ice cream shop!

Jessica's example of grocery shopping is used to document her struggles in a number of ways. Firstly, she is uncertain of what constitutes expected behaviour at the checkout, how to be a 'customer' in this place, which is compounded by her reluctance to reveal this uncertainty by asking whether she should bag her own groceries or not. Further, she lacks experience of successfully completing a card transaction and is not very familiar with British currency, feeling that picking the right coins takes her too long. Jessica then invokes stage-of-life category work (Sacks 1974, 1992) to map her experience of shopping onto being a child learning about shopping. For Jessica, learning about coins is something a child does through buying small treat items like ice cream, whilst Jessica is an adult buying groceries. Her feelings of awkwardness then come from her feeling like a child, from not feeling like a competent adult in this scenario.

In all the blogs discussed above, the idea of a temporal transition is central to the experience of relocation. It takes the shape of anticipation before moving, of setting out to acquire a 'local' scheme of reference, and of overcoming challenges as time progresses. For Jessica, the confidence she had in doing everyday things before moving now needs to be recovered as part of becoming a successful expatriate. This highlights the way bloggers relate to time and transition bound up with their evolving identity as a central aspect of understanding and describing the relocation experience.

### **7.3 Time as a resource for owning the experience**

Along with documenting their transitional experience through particular instances, bloggers also reflect on the temporal experience of being away from home and on the passage of time in relation to their experience. A prominent way of doing so is through comparisons between their expectations of expatriate life before relocation and what they know now based on living abroad themselves. Discussing how their initial expectations were wrong provides a comparison with their new insights and a way of demonstrating their transition status into one of experienced expatriate. Just over five months after relocation, Jessica reflects on what she has learnt about life as an expatriate for future expatriates.

#### **Example 6 [Jessica]**

##### **Expat Life – What they didn't tell me...**

A couple of weeks ago I posted about maintaining your *confidence as an expat*. And today I'm teaming up with HiFX and their *Expat Tips* campaign to bring you some advice that I wish someone would have told me before moving to England! But to be honest, I'm not sure I would have

listened to anyone telling me about the realities of moving to another country. Before we moved, I imagined a fairytale life ahead of me, frolicking through the European streets, eating delicate pastries and sipping tea. No one could interrupt my fantasy with reality!!

So maybe friends did tell me these things....I just didn't listen. Maybe you might happen upon this post and let some reality sink in a bit, unlike myself. So I'm lending my advice to the online world of expats or soon to be expats with things I wish someone would have told me..... [...]

Give yourself a good 6 months to feel normal again. Gosh, I wish someone would have told me this. Having just passed the 5 month mark in England, everyday is getting easier. I feel so much more comfortable in my surroundings. It was only when I stopped being so hard on myself was I able to relax and adjust with time. I really expected to adjust with lightning speed. And I gave myself a hard time when I didn't. You may adjust faster, but really, don't be hard on yourself. Everyone adjusts at different speeds and this is OK.

Notably, Jessica's blog is no longer only designed for friends and family back home, but now also for other expatriates. She addresses this new audience from the position of giving 'Expat Tips' hosted by the banking organisation *HiFX*. She now offers her experience of being an expatriate as guidance to current and potential future expatriates, shifting to the public nature and potentially wider readership of blogging.

It is also apparent that Jessica uses time as a central resource to frame her experiences. In the above post, she uses a category-based time device, where she contrasts her past assumptions about expatriate life before moving abroad with her current views based on her experiences of being an expatriate. Portraying her former expectations as a 'fantasy' of a 'fairytale life' then enables her to position her advice as now real and valid, having lived through it. Jessica begins the post with the temporal device of *before* and *now*, by which she is able to contrast her previous understanding with experience predicated with the acquisition of knowledge over time. As such, the pre-expatriate person does not have the same knowledge as the experienced expatriate. Switching within the temporal device provides a way of adopting different perspectives and of giving 'advice' to future expatriates on what to *actually* expect. The advice is not based around how to do things, such as how to rent a house, buy groceries or manage money, but around the emotional experience of time. It is structured around time spent as an expatriate, namely giving yourself 'a good 6 months to feel normal again' and having 'passed the 5 month mark', as well as involving temporally based insights, such as not to give yourself 'a hard time' and how important it was that Jessica 'stopped being so hard on myself'. The change of assumed address for the blog from family and friends to advice for expatriates is also achieved by treating her personal experience as categorial experience, as the experience 'new' expatriates can expect to go through. Thus, predicating her personal

experience to a categorial experience allows Jessica to offer her advice as a *temporally seasoned* member of the category ‘expat’.

Similarly to Jessica, Leah takes stock of her experience six months after relocation through a reflection on her time in England. Leah’s advice focuses on the day-to-day experiences of being an American in England.

### **Example 7 [Leah]**

#### **Six Months On: Things I’ve Learned**

[...]

9. Make an effort to blend in to the culture, but don’t try to fit in. You will always be marked as an other. [...]

11. Don’t bother explaining you aren’t a tourist and actually live in the country right now. Nobody will believe you or particularly care. [...]

15. Everyone will assume as an American that you understand all of English social norms. You will not. Be prepared to get exasperated expressions and sighs. [...]

44. You will get x’s at the end of texts and emails from SO’s, good friends, and family. Like, every single text and email. You will be asked why you aren’t sending them back. You will possibly upset someone with a lack or surplus of x’s. You will finally get used to it and then accidentally put them on texts and emails to people back in the US. They will be incredibly confused. The cycle will continue.

In this post, Leah presents a list of 50 things that she has learnt since moving to England, and, like Jessica, treats the experience of being an expatriate as acquired over time. Again, similarly to Jessica’s advice, the things discussed are not how to find accommodation or how to get a taxi, but are more situated in her routine experiences that provide points of reflection on the day-to-day cultural differences encountered. Another similarity to Jessica’s post is the shift from personal experience to categorial experience.

However, Leah also predicates her experience to a particular category of expatriate, the American expatriate. Whereas Jessica’s advice is neither situated explicitly in her being American nor portrayed as advice for people coming from the US, Leah’s advice is explicitly based around a cultural device of ‘American’ and ‘English’. This device then provides a frame for Leah to occupy both categories of American *and* experienced expatriate, from which to relate her personal experience of culture shock as a routine experience of American expatriates. For Leah, no matter how long US expatriates are in the UK, they will never fully transition into being a local, and the most that can be hoped for is that they may eventually ‘fit in’ with the culture.



However, whilst not ever being a local, Leah also relates how she now confuses people back home in the US with her new habits acquired in the UK.

## **8. Visiting ‘home’**

As Leah’s discussion above shows, transnational relocation impacts on individuals not only with regard to being in a new environment, but also by affecting contact with the people and places they left. When bloggers visit ‘home’ again, they often reflect on their experience of being at home, which now itself appears strange. Several bloggers comment on the fact that they see their home with fresh eyes, suddenly being aware of aspects that had gone unnoticed before or expressing estrangement from previously familiar matters. A case in point is Jessica’s comment below.

### **Example 8 [Jessica]**

#### **Hello from the States!**

[...]

Being back in the States is well, strange. The vast parking lots, the large highways, the unhealthy state of our people, all of it is strange. I am enjoying the the time with my family but I long for my British town! It is such a strange way to feel!!

Whilst her previous advice was not specifically for US expatriates, in this post Jessica uses this device to discuss going back home by setting up a contrast device between the US and the UK. It seems that for Jessica, the experience of homecoming is a further form of culture shock in the transitional experience of the expatriate (Schuetz 1945). Whilst enjoying being with her family in the US, she also describes a longing to be elsewhere, to be back in the UK. This is also framed through her descriptions of the now strange landscape of home. The poignancy of this feeling of dislocation lies in Jessica’s self-category work and her description of ‘our people’. Whilst she claims membership of the collection ‘our people’, she does this as someone observing from a distance, where the previously unremarkable is now becoming remarkable, and appraising what used to go unnoticed and unquestioned.

Megan draws on very similar resources in her report on a visit to the US that leads her to reflect more broadly on what constitutes home for her.

### **Example 9 [Megan]**

#### **Going “Home”**

One of the most bizarre things about expat life is taking trips back to your home town, and being on vacation while everyone else is living the life

you used to live as well. Maybe in larger cities it isn't as strange, but in small town [US state], it isn't like there are tons of people wandering around on weekdays to socialize with, and it takes a while to check back in to the things you were so used to before (dollar bills, driving on the right, leaving a tip).

For Megan, the 'bizarre' and 'strange' feeling of being home is related to the routine life of the small US town she lived in. Whilst for Jessica the estrangement lies in experiencing the once familiar landscape through foreign eyes, for Megan it is that she is no longer part of the routine day-to-day life of the town. She is now a visitor disconnected from the local rhythms of the people and place. For Megan, the routines of the two categories of visitor and local are now brought into relief where *her* once local routine remains in place, yet she is but an observer of it, and where once routine transactions now take effort and awareness. She concludes her post as follows.

#### **Example 10 [Megan]**

Leaving "home" even after a short visit never seems to get easier. It's so refreshing and rejuvenating to visit but painful to leave. But this time, when the plane touched down in [UK city] I felt like I had arrived home. So that's progress, maybe I have two places to call home instead of none.

What do you do on your visits "home"?

Megan now puts 'home' in quotation marks, signalling that this term no longer aptly captures her relationship to the place where she once lived, as now leaving her old 'home' means she is also on her way home. She frames this realisation as 'progress', acknowledging the change that her relocation experience and transition has meant that she now feels at 'home' in two places. This points to reflecting on 'home' as more than merely a place to live in, but a place to be very familiar with, indeed familiar enough to be equated with the original feeling of 'home'.

In these posts, visiting 'home' provides the two bloggers with a chance to quite literally revisit their former surroundings and practices and reflect on their former self. However, as each relates, this is not a straightforward return to the routine and familiar, but an unsettling experience where they bring into contrast their previous and current experience of home. Between the two encounters with 'home' lies the experience of the new place, which in turn causes a reflection on the once familiar place. The individual's experience of the old place is timeless, it is as it was left, yet they no longer feel as connected to it, they are no longer a part of its routines. For them, it is they who have changed, and their experience of being somewhere else, their new taken for granted, provides a point of reflection and manifests itself in a more observational stance towards what was once the familiar frame of reference. At

the heart of these reflections is the sense of identity transition, of loss of one and membership of another. The bloggers' personal experience then documents the transition of their thinking-as-usual and of their familiar scheme of reference as a reflection of the process of identity change and of their own realisation of becoming an 'expat'.

## **9. Conclusion**

In the above discussion we have focused on transnational relocation as described and reflected on in expatriate blogs. In particular, we have examined how personal and social identities are invoked by the bloggers as ways to make sense of being in a new environment, and of their experience of transition both in practical and emotional terms. Furthermore, time is made relevant not only as a measurement of how long has been spent in the new place, but also, more importantly, time enables the bloggers to conceive of their experience as evolving, and consequently of themselves as transitioning and becoming. The analysis has explored how the individual description of change is bound up with a categorial trajectory, as the bloggers' framing of their experience shifts from personal to categorial. This also provides a way for the description of personal experience to be mapped onto the categorial evolution of 'expat' to a point where the person, now as an experienced expatriate, can give advice to others. Thus, while membership may be premised on embarking on transnational relocation, it is time spent and experiences made abroad that drives the transition of identity and enables bloggers to ultimately position themselves as successful expatriates.

Our discussion highlights how expatriate blogging is shaped by the affordances of the online medium: blogging not only enables the writers to describe their life abroad in terms of their personal experiences, but it also allows them to frame these descriptions publicly as a series of categorial work that constitutes them as expatriates who are becoming familiar with the nature of life abroad.

Exploring this phenomenon through MCA offers a way of examining what resources bloggers draw on to describe and make sense of identity transition in their own terms. It thus provides an approach to transnational relocation and its perceived impact on the individual through the bloggers' own descriptions and as reflected on through their own experience. The strength of MCA firstly lies in its ability to explore categorial work in the particular context of its occurrence. Yet beyond this, our discussion shows that despite its focus on the occasioned nature of categorial phenomena, MCA is well suited for capturing identity as fluid and changing over time in the form of a categorial trajectory. Our analysis thus provides a new way of exploring how descriptions of transnational experiences are conveyed through categorial transition, which unfolds not only in a dynamic world, but also specifically within the scope of online spaces that have become firmly established in everyday life.

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