Linköping University | Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning
International Master, 15ECTC | Adult Learning and Global Change
Autumn 2015 | LIU-IBL/IMPALGC-A—16/003-SE

Workplace Learning Across Boundaries

–An interview study on professional development and identity formation in intercultural work contexts

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I discuss workplace learning during international assignments in a variety of work sectors. In addition to normal adjustments to a new workplace, foreign language acquisition and cultural adaptation are necessary. By collecting and analyzing narratives of a group of Swedish professionals with international work assignments, I have found some regularities and variations of workplace learning as well as some significant effects that these assignments had on their identity. Recommendations are given to providers of preparatory courses for international work assignments as well as sending organizations and employers.

The main finding is that workplace learning for international workers follows a trajectory starting already long before departure and continues throughout different phases of the assignment. It also has effects on work life after the return to one's home culture. The learning resulting from the work assignment affected all areas of life (not only work life) and contributed towards an intercultural identity. This kind of assignment often included networking with several organizations and groups of people of varying nationalities. Instead of working towards becoming full members of one work community, the participants in this study often found themselves in the peripheries of multiple ones. This peripheral albeit influential situation provided many opportunities for learning, both for the individual and the groups they work with. In this way, these international workers have the potential to be agents of change and development in all work communities they relate to.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural identity, communities of practice, cultural adaptation, development work, workplace learning

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis is the final requirement for the international Master program Adult Learning and Global Change (ALGC), offered by the University of Linköping in collaboration with the Canadian University of British Columbia, the South African University of Western Cape and the Australian Monash University. This Master program and this research has broadened my understanding of adult learning and I would like to thank all my tutors at these universities. All students were helpful in my learning process but one of them stood out, Cindy Lowe, my Canadian learning partner who put my study efforts in perspective and cheered me on the whole way. Had this course been offered in a classroom (as opposed to online) I picture us sitting next to each other.

Heartfelt thanks to my supervisor Anders Hallqvist at the University of Linköping without whom this thesis would not have been completed.

I would also like to thank the training institute in Sweden that provided advice on literature, names of possible participants as well as valuable feedback once my thesis was almost ready. I am especially grateful to the participants of this study who entrusted me with their personal stories of workplace learning. You have my support and admiration.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family; Magnus, Victor and Jonathan Alphonce whose support took me through this long learning endeavor. Your love and patience with your, at times, absentminded wife and mother was noted and greatly appreciated. Living and learning with you add deep meaning to my life.

Linköping, December 28, 2015

Maria Alphonce

INTRODUCTION

"Our perspectives on learning matter: what we think about learning influences where we recognize learning, as well as what we do when we realize we must do something about it -as individuals, as communities, as organizations" (Wenger, 1998 p9).

Learning to function and thrive at any new workplace takes time and effort. Learning to function and thrive in a linguistically and culturally different work environment requires even more, both of the new worker and the people on the receiving end. The need for intercultural insights and competencies is felt by an increasing number of organizations today. Therefore, more and more companies, agencies and educational institutions offer training to their employees prior to work assignments abroad to prepare them for cultural adaptation and stressful situations. This training is essential but the learning for professionals involved in intercultural work begins even before this preparatory training, continues throughout the work assignment with effects in future work situations as well. In addition, it spans over a variety of learning forms.

In this research project, I will analyze regularities and variations on workplace learning experiences in intercultural work situations. The participants in this study are Swedes with work experiences in the area of aid and development in different nations in Asia or Africa. Their work assignments were mostly innovative in nature, that is, they had to create their own work description in communication with the sending organization in Sweden and the receiving organization in the host country. Examples of work situations for the participants in this study were establishing a training program in pediatric care for nurses, training volunteers for work with disabled children, rural community development, development of social work among minorities, English teaching, pedagogical training and work for women's and children's rights. These were their main roles but all participants were involved in a variety of longer or shorter periods of additional volunteer work.

I will analyze the material I collected from the participants using sociocultural learning theories along with some theories on cross-cultural adaptation. Based on my findings, I hope to give a few recommendations regarding learning strategies, for individuals, communities and sending organizations involved in intercultural work.

Once foreign professionals settle in their host country and start working, their learning situation generally changes from mostly explicit and formal learning in their home culture to self-directed, informal "on-the-job" learning in the foreign culture. Some organizations offer orientation courses upon arrival in the host nation in order to provide basic language introduction and cultural insights. These are valuable and help the newly arrived worker adapt in a safe environment. However, studies show that intercultural competence is mainly acquired through social interaction in combination with sequenced program design to facilitate learning before, during and after the intercultural experience. Learning increases when there is a balance between challenge and support (Bennett, 2004, 2011). Intercultural competence has been defined in the following ways: "…a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that supports effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett 2011). Alvino and Fantini describe intercultural competence as "…a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (2006 p12).

Research on workplace learning spans over many levels: individual learning and organizational learning to name a few. The participants in this study went through preparatory training in intercultural studies at an institute in Sweden. They received their work assignment and general work description from one organization in Sweden in cooperation with organizations in their host countries. The receiving organizations are usually international or local NGOs. Although relating to different organizations, on a daily basis the participants found themselves working in quite isolated and experimental work situations, such as starting up new development projects. The nature of their work often involved fluid boundaries between work and free time. Thus, their workplace learning affected them both as individuals and as families as well as the different organizations and networks they are involved with.

Research aim and research questions

My aim with this research is to understand what workplace learning looks like for Swedish development workers in culturally and linguistically different contexts. As mentioned before, the participants of this study have all kinds of professional backgrounds and work in a variety of sociocultural contexts. They do have a few things in common: their choice of working abroad in an intercultural work situation was motivated by their faith in God. They were all

trained in intercultural studies at the same training institute in Sweden and they had all received their work assignment by the same organization in Sweden.
More specifically, I will ask:
-What regularities and varieties are there in workplace learning strategies and experiences among Swedish development workers during their adjustment to a foreign work environment?
-How does this work assignment affect their identity?

By asking these questions, I hope to gain a better understanding of workplace learning for this group of people, how intercultural competence is acquired and what kind of, if any, assistance may be needed in this learning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace learning

According to a number of studies, there are significant benefits for both individuals and sending organizations resulting from the learning and competence acquired during service abroad (Crabtree, 1998; Kiely, 2002; Porter & Monard, 2001. In Chang et al.) These benefits include intercultural competence, language skills, tolerance for ambiguity and an understanding of complex global problems among other competencies.

There are several ways of viewing learning; a common way is to differentiate between formal and informal learning. Formal learning would be when new knowledge or skills are acquired as the result of instruction or other activities by trained teachers at schools or similar institutions. Workplace learning typically involves informal learning or experiential learning (learning by reflecting on doing). In his article, *Informal learning and work: conditions, process and logics* (2010), Per-Erik Ellström presents a few more forms of learning:

> ***Informal learning*:** learning that occurs at work or in daily life as a result of other activities, that is, when learning is not the primary goal
> ***Implicit learning:*** learning without awareness or intention to learn
> ***Adaptive learning*:** when newcomers learn and adapt to existing work routines at a workplace, also referred to as workplace socialization
> ***Developmental learning:*** when individuals or groups question existing work routines or standard solutions of problems and work on developing new ways of dealing with issues at work

In her article *Perspectives into learning at the workplace* (2008) Päivi Tynjälä distinguishes between the nature of workplace learning and school learning. Typically, school learning is based on formal, intentional educational activities while at work, learning is often informal (2008). Informal learning takes place in the everyday performing at work and often produces tacit learning while formal learning is intentional, organized and meant to produce explicit, formal knowledge and skills. Tynjälä points out that informal learning may produce undesired outcomes such as bad habits and dysfunctional practices; so ideally, workplace learning is both informal and formal (2008). Applied to my topic of research, immersion in a foreign culture does not by default result in successful intercultural learning and cross-cultural adaptation (Trede et.al., 2013). Or in John Dewey's words, "not all experience is genuinely or equally educative /…/ some experiences are mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938 p13). Furthermore, today's knowledge society is producing new knowledge at such a rapid pace that informal learning cannot keep up with the demands. Tynjälä suggests that work organizations need to pick up the tacit knowledge of individual workers and transform it into explicit knowledge in order to benefit the whole organization (2008). Finally, Tynjälä indicates that education and work are moving closer to each other. Formal and informal learning need to be integrated in order to develop the kind of expertise needed in the ever-changing working life (2008).

Like Tynjälä, Ellström emphasizes the informal learning potential of the workplace (2010). He quotes Shoshana Zuboff, "Learning is not something that requires time out from productive activity; learning is the heart of productive activity.' (Zuboff (1988 p395) in Ellström, 2010 p105). Learning at work is dependent on outside factors such as the workplace itself and individual factors (motivation, previous learning, skills, etc.). It is the interaction between these factors at work that produces opportunities for workplace learning.

These theories suggest that workplace learning is mostly informal and "on-the-job," however; learning is increased when there is some formal input as well. The benefits of this combination would be both personal and organizational.

Intercultural competence

Whether you look at studies of international managers in multinational corporations (Lenartowizc, 2013) or workers and volunteers in non-government organizations (ed. William

D Taylor, 1997) they all point the same direction: without intercultural competence, work efficiency is reduced and costs (monetary, relational, etc.) increased (Lenartowizc, 2013; Hay et.al, 2006; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996). As a result of these studies, there is an abundance of training opportunities available prior to international study or work assignments. The purpose of this form of training is to maximize the experience and effectiveness as well as minimize anxiety of the individual involved in international work or studies (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2005). There are also organizational benefits as a result of better-prepared individuals. This training may be of varying length and foci but are generally considered a necessity for international work (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996).

By nature and design, pre-service training tends to emphasize cognitive and explicit learning (Lenartowitz, 2013) and is often effective in increasing awareness of global and cultural differences. However, acquiring intercultural competence is a much more complex and transformational learning process that needs time (Kaufmann et al. 2013; Chang et al. 2012). This competency is gained through direct social interaction between people of different cultural background. Much research has been done on the effectiveness of the pre-assignment programs in diverse fields such as student exchange programs, multinational corporations and Christian mission and development organizations (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Lenartowicz, 2013; Bartel-Radic, 2006; Taylor, 1997). My intention is not to evaluate the effectiveness of these training programs per se but rather see how international workers gain the skills and competencies needed for their work assignment, preparatory courses being one part of that learning process.

In addition to or in place of pre-field training, some organizations offer orientation programs upon arrival in the host country. They usually give a cultural overview, survival skills, some introduction to the host language and different strategies how to survive culture shock and stress. According to Hay et.al's study covering 40% of evangelical mission- and development organizations, these orientation courses correlate positively with retention of staff (2006). In addition, personal and professional development during the assignment is strongly related to staff retention (Hay et.al., 2006). Ongoing language and cultural learning was highly correlated with preventable attrition. It also gave a sense of worth and value, which lead to increased motivation (Hay et.al., 2006).

Anne Bartel-Radic's study on global teams shows that long-term intercultural interaction facilitates great learning opportunities for intercultural competence (2006). That said, research

on professionals and exchange students with international experience show that this learning does not occur automatically. ”Immersion in culture is not, on its own, an assurance of intercultural learning.” (Trede et.al., 2013, p443). Furthermore, they suggest that intercultural experiences without a pedagogical framework may actually reinforce stereotypical beliefs about other countries, customs and norms (2013). This confirms Dewey’s statement that not all experience educates (1938).

Lenartowicz et.al have studied how cultural knowledge is acquired and spread in international organizations. They claim that since cross-cultural knowledge is tacit (experienced informally, personally and not easily expressed in words), formal pre-service intercultural training based on explicit knowledge is less effective (Lenartowicz, 2013). Comparing five different learning theories: Kolb, Anderson, Nonaka et.al, Bhawuk, Wyss-Flamm, they conclude that cultural knowledge in adults is created through experiencing culture (tacit), then reflecting on and evaluating that experience (explicit) and then more experiences (tacit) in a cyclic fashion (Lenartowicz, 2013). In other words, there needs to be an interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge in order to acquire intercultural competence (Lenartowicz, 2013). These cycles of explicit and tacit learning are repeated.

The above-mentioned literature has covered why intercultural competence is important for individuals and organizations involved in international work and how it is acquired. Pre-field training courses are valid for many reasons; however, the above literature suggests that intercultural competence is acquired over time in cross-cultural contexts and not necessarily in formal learning situations. If this is true, it suggests a change of perspective on learning by individuals and organizations involved in international work. By collecting narrative material on international work adjustment experiences, I hope to understand more what international workplace learning entails, how intercultural competence is acquired and what kind of, if any, assistance may be needed in this process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

My aim with this research is to understand what workplace learning looks like for Swedish development workers in culturally and linguistically different contexts. The nature of my informants’ work assignments does not imply learning at a physical workplace or facility, it is rather a learning process based on a work assignment that spans a variety of contexts. For them, “workplace learning” involves transferring professional knowledge and skills across

language boundaries, cultural and socio-economic differences and becoming interculturally competent as they do so. In order to get a more complete understanding of workplace learning for this group of people, I will use two theoretical areas, namely: socio-cultural learning and cultural adaptation. In this section, I will explain certain concepts in these theoretical areas that are relevant to my analysis.

Socio-cultural learning perspectives view adult learning as a social phenomenon. Learning results from interaction, negotiation, and collaboration in social relationships (Scott, Palinscar, 2006-2012*)*. Rather than looking at individuals' cognitive learning processes, this perspective focuses on how relationships provide contexts and structure for learning and identity formation. Of all perspectives available, I have chosen to use Etienne Wenger's theory of Communities of practice (1998). More specifically I will use his theories on varying learning trajectories, and his concepts of peripherality and boundary relationships to understand workplace learning for my informants. Simply expressed, workplace learning is about becoming competent in a work role. In a foreign environment, gaining that competence is more or less impossible without language skills or intercultural competence, which is why I will use some theoretical concepts relating to cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural competence as well. I will mainly refer to parts of Young Yun Kim's Integrative theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (2001). Below, I will introduce these theories and concepts briefly.

Socio-cultural learning: Communities of practice

We are social beings. This is Etienne Wenger's entry point on what matters about learning and how it connects to knowledge (1998). Knowledge is a matter of practice in a certain area or enterprise. To know is to participate in such an enterprise, to be actively engaged in the world. Learning helps us experience this world as meaningful. Wenger develops this perspective in his theory called Communities of practice. These communities refer to a group that has a common interest or purpose and work together to reach that purpose. As they do so, they learn to cope with their circumstances, develop as people and this gives them a sense of meaning, competence and identity (Wenger, 2008). These groups can be anything from neighbors keeping their neighborhood clean and safe, a sports team working on achieving their goals, or colleagues learning how to improve their work situation. A profession, a workplace or a sports team are not by themselves communities of practice, the key element

here is that there is a task to be done, a goal to be reached together and as it is done, it involves developing new competencies and constructing new identities.

The components of Wenger's social theory of learning are: meaning, practice, community and identity (1998). Everyone belongs to communities of practice: some past, some present, some as full members or even leaders while others take a more peripheral role. Some memberships in communities are central to our identities while others are temporary and peripheral. In life, there is ongoing negotiation between these different memberships and an ongoing work of maintaining one's identity.

Learning Trajectories

According to Wenger, learning in a community of practice follows different learning trajectories. These are not fixed routes but a continuous motion (1998). Normally, workplace-learning trajectories would be *inbound.* Learning starts in the peripheries with the goal of becoming full members of a workplace. A newcomer gains competence and solidifies membership as time goes by.

Alternatives to inbound trajectories are *peripheral-, insider-, boundary- and outbound* trajectories (Wenger, 1998). As it suggests, a peripheral learning trajectory refers to when a learner gets access to a professional community, even when the intended goal is not full participation. Nevertheless, the learning resulting from that experience can contribute significantly to the learner's identity. Peripherality can involve both observation and participation but does not involve full membership of the community. Opportunities for learning are available for both the individuals in the periphery and those that are full members of the community of practice. The periphery is, according to Wenger, a fertile area for learning and change since it is partially outside and in contact with other communities of practice and partially on the inside and in contact with the core of the community of practice. In other words, there is a constant renegotiation and learning going on. People can stay in the peripheries over time. There is continuity, areas of overlap, meeting places, organized or casual participation.

By belonging to several professional communities simultaneously there is a brokering between them. Some learning actually comes out of spanning and linking these different communities of practice. Wenger calls this a *boundary* trajectory. Boundaries and peripheries

are different but connected. Even in the periphery, a person can feel fulfilled and feel like a full member of the community. But now and then, boundaries will be revealed and felt by the person in the periphery, for example by not being fluent in the language, not understanding a common cultural reference, or having a different living standard to the others. In other words, a reminder that one is not a full member after all (Wenger, 1998).

Finally, *outbound* trajectories describe the learning involved when someone leaves a community and prepares for the next. What competencies gained in the old community of practice will be needed in the new community? What skills are transferable? There is an element of reflection, evaluation and closure of relationships.

Peripherality and legitimacy

Wenger has together with Anthropologist Jean Lave described the process of entering an already existing Community of Practice by using the term legitimate peripheral participation (1998). According to them, peripherality and legitimacy are two components necessary to make new people members of communities of practice. As described above, peripherality is the beginning of workplace learning, similar to an internship. There are fewer expectations on the newcomer as to what they can actually accomplish and be responsible for. Workplace socialization is a learning experience where mistakes are made and older generations at the workplace are there to teach, process, correct and encourage (Wenger, 1998 p100). Whether learning a new language, new cultural cues, or work skills, my interviewees are all familiar with this stage of workplace learning.

The second component of work adaptation is legitimacy. In order for the newcomer to be able to enter into the Community of Practice, they need to be granted legitimacy by the existing members of the work community they are trying to join. If the hosts are not welcoming the newcomer, learning will be negatively affected. Legitimacy may be expressed as being useful or having the right profession or nationality.

Boundary relationships

Another aspect of Wenger's theory is the duality of boundary relationships (1998, p104-105). As mentioned before, it is common to belong to several parallel communities of practice at any specific time in life. We can be members of a family, a neighborhood, a book club and a workplace all at the same time. Some work roles involve being part of several work related communities of practice as well. While it may seem confusing and complicated to handle

memberships of different communities that all have a claim on a person's work performance, Wenger assures that it is possible (1998). The connections between these communities through the worker can even be beneficial to learning in the different communities. That said, maintaining memberships and negotiating identity in these different communities of practice simultaneously is challenging. The ideologies or practice of one community may clash with the ideologies or practice of another. Reconciling different aspects of different communities requires a transformation or re-construction of identities that can bridge or contain different sets of values and competencies at the same time.

Cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural competence

Cross-cultural adaptation is by definition about experiencing differences and realizing patterns of differences in groups of people and adapting to them. A more recent term regarding cross-cultural adaptation is intercultural competence. This concept entails being sensitive to other worldviews and cultural behavior and knowing what to do in culturally different situations. According to Milton Bennet (2004), cross-cultural adaptation is not a substitution of a person's primary cultural identity with a new identity but rather an extension of it. He claims that it is possible to operate effectively in a different cultural environment and still keep ones own beliefs and behavior (Bennet, 2004). In his own words, "Integration of cultural difference is the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews." (Bennet, 2004, p10). Alvino Fantini describes intercultural competence as "abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (2006, p.12, emphasis in original). Among other things, his research shows that learning the host language affects intercultural development in positive ways and that intercultural experiences are life-altering (Fantini, 2006).

Young Yun Kim's Integrative theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Kim defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (2001, p31).

Kim makes three assumptions regarding cross-cultural adaptation based on open systems theory. The first assumption is that humans have an innate self-organizing drive and capacity to adapt to environmental challenges. Secondly, this adaptation occurs in and through

communication. Finally, it is a complex and dynamic process that brings about a qualitative transformation of the individual (Kim, 2001).

Kim tries to bridge different factors of cross-cultural adaptation such as host environment and personal factors, long-term and short-term adaptation and factors of new learning and psychological growth in adaptation. In her theory, she attempts to combine the assimilationist view and the pluralist view, in other words, both how we adapt to our environment and how we maintain our ethnic identities (2001).

She describes cross-cultural adaptation as a process. Children are socialized into the culture of their parents. This is for the most part an unconscious learning process and it occurs as children interact with their environment and learn how to decode symbols and systems of communication, in other words, learn their mother tongue and birth culture. This way, children grow up to become functional adults in society. That said, in this time of increased globalization, this enculturation process is quite complex as several cultural and linguistic systems coexist in many of today's societies. When an adult changes cultural environment, he or she starts noticing differences. There may be uncertainties regarding how to interact or behave due to a lack of language or cultural cues. In fact, it is not until an encounter with something different that we begin to be aware of our own "internalized cultural imprinting" (Kim, 2001, p50). This situation often leads to some level of stress, in some cases even an identity crisis. In addition to an individual's internal reactions, the host environment may react in negative or positive ways towards the "difference" that the newcomer brings. Still, humans have a compulsion to learn and adapt to new ways. Kim has named the process of learning and adapting: *acculturation.* She claims it is not merely learning new things but even re-learning some very basic skills and expressions. This re-learning process she calls: *deculturation,* or the unlearning of some old cultural elements. This intense learning phase is an interplay of both acculturation and deculturation, which often leads to a transformation of self. It starts with re-learning outward behavior, roles as well as language. However, deculturation and acculturation of values and beliefs is much more difficult and take much longer to transform, if ever (Kim, 2001).

Stress-adaptation-growth model

Needless to say, stress is a reoccurring feeling when people settle in a new country without knowing the culture and the language. When individuals cannot meet the demands around

them, they experience stress. Kim describes how, when confronted with the need to let go of cultural ideas and behavior from ones upbringing, individuals often react by wanting to hold on to them harder. This state does not stay forever. The feeling of being different in combination with heightened stress propels the foreigner towards adaptation. In the deculturation-acculturation process, some of the host environment's ways and beliefs are internalized and brings growth to the individual. "A crisis, once managed, presents the stranger with an opportunity for new learning and for strengthening his or her coping abilities" (Kim, 2001, p56). The stress-adaptation-growth process is not linear and proceeds in a cyclic journey. Cultural stress may make individuals temporarily draw back from intercultural interaction for a while. This withdrawal gives new energy and drive to adapt, which leads to personal learning and growth. In this cyclic way, a person is transformed according to Kim (2001). There are exceptions to this process. For some, the stress does not lead to adaptation and growth but rather the opposite: psychological ill health.

Kim describes three components of internal transformation that the foreigner goes through as he or she is adapting to the host environment. He or she starts to feel better (psychological health), function better in the new society (functional fitness) and eventually experience a transformation of identity (intercultural identity). This is not necessarily a linear process but a going back and forth, hopefully in the direction of intercultural identity. Functional fitness is very much related to competencies in language and cultural cues and appropriate behavior. As the "stranger" functions better in the new environment, more basic human needs are met and there is a sense of well-being and belonging. According to Kim, the opposite is also true, where competence in communication is lacking, the stranger's functionality in that society decreases, which in turn leads to an increase of mental, emotional stress. When stress increases it may lead to serious psychological ill health. However, according to Kim, most foreigners are able to move on from this state of culture shock through the repeated stress-adaptation-growth process.

Whether we are aware of it or not, our identities are colored by the cultural group we were born into and grew up in. Obviously, there is variety within each ethnic group based on factors such as age, personality, gender, and social status but generally, basic beliefs and behavior are shared and taken for granted. In Kim's own words: "…cultural identity serves as a linkage between a person and a specific cultural group…" (2001, p65). There is a feeling of being at home and at ease in ones home culture. In the cross-cultural encounter ones cultural

identity is challenged and the stress-adaptation-growth process begins. With time, the individual has linkages to more than one culture, not just the home culture or the host culture, but both. One knows how to communicate and function in both environments – this is what is referred to as being interculturally competent.

METHOD

There are different ways to understand workplace learning in a foreign context. As presented in the previous chapter, I have studied literature on workplace learning, cross-cultural adaptation and sociocultural learning. Workplace learning and how it affects identity are based on constructed ideas and interpretation of reality. Numbers does not easily measure it and can best be understood through a qualitative research design (Bryman, 2012). I therefore chose to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to collect narratives on workplace learning (see questions attached). This way I will try to understand reality as experienced by the participants. By identifying events and actions of significance and their consequences in these narratives, I hope to find regularities and varieties of workplace learning in foreign cultural settings. I am not excluding the possibility that some of my informants may not describe themselves as having adapted to their host culture and reached a level of intercultural competence at the time of the interview.

Personal Bias

At the time of conducting this study, I have almost 20 years' of experience of cross-cultural studies and work with similar assignments as some of my informants. As a result, I am quite familiar with intercultural work life in a foreign culture. This gives me an insider perspective and it is likely that my own experiences will color the way I interpret the interviews. In addition, even if the names of my informants were given by the training institute, I have also met all of them personally at conferences or other work related gatherings. Being aware of this bias is crucial for the analysis. Even so, I believe my own experience will be an asset in the analytical work.

Presentation Of The Interviewees

In order to find suitable interviewees for my study, I contacted a Swedish institute that prepares Swedes for intercultural work. The course has been provided for almost 40 years and is presently run by three different Christian organizations. The reason for contacting this institute is that I wanted informants that had had formal training in intercultural studies prior

to their work abroad. I also wanted interviewees that had at least two to five years of work experience abroad and preferably people that were abroad at the time of the interview or had returned to Sweden more or less recently. The institute gave me names and contact information of 25 graduates that had completed most of the courses at the institute within the last eight years. After consultation with my supervisor I decided to narrow my criteria to graduates that were married and had children to limit the scope of experiences. I randomly picked and contacted 14 potential informants from that list that all fit my age range and abovementioned criteria. In my email, I stated the topic of my study, its purpose and how they had been selected. I also informed them that participation was optional. If they agreed to participate, their information would be treated confidentially and their information would only be used for research purposes. They were also informed that I would record the interviews. Seven of them replied by email that they were willing to be interviewed, one said no due to time constraints and the rest did not reply to my email. Due to the time limitation of this research, I settled for the first seven interviewees that had replied and did not contact other potential informants.

For ethical purposes, I have chosen to give my informants fictional names in this paper. At the time of the interview, three of them were working abroad (Anders, Cecilia and Diana) and four had finished their work assignment and returned to Sweden (Bertil, Evelina, Fia and Gunilla). For the same reason, I have substituted names of languages and countries with "host language" and "host country" when needed. At the time of the interview, the participants were between 39 and 50 years of age, married and had children. Bertil and Fia are married to each other. Prior to their work assignment abroad, they all had work experience in Sweden in various sectors such as health care, engineering, banking, education, and church. Their work assignments abroad were mainly in the area of social development projects and/or church work.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Prior to the interviews I had prepared open-ended questions encouraging the informants to share stories about their work assignments and cultural adaptation (Bryman 2012). The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and were conducted over Skype. I recorded the interviews on QuickMediaPlayer and transcribed them manually afterwards. As my interviewees are Swedish, I conducted my interviews in Swedish. To illustrate and exemplify my analysis I have chosen quotes from the interviews. When using quotes in this thesis, I

have translated them into English and tried to not change their informal register of speech into written, formal English.

Analysis method

When I had transcribed all interviews, I organized the individual stories into timelines in order to make a narrative analysis (Bryman 2012). After that, I identified significant actions and events in their work experience in order to find varieties and similarities of the participants' experiences. I selected the parts that answered my research questions and tried to understand them according to my theoretical concepts. As I looked at the timeline, I was able to see a pattern of five distinct phases that all participants went through relating to their work assignment abroad. I found that each phase had different forms of learning emphasized. These phases were not decided beforehand but emerged as I analyzed the material.

Limitations Of The Study

The time length of the study limited the number of informants I was able to interview and analyze. While the similar background of all informants (age, nationality, marital status, sending organization and preparatory course) may limit the variation of the narratives, I believe I found great variety of cultural host environments and work sectors in my selection of interviewees. Needless to say, more informants from different nationalities and preparatory training would have provided a deeper understanding of this topic.

ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Workplace learning in this group of informants clearly follows a certain trajectory with distinct learning phases of varying length. Some phases overlap but are still distinctly different. There are elements of formal, informal, implicit, adaptive, experiential and developmental workplace learning in all phases (Ellström 2010, Tynjälä 2008). Here I use the term workplace learning as the whole process of learning that relates to a time limited work assignment abroad. The length of each phase varied between my participants, as did the perceived difficulty and success of learning in each phase. Parallel to learning how to function at work in a foreign country the participants described an intense search for meaning and identity. It is a learning trajectory from having a primarily monocultural outlook on life and self to a person with intercultural competence. The phases I have identified are:

1. Preparation
2. Orientation

3. Establishing work role
4. Functioning in work role
5. Reconnecting to work life in Sweden

What my informants all had in common was learning how to work in a new culture and to different degrees in a new language. In addition, they all experienced changed perspectives on themselves, life in general and the world. They had learned or were learning how to handle cultural stress and let it lead to new insights and skills. This is in line with Chang et al's previous research on international assignments and individual transformation (2012).
Below, I will first summarize and analyze the narratives of my informants using Wenger's concepts of communities of practice and Kim's concepts of cultural adaptation. Then I will conclude my findings and give recommendations.

Phase 1: Preparation

This phase usually started years before the actual departure. For some of my informants, the preparation phase spanned over 10 years. My main finding here is that it generally consists of three areas of learning and identity formation:

- A personal conviction of wanting to work abroad followed by fund raising and establishing contacts in the host nations.
- A six-month-long course of full-time intercultural studies (or one year of part-time studies)
- Packing up home and saying good-bye to loved ones

This is a time of preparation for uprooting and a new life in a culturally different environment. The practical side of this phase is obvious but it also intensely affects learning and identity formation. In his book on learning in communities of practice, Wenger calls this process of leaving one practice for another an *outbound* trajectory (1998, p155). Participation in different communities in Sweden (for example work, church, neighborhoods) come to an end but it is the very process of leaving that helps prepare and enable the person for new communities of practice.

Depending on the nature of the work assignment, my informants were either financed by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) or by churches that wanted to support the international worker. The time between the personal commitments to work abroad until all finances were settled was usually a long period of uncertainty that affected them deeply.

> *It's a very draining position to be in during long periods of uncertainties. You prepare yourself for an uprooting but you don't know how things will turn out. It also makes you stronger.* (Anders)

The course in intercultural studies contains lectures (in a classroom or via link to learning centers), discussions and reading assignments. The curriculum aims at providing a general understanding of culture as all students will work in different host nations with different cultures. It also aims at preparing its students for what can be expected in the process of cultural adaptation and cultural stress. In addition, tools are given in how to handle cultural stress and other forms of stress. Many informants expressed that their own cultural adaptation to their new host cultures had been perceived as less stressful thanks to taking this course beforehand.

> *The course on cultural understanding was very useful /…/ different processes you can go through, how you may be perceived and that you have to enter situations with humble understandings, I'm the guest here and I listen first and try to understand…that stuff was really good to bring. (Fia)*

Furthermore, participating in this course served as an entryway into a new community of practice: people that are sent on work assignments abroad. The different students ended up in different countries with a wide variety of work assignments but for a time, they shared the same goal with people in a similar stage of life: to prepare for life and work abroad with all that it entailed. In this environment, issues that only apply to people preparing for work abroad were grappled with and it shaped and developed their identities in a new direction.

When the course was over, an uprooting from well-known work communities, neighborhoods, church communities and extended family followed. In a way, this stage was what many had been eagerly anticipating and dreading at the same time. Houses were sold or rented out, furniture was put in storage, and belongings were stored or shipped to the new host country. Contacts with authorities in Sweden as well as authorities in the host nation were established. This whole process resulted in learning how different societies work (home and host society) but also how oneself and one's family react to transition stress. As a result, coping mechanisms and stress reduction strategies studied in the preparatory course were already put to test.

Then the farewells started. Some extended families, friends or workmates had been supportive of the worker's decision to leave Sweden while others had been trying to convince

them to stay. Supported or not, saying good-bye affected all informants deeply and was expressed as emotionally exhausting and stressful by many. The implicit learning that resulted from this tension was described as a strengthening of character and of the relationships within the departing family.

> *It's a big decision to move to a different country, to leave the familiar and it has probably sharpened our characters.* (Anders)

Several also spoke of learning to trust God more when all other known safety nets were about to be left behind.

Phase 2: Orientation in host country

The arrival in the host nation was in many ways both a goal line and a starting point. The waiting, the preparations and the good-byes were in the past and they had finally arrived at the place they had been longing for. Motivation was usually high and took them through this phase of orientation. Prior to their arrival, arrangements had been made between the sending organization in Sweden and the receiving organization in the host nation. This fact reduced stress and introduced them to possible communities of practice from the beginning of their work assignment. However, these arrangements were experienced in quite different ways. The learning areas in this phase can be divided into three:

- starting language learning
- introduction to the new culture and society
- setting up home

Language learning and introduction to the new culture and society

There was quite a variation in how my informants went about learning about their new environment and adjusting in this phase. Four out of seven were received by organizations that provided some form of orientation program upon arrival. These programs were formal, instructive and reflective in nature. One couple enrolled in a state run language institute. One moved directly to her work location where formal language training was unavailable. This led to her having to find a private tutor. Another one studied one of the official languages of her host nation in another nation before arrival. Then she had to learn yet another official language after arrival in her host nation as the people she worked among did not speak the official language that she had learned but the other one. Generally, participants studied the host language in formal settings initially and then moved on to private language tutors

parallel to starting work. As they worked with and interacted with native speakers of the host language, there were many opportunities to practice and learn outside the formal language classroom.

For some informants, shifting from a professional role with large areas of responsibilities in Sweden to that of a language student was quite a transition. Quite often there was great frustration before some competence was achieved:

> *I wanted that cheese but I didn't know the word for it, I couldn't tell her which cheese I wanted and I realized, I can't even buy cheese! What is this? It was so frustrating but then you learned…* (Fia)

The learning of a new culture starts by noticing the differences. These differences can be noticed intellectually but also experienced emotionally when one does not meet the expectations of the host culture.

> *One could say it was quite a direct, heads-on collision with the culture where one was expected to do things that normally demand high cultural understanding to know how to do it.* (Bertil)

> *…how does the system work, what kinds of laws are valid, not only culture but how things are organized… especially if you are to work with handicap issues or vulnerable people, one needs to know what is available and what is not available? So I think that takes time to get into.* (Cecilia)

In this phase, the host people were still perceived as strangers to the newcomers and people from the receiving organization (often other foreigners or local people with intercultural competence) were welcoming the newcomers into their communities. These communities operating in English obviously made them more easily accessible for the newcomer compared to the host people.

> *…it wasn't a great start for me because I had a hard time sleeping at night, I was afraid of being alone at times at night. But that changed later and as Westerners you felt a bit… and then when you got to know the locals you knew whom to trust, who are you that come here and so on. It got better and better but the beginning wasn't that great. I guess it is fear because you're responsible for your kids and you think if something happens to me it doesn't matter but you have your whole family with you so it's a lot harder.* (Evelina)

Setting up home

Apart from language learning, adapting to their new environment included learning how to physically live in a different climate, with simpler standards of living, with differences in food, urban or rural differences and for some, adapting to life in a high-risk society.

> *We established ourselves in the host country, in the capital, a city with two million people, we hadn't done that before… the first three or four months were, extremely intense in the way that there are a lot of things to learn, how to, where to shop, how to eat, how do I deal with being stopped by the police three times a day for having Swedish registration plates...* (Bertil)

> *In the beginning, well, there are a lot of practical things and finding a house and furniture and dealing with all the practical, car, settle the kids into school, yes, and finding your way, knowing what. I think a lot of time was spent finding what there is around. What does one want? What do people here want? What's a good price? What is not? A lot of time was spent on this.* (Cecilia)

Wenger's term peripherality can describe this phase (1998). The newcomers are allowed access to pre-existing communities of practice (neighborhoods, workplaces, etc.) but they are not yet full participants. There is a difference between explanations by other expatriates *about* the host culture and actual participation in communities *in* the host culture. Learning was enhanced in the latter. Diana praised the orientation course she was able to participate in upon arrival but at the same time, some seminars about the local culture were outdated and irrelevant. For Anders, freedom of movement was initially very limited for security reasons. Prior to his family's arrival in that nation, there had been incidents involving foreign citizens that made everyone extra cautious. Before reaching a level of competency in the local language and an ability to read signs of danger, one was not allowed to explore the city on one's own. Instead, the receiving organization had local staff employed that helped with the set-up of a new home, shopping and other tasks that would normally have served as learning opportunities.

As Wenger has described, inbound learning trajectories begin in the peripheries and lead to full membership of the community of practice or society. In the area of cultural adaptation, however, it is hard to become full members of a society you were not born into or grew up in. Valuable socialization during the childhood years is missing. Aiming at adaptation and intentional language learning will take a person far into the culture but rarely all the way. According to Wenger, some trajectories never lead to full participation (1998). This may be

due to necessity or choice. For example, Evelina's living standard was higher than the local population's but much lower than what she was used to from Sweden. This together with safety concerns drew boundaries between them and the local population that was hard to overcome.

> *They* [the local people] *found it hard to come to our nice veranda, there were also guards around the whole hospital area… /…/ We lived nicer than the others; it was impossible to live like they do with our standard, to adapt. We thought we lived simple as it was with cement floor, we did have electricity and water but, like that.* (Evelina)

This suggests that the nature of the work assignment together with different boundaries actually kept the international workers in the peripheries of their communities of practice. This may be perceived in different ways but from a learning perspective, this is not necessarily negative as the worker will both learn from the full participants of the community and be brokers of learning between different communities of practice.

The orientation phase of the work assignment abroad usually lasted between three months and one year in the participants' experiences. According to Kim, without adapting to culture and learning the language, work performance and personal well-being is hindered (2001). Obviously, the whole process of deculturation and acculturation that Kim describes takes more than a few months or even a year but the orientation phase served as a necessary stepping stone before transitioning into their new work roles.

Phase 3: Establishing the work role

After the initial months of language learning and in some cases, orientation programs, there was usually a restlessness to get started with work. No matter how highly the participants valued learning the host language, studies abroad was not the reason for their move to the host nation, work was. They felt an urge to get on with the task, establish a work identity, a work routine and relationships with potential colleagues in the host culture. I have divided the learning and identity formation that marks this phase into four aspects of learning:

- work description meets reality
- entering into or forming new work communities
- culture stress
- legitimacy or host receptivity

Work description meets reality

The work my informants were sent to do was usually to start up a new project, bring expertise or support a development project. The purpose was not to fill an already existing work role that could be filled with someone from the host nation, but to meet a felt need by the receiving organization in the host country. The Swedish workers' assignments were often of innovative nature and intended to be handed over to and continued by people in the host nation after the Swedish workers had left. As these work roles typically have been non-existing before the arrival of the international worker, there is no regular "introduction" done by a more experienced worker. In addition, the work descriptions are often quite broad to leave room for adjustment once the worker is in place and knows the circumstances firsthand. The orientation these workers received upon arrival in the country focused on language and cultural adaptation but not necessarily work orientation.

> *...we came to our receiving organization, which is a strong organization, which has a special program when you come as a family. You are well received. You get a mentor family, languages studies, you kind of get, well they have a program, cultural adaptation and such things, you are supported. When it comes to work and such, with our organization you had seven months full time language studies. During this time you weren't supposed to, or weren't allowed to get involved with the future work role / .../ maybe for good or for worse. I guess they want people to focus on the studies but I don't think this suits everyone. Personally it would have suited me better not to start working but still hear what it's all about so that you're not totally clueless when you come, but these were the rules they had.* (Anders)

In consultation with the receiving organization, the worker therefore had to transfer their knowledge and skills gained in a Swedish work context and create their own work routine. The challenging part of this is that as the assignment was brand new, the workers' main community of practice, the group of people they were going to be working with on a daily basis, may or may not have existed when they arrived. Gunilla's work description was to start a specialist training for nurses. She was assigned a doctor as a supervisor but his workload was so heavy in reality she was on her own.

> *...it was very frustrating in the beginning to not have a functioning supervisor and I thought we would be a small team. There were local nurses too but they didn't have time either. I had to bring them in as consultants, what do you need, what should we focus on. I'm not a teacher so it was hard; I have never created a course or training in how to do it so it was quite unclear in the beginning. So it was frustrating in the beginning.* (Gunilla)

As frustrating as this was in the beginning of the assignment, this situation gave plenty of opportunity for invention and adaptation.

In some cases, work descriptions were more detailed prior to leaving Sweden (for example SIDA projects) but due to various external circumstances, they turned out quite differently in reality. My participants all expressed that there had been periods of stress due to work expectations being unclear, contradicting or unfulfilled. The learning curve in these situations proved to be steep; not only were they learning a new job, but they had to learn how to deal with changed circumstances and contradicting expectations, and in addition, linguistic and cultural barriers. Many of their experiences confirm Kim's theory on stress-adaptation-growth cycles. Stress provided learning opportunities and strengthened their coping abilities. For example, Fia's work description went through several changes during this phase before she found her work role:

> *It changed a bit during the time we prepared to move and then when we moved, the need* [in the host country] *changed a bit, too, so well, I was supposed to work with micro credits and with administration or something like that in my work description and then this second hand store that I was supposed to start. The micro credit didn't happen for different reasons and then administration, but they had such competent staff in the administration, so it turned out to be me learning how it worked but I felt everything was in the local language so there was nothing there so I did some other things instead, like starting the second hand store and working with a poor minority group.*

Anders, on the other hand, struggled more with changed circumstances and conflicting work expectations. He had expectations from many different stakeholders: SIDA, the sending organization, the receiving organization (international), the village elders, and the government of the nation he was working in. Needless to say, this "nexus of multimembership" (Wenger, 1998) is a challenge. These organizations and communities have different ideologies, expectations and cultural practices. Anders' situation was extreme as there had been a series of violent events leading up to several international workers leaving the country around the same time he and his wife arrived in the mountain village where they were going to start working:

> *It meant that instead of doing what I was supposed to do, I got three jobs, which wasn't good at all. But it's hard to, no, it wasn't possible to say no. There were demands from SIDA, the funding source and the host government that some things had to be dealt with and there were no staff that could take it and that was not good for my family, especially not for my wife. /.../ The benefit of a*

> *voluntary position with SIDA is that you have a clear work description. But then it didn't turn out that way anyway due to the circumstances I mentioned before. /…/ I had one part of my work with a very good work description, the other I didn't have any description, but you had to do what had to be done within certain areas.*

Gunilla's work description was clear from the beginning but the foreign mentor that was supposed to introduce her to her workplace and help her start up the project was doing three people's work at the same time and therefore had no time to mentor her. Once he came four hours late for an appointment and then had to leave again after 10 minutes. Instead she was able to consult with some local nurses that were also very busy but less so than the foreigner. By asking many questions, she was able to get the project started and running after some time.

In some cases, conflicts developed between the worker and the receiving organization regarding work strategy.

> *We should have gone through this before. How are we to think about our host people, what should we think, how shall we do things? This frustration and situation was very hard and made us very… it was draining and we never felt comfortable in being ourselves among those we worked with /…/ That's probably why we finally left the team… me and the leader we confronted each other, no, this is not working."* (Diana)

Unclear and unexpected work situations were more or less the norm for the participants and contributed to higher competencies in flexibility, invention and adaptability. In some cases though, the circumstances were not conducive for work or the health of the worker and the assignment had to be changed or disrupted.

Forming or entering communities of practice

As mentioned above, my participants were all received by organizations in the host nations. Quite often, these organizations generally provided support, care and help with orientation to the host country as well as visa invitations, housing and other practical matters. Even so, the level of service provided varied greatly. For some participants, these receiving organizations became their main community of practice, for others they played a more administrative or supportive role. The actual collaboration, problem solving, mutual work relationship, shared stories and jargon that according to Wenger characterize a community of practice (1998, p125), were sometimes found in other work entities or teams in other geographical locations from the receiving organization. Again, there were variations of this. Gunilla worked at a

hospital, her community of practice turned out to be the nurses she worked with and later trained in pediatric care.

> *…it was fantastic getting to know these nurses, quite soon I felt I became a part of them, to be there and work with them. There was a boy who had tetanus and was in a respirator for a month and there were no intensive care nurses so it was me who knew most about intensive care so I got to be part of the team around him. We thought he was going to die but, we prayed for him and, but these were difficult things that brought us together fast…*
> *It was such a powerful time in their lives, for all of us. We had such a dynamic group, we had lunch together and we talked a lot about cases, how to respond to patients and we cried and laughed together. I worked a lot towards us getting to know each other from the beginning. They shared about difficult things in life. We became a strong group.* (Gunilla)

Fia worked at a non-governmental organization, starting up a second-hand store and worked with vulnerable minority groups. Her participation in her community of practice started in the peripheries but then followed an inbound learning trajectory.

> *After a while, as you get to know the organization and the people, you find your place, a role and your contribution into it. And then you're able to contribute in more significant ways.*

Anders was a project leader in a cultural setting very different from his own. He experienced a good working atmosphere and learning opportunities were many for him and his colleagues. Still, cultural gaps and security issues kept him in the peripheries of the communities he worked in.

> *Up in the village it worked well, both with our colleagues from the host nation, we were well received, well, most of the time, except being lied to at times, of course we were taken advantage of many times, you never really understand the whole picture even when you've been there for a while, underlying things, relationships you never understand fully.*

Bertil's role was questioned when he did not fill the same role as previous Westerners, whose approach had been to come in and do everything for the people in the host organization and then hand over and leave. Bertil had had a different approach; to come in, see what the people in the host nation want to do, and then work together with them to reach that goal. They were not used to that which led to them questioning Bertil's being there. With time and good communication, they were able to work out their different expectations and cultural misunderstandings.

In a community of practice, there is a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). With linguistic barriers, taking part in or developing a shared repertoire is obviously limited. In my

informants' cases, improving their language skills was a result of interaction in their communities of practice. In addition, some of them continued with private language lessons 1-2 times per week parallel to working. They were highly motivated to learn, as it would improve the communication with their workmates. Several claimed learning the local language being essential for their work performance. Being forced by necessity to use their new language also became a contributing factor to learning.

> *…2 days a week, I worked at the hospital with the nurses and that was what made me learn the language so fast because they didn't speak any English* (Gunilla)
> *I didn't have time to continue with the language lessons but since I was with locals who didn't know English I got started, I got a lot of practice, in other words.* (Anders)

Culture stress and shock

Culture shock is a well studied and well known term, first coined by Kalvero Oberg (1954). He calls it an "occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad" (Oberg, 1960, p.177). Basically it is a psychological reaction when being uprooted from the familiar and re-planted in the unfamiliar. Competencies mastered in childhood are suddenly insufficient and one lacks language and skills to function in the new culture. Needless to say, this is stressful.

The course in intercultural studies at the institute in Sweden aims at preparing its students for handling the inevitable cultural stress. The training helps them normalize times with cultural stress and tiredness. While training in intercultural studies prepares a person for cross-cultural encounters, intercultural competence can only be gained through exposure and interaction with people from another culture in other words, through experiential learning.

It is possible to adapt to behavior or circumstances that at first seems very stressful. Evelina's experiences of car rides in rural areas in her host nation illustrates this process:

> *In the beginning, it was the car rides that were extremely hard. They were new to me. So I mostly sat and prayed that the car wouldn't break down, that we would reach our destination. I couldn't enjoy them everything was so new. But then, I guess I'm a creature of habit, after one year, 1.5 years I didn't understand at all, I didn't think you had to be scared of it, you just bring tools with you and you'll be fine.*

According to Kim (2001), human beings have an innate drive to adapt and learn and make sense of circumstances and interactions. This was generally the experience of my informants. Their experiences confirm Kim's stress-adaptation-growth process. However, sometimes the level of cultural stress and amount of adaptation needed was not desirable or too overwhelming. In such cases, the work assignment or work community had to be changed.

Legitimate peripheral participation

Culture shock is often studied from a psychological perspective, for example what reactions are triggered within a person as he or she adjusts to the foreign environment. However, this reaction always takes place in a social environment. Whether learning a foreign language, picking up cultural cues or performing a task at work, the receiving people need to show some form of acceptance in order for the new worker to learn in constructive ways. Young Yun Kim uses the term host receptivity to explain a group's attitudes towards newcomers or strangers (2001). There is a continuum of public and private attitudes of the host nation towards strangers ranging from openness and acceptance to hostility. Host receptivity can be felt on several levels: for example governmental regulations regarding visas, communicative behavior with foreigners by society and not least: workplace acceptance, co-operation, support and inclusion (Kim, 2001, p151).

Other foreigners in the receiving organization were often the first to accept the new worker. As the worker acquired language skills and culturally acceptable behavior, the acceptance by the host people increased. However, as mentioned before, due to different barriers foreigners often stay in the peripheries in their community of practice. As adults, they carry values and behavior from the culture they grew up in and learning a foreign language at an adult age has its limitations. There is a constant pull within the worker between different cultural values and behavior. Cecilia expressed it in this way:

> *There are pros and cons when you encounter cultures, you adapt or acquire, But then there are things that you don't wish* [to adapt to]. *You evaluate all the time, or try to understand what signals your own "backpack" sends.*

In some cases, the foreigner may choose to stay in the peripheries, in other cases, the hosts may not let them in. Wenger claims that in order to be on an inbound learning trajectory, newcomers must be accepted by the host people or old timers in the community (1998). Before the worker has proven himself useful, gained enough language skills or culturally

acceptable behavior, he or she will be treated as an outsider. Even after gaining competence in those areas, there will be moments when the foreigner will feel the mark of "foreignness" more than usual. This may be one reason why many foreigners on international work assignments end up in communities with other internationals rather than locals. In a community of practice, joint learning is a goal and a process. As the foreigner is limited in communication skills initially, the "older generation" or the locals will have to display generosity and a teaching role to the new members.

The worker's nationality may affect legitimacy, too. Several participants mentioned how the hosts often had positive impressions of Swedish society or politics and how that made it easier for them to be accepted and trusted. In other cases, the host people had direct experience of working with other Swedes before.

> *There were many African friends who were very kind and helpful and had experience of Swedish workers where we lived since many years back, so they were very, like, wanting to help us with language and childcare and so on.* (Evelina)

Someone else experienced that the fact that they had brought their children with them to the host nation gave them greater legitimacy with the host people.

Phase 4: Functioning in work role

The learning and personal transformation leading up to this fourth phase is long, intense and demands a big personal investment. This is in theory the phase when the worker is finally less of a stranger or helpless newcomer and can be expected to participate, function and contribute in a clear work role. He or she has some degree of language and intercultural competence and the initial cultural stress has decreased. One participant shared about a time when something in the project had gone wrong. He had to confront the local partner and did it in a scolding way. The partner then reacted in the same way. After some arguing, they were able to resolve their conflict and the local man acknowledged that the Swede had become like one of them in culturally appropriate communication styles. In this phase, the worker has gone through repeated stress-adaptation-growth processes and overall, there is a sense of well-being and belonging.

However, there are variations to this. In some cases, high stress levels continue into this phase. One of my informants experienced that she functioned well with the local population

but that there was constant disagreement and friction with her workmates in the receiving organization. She was not able to enter into that community of practice due to a different view of work methods and eventually ended up leaving that group. Another informant and his wife worked under such high stress levels due to lack of staff and in social isolation that they eventually had to leave their host country. It is fair to say that even if the time of actually functioning in their work roles may have been shorter than planned; there was no lack of learning and developing of new competencies.

In my interviews I found that the typical participant was very reflective and had an attitude of learning already before leaving Sweden. Challenges and obstacles were generally seen as opportunities for learning and growth. Bertil contributed this attitude to the nature of the assignment.

> *The attitude is of great importance and I believe that the nature of the work we were sent to do demands that. You're not there to earn money or because you've received a prestigious role but you're there because you want to see change. And naturally, with that comes a whole different approach.*

Some expressed that the challenges they met strengthened their trust in God. They also gained a new outlook on work productivity and work performance by spending time with people with different cultural attitudes towards work. For example, the importance of relationships and family over work productivity was a lesson learned by many by both observation and social interaction. When asked what had been most challenging in their work life abroad, many shared stories of encountering value differences. Working with rigid social hierarchies and dealing with some negative cultural traits (not owning up to mistakes, normalization of lying, lack of forgiveness, hiding offense) were some of the harder lessons they had to learn.

My informants were all married and often processed the cultural differences they observed and experienced with their spouses. These are examples of informal and reflective learning. In general, work life, free time and family life were all very integrated and hard to keep apart. Naturally this form of work assignment affected all areas of life for the whole family.

> *…the women were more like serfs and had the whole house and also the fields to manage so there was not much time plus they weren't always allowed. So there was a huge adjustment when we realized that, this difficulty, especially for my wife to make contact….* (Anders)

Peripherality

Even if this is the phase when the worker feels most adapted and functions well at work and in society, there is still a sense of being "different." Wenger's concepts of *peripherality* and *boundary* apply here (1998). There are many factors that set the foreign worker apart from workers in the host population. These factors can be cultural background, limited language competence, different rights and obligations as citizens of different nations, different work benefits due to employment by a Swedish organization, time limited contracts, regular breaks from the host nation, etc. Even so, in spite of these factors that set the workers apart from their local colleagues, Wenger's theory on peripherality and my informants' experiences suggest that it is possible to feel at home and contribute significantly to the community in the host nation.

The peripheral position can also be true for the relationship to the sending organization in Sweden. This may seem contradicting since they are the ones that send the workers on an assignment. A community of practice is a concept that reflects a practical reality, not necessarily an organization. After arrival in their host nations, my participants had limited contact with the sending organization. Instead, it was the local work community that provided a sense of meaning and identity. For example, Fia found a community of practice in her host nation in starting up a second hand store. Nevertheless, she remembered having felt the need for the kind of support and sharing of experiences people from her own cultural background could have given.

As mentioned previously, learning opportunities and identity formation is significant in the peripherality. In fact, the foreign worker's presence in the host culture provides learning opportunities for both people in the peripheries and for those that are full members of the community of practice.

> *The most fantastic thing is that when you start working together, something happens and people start contributing with different things from different sides. From my side I can contribute without being an expert in the area, I can still help with structures or ideas or dare viewing things differently in ways they don't dare to view things.* (Bertil)

The factors that make the foreigner feel different and work under different conditions from the local population can also provide learning opportunities for both parts. Both parties share a community of practice but bring different views and practices to work. Hence, difference

can set people apart but can also be triggers for new learning, change and growth. Important ingredients here are humility, attitudes to learning and negotiation.

Learning on the job and identity formation for my participants were complex compared to many other professions. Their work descriptions are often left broad and vague on purpose. In addition to the worker and the sending organization, the receiving organization in the host nation has a stake in how the worker's competence best can be used in that context. More often than not, the work role is uniquely designed for that specific worker. So in addition to learning a new language and cultural behavior, the worker has to assess and learn how to create a new work role and routine for himself.

> *But here it's more areas of work that we work within, then it's more like developing things from scratch so I feel I'm more into what I'm doing now /.../ it has to do with training and development and in that way you have to think in new ways, think from scratch a lot…* (Cecilia)

Boundary relationships

During the time of the assignment, the participants become part of several work related communities of practice:

- One sending organization in Sweden that accepts employment responsibilities and leadership in broad strokes
- One or more local receiving organizations, for example non-governmental organizations, governmental institutions, private institutions or companies

The sending organization of my participants in Sweden has a policy of only sending workers to work with existing organizations in the host nation. I have called them receiving organizations in this thesis. Some workers relate to more than one organization in the host nation. An organization is not identical to a community of practice as one may be a formal member of an organization but in practice work together with other people on a daily basis. Evelina, although formally sent by a Swedish agency found herself in three different work related communities in her host nation. She was a teacher at a nursing school, she gave administrative and pedagogical support to the director of a women's school and she joined a church based group that worked against domestic violence in several villages. Handling these simultaneous memberships of different communities is challenging and demands a high degree of communication and negotiation. Add to this the differences in language and culture between people in the different communities and the complexity just increases. However, with my informants, as they gained intercultural competence, the easier the brokering between

his/her different communities became. For them, spanning the boundaries of different communities of practice and organizations was part of their work. Bertil experienced both the challenge and the benefit of this situation:

> *It was unclear between the organizations that had agreed about us coming there to work, how we would work, there had been no communication about it; it created a problem so to speak. But the most fantastic is that when you start working together, something happens and everyone starts contributing with different things. And from my position, I can contribute without being an expert in the area with structure or ideas or daring to see in ways they haven't dared to before…*

From a learning perspective, this multi-membership can be beneficial for both the worker and the different communities he or she belongs to. Wenger has borrowed the term *brokering* from Penelope Eckert to describe the transfer of knowledge between communities that a boundary person does (1998). What is challenging in brokering is that one person becomes the spokesperson for a whole community of practice and thus will only pass on a limited part based on what they remember of their community's experiences (Wenger, 1998). Brokering can happen in meetings, conversations, visits or other forms (Wenger, 1998). They all have different advantages. A conversation may be partial while a visit provides a broader experience of the community of practice. My informants had had experiences of different forms of brokering. Sometimes they visited similar projects or communities of practice within their network. Occasionally, they participated in training courses to learn more about specific skills needed at work.

> *Some* [training] *was provided by the receiving organization, people came and held some training I could join, with several new ones, for example training in development issues in that specific cultural aspect, then they arranged with a trainer from Australia who came an and had a course with us who needed it. It was very positive.* (Anders)

Another informant's main role is brokering between authorities and different NGOs involved in caring for people in vulnerable life situations. At the time of the interview she had just made a connection between a shelter and a prison for women. The social worker at the prison had struggled, as she did not know where to send released prisoners. Due to shame, they often have nowhere to go. In the same way, she had found a drug rehabilitation center and introduced them to the workers at the prison. Her role was clearly that of a broker between different communities of practices. But she also felt the need to learn from others who work

with vulnerable women and had therefore initiated with her superior in the sending organization about visiting similar communities of practice in a neighboring country.

Phase 5. Return to work life in Sweden

My group of informants all have in common that their work experience abroad is limited in time. The term outbound learning trajectory (Wenger, 1998) is relevant to them as they first leave their communities of practice in Sweden in order to work abroad. When their international assignment is completed, they leave their communities of practice in their host nations and relocate back to Sweden where they find new communities of practice. There is extensive and intense learning and identity formation going on as a person leaves one community and adapts to a new or semi-familiar cultural environment, bringing with them a whole set of new competencies and perspectives on the world.

Four of my informants had returned to Sweden from their work assignments abroad at the time of the interview. Although not the initial focus of my study, this phase proved to be significant from a learning perspective for them. Their learning experiences abroad had continued to affect their work identity as they continued to reflect on their international work experience even after returning to Sweden. Their outbound learning trajectories looked quite different from each other: someone's departure was disruptive and traumatic; most were planned and expected. However, all of them spoke of transformational learning as a result of living and later leaving their work assignments abroad.

> *It has changed me completely /…/ To return home, that is the hard part /…/ it has given such depth to life, we feel at home in two continents, but there is also a lot of pain because you long to go back and you're not completely at home now here in Sweden /…/ It's very positive, mostly, to have a different dimension in life.* (Gunilla)

For several of them, the experience of being culturally different during an extended period of time had brought empathy and respect for immigrants in Sweden.

> *I have such respect for immigrants, it's not that easy to learn a language, you behave in strange ways and take time in many ways. I mean, we behaved strangely too and some things you feel, this behavior I'll keep, while other behaviors you adapt to.* (Fia)

> *…but I have also gotten cultural understanding /…/ I now work at a school with immigrant students and I have greater love for diversity in some ways and to be*

here for others that come here and experience the same hard process I was in in the beginning. (Evelina)

Some shared about an increased ability to handle stressful situations and of greater flexibility.

I have realized that a person's ability to adapt is much greater than you may imagine. I have become more flexible naturally today. Yes, there are very few situations that put my nose out of joint. (Bertil)

I think I have learned a lot about my weaknesses and what I am afraid of. But also what I can handle and that makes me feel safe even if things are uncertain around us we can work it out. I have pressed through and this has influenced my situation even in Sweden after coming back, I have a different perspective. (Evelina)

They also shared about certain cultural values and behaviors that they had picked up while living and working abroad. Bertil learned to appreciate the ease people had in talking with strangers in his host country. He found it hard to readjust to the quiet culture of Swedes. Fia shared about a deeper appreciation for relationships and family after her work assignment abroad. She found that her host people valued relationships with people much more than anything money can buy.

For some, their assignment provided new skills and competencies transferrable to a Swedish work context. For example Anders shared of new competencies in his role as a project leader at work:

I think I brought a different confidence back to Sweden. Have we managed, I mean, village elders in our host country and warlords in the mountains, then we can, this is no problem, that's the feeling, it's very positive. It has strengthened me in my Swedish work life. My boss expressed that he was surprised how much I had grown in the work role I have in Sweden during the years I was gone when I hadn't worked with anything that had to do with that. He saw it anyway, other parts. (Anders)

Fia's experience abroad led to both a change of life direction and a career change after her return to Sweden.

When I got unemployed the second time I dreamt that we needed to do this in Sweden, too, do social work like the churches do down there. And then, when we returned to Sweden, we saw that there are beggars here too. /.../ a shelter opened in my hometown for EU-migrants and it's been so exciting and fun /.../ Sometimes I wonder, "what did I do in that country?"... most of all I learned a lot about myself and if I haven't been of any help in the host country, I have at least brought with me an experience I can use here in Sweden. /.../ There are so many questions that come up about these Romanies, how to behave and then I

> *feel "wow, I have a lot of experiences that the others in the group don't and I can really use it.* (Fia)

The work assignment abroad had had significant influence on my participants' adult learning and identity formation. In addition to advancing their work skills, they acquired foreign language and intercultural competence as well as transformed identities.

CONCLUSION

My aim with this thesis has been to understand what workplace learning looks like for development workers in culturally and linguistically different contexts. To understand this, I chose a qualitative research approach and a sociocultural learning perspective (Wenger, 1998). In line with previous research (Crabtree, 1998; Kiely, 2002; Porter & Monard, 2001. In Chang et al.), I also found that intercultural competence is not learned in classrooms but through intercultural interaction in the workplace. That said, the preparatory course in the home country and the orientation programs given in the host nation served the purpose of laying a foundation for intercultural work and preparing the worker for stressful situations well. I also found that they laid the foundations for the language acquisition and cultural adaptation needed to later function in the workplace.

Workplace learning for these international development workers seemed to span over five phases: preparation in Sweden, orientation, establishing work role, functioning in work role, return to work in Sweden. Each phase varied in length for the different participants. There was also variation in the forms of learning (Ellström, 2010) during each of these phases. Formal learning dominated in the first two phases and informal learning in the later three phases. Learning during the phases of establishing work role and functioning in work role were mainly experimental and developmental. There was much organized support for learning during the first two phases but significantly less in the last three.

Due to the circumstances of the assignment, the work description was perceived as broad which left much room for invention and interpretation. For some participants, external circumstances changed dramatically between the departure from Sweden and the phase when work began and therefore had to be adapted. These situations provided ample opportunities for experimental learning and learning in communities of practice. For some, the steep

learning curve brought stress and fatigue but in time led to growth and adaptation (Kim, 2001).

Confirming Wenger's theory on communities of practice, the participants related to more than one community of practice at the same time. This is normal for most people but what stood out was that they related to several communities of practice in their work life. Typically, they never became full members of any one community of practice but functioned more or less in the peripheries of many and also as brokers between them. For learning purposes, this is an ideal place to be in as one is always an observer, always a learner. If the different groups that the worker relates to are able to make use of his or her competencies, it provides ample opportunities for organizational learning.

The workplace learning areas for my informants included but was not limited to: learning a foreign language, cultural ideas and behavior, gaining intercultural competence, new perspectives on themselves and others in addition to improving work skills in their specific field. In line with Zuboff and Ellström's studies (1988, 2010) learning is a result of interaction and production at work. In addition, they experienced high levels of stress frequently and had to learn how to handle that.

Finally, I wanted to understand how the international work experience affected my participants' identity. Since belonging affects identity, an experience like this will affect the way you perceive yourself and how others perceive you. Interestingly enough, this identity transformation started already before leaving their home country, during the preparatory course and the practical preparation for expatriation from Sweden. It continued throughout the stay in the host country, and for a while after returning to Sweden. Identity formation is constant negotiation. Workplace learning of this kind is complex as it occurs across languages and cultural barriers, which are both carriers of identity. As culture, language and national citizenship are major factors for one's sense of belonging, in some ways, these factors being different from their work environment, the participants were kept in the peripheries of their local work communities. This was not necessarily perceived as something negative. Negotiation of cultural differences and professional belonging started long before leaving Sweden and continued after the return to Sweden.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with previous research on intercultural learning (Trede et al., 2013) and as a result of this study, I conclude that workplace learning for people with international work assignments would be enhanced if there were a pedagogical framework around their tacit learning. Preparatory courses have important learning potential and so does tacit learning as the worker interacts with colleagues and others in the host culture. However, as Lenartowicz suggests, combining experience with reflection in cycles would enhance learning and assist in gaining intercultural competence (2013, p7) and enhance work performance. There is a need for sending organizations or staff at training institutions to develop a pedagogical framework that links the preparatory training with ongoing learning during the work assignment. Likewise, Tynjälä suggests that informal learning is not enough as the pace at which new knowledge is produced today is increasing (2008). A pedagogical framework provided by the sending organization and, or host organization will help the worker with the process of becoming interculturally competent and skilled at work. This could take the form of mentoring, written assignments, group discussions or any pedagogical form that help the worker reflect on their intercultural work experience. In this way, the tacit knowledge gained will be transformed into explicit knowledge, which is something the whole organization and future international workers could benefit from.

As a result of globalization, the opportunities of learning between organizations and across national borders have increased. Sending organizations and host organizations need to find opportunities to learn from each other and workers like my participants. People involved in international work are important agents in this organizational learning as they move in the peripheries of several communities of practice.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, translated from Swedish

1. What year did you graduate from the training institute?
2. When did you work abroad?
3. In what country, with what people group and which language did you learn?
4. Which courses did you complete at the training institute?
5. Which was your main cultural upbringing?
6. What did you work with before you moved abroad?
7. I know that you have studied at the training institute before departure. The purpose of the training in intercultural studies is to prepare and ease the adaptation to a new culture. What happened after you completed the training, left Sweden and arrived in your host culture?
8. To leave one's own country and work for a longer period in a different culture can be seen by many as a bold decision and big step. How have you as a person changed by this move?
9. What difficulties did you face in this transition?
10. How clear was your work role before you left? What was your work role?
11. What does your work situation look like? What is working, what is not working?
12. You work with people with a different cultural background. How is that going? How was it at first and how is it now?
13. Do you feel at home where you live and work?
14. You live and work in a foreign country, what kind of groups to you spend most of your time with?
15. Do you speak the host language? If yes, can you tell me how you went about learning it?
16. Tell me about the language situation at work. Is it important and necessary to know the local language?
17. Did you ever sense a need for further training from your home country when you were working abroad?