Mary Haour-Knipe

moving families

expatriation,
stress
and coping

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London and New York

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Employees of governments, companies and non-commercial organisations increasingly find themselves sent to live abroad for years at a time, uprooting their families from jobs, schools and support networks in the process. This study is a detailed exploration of how families cope both individually and as structures with the stresses of moving to a new culture: how children cope with the change of schools, friends, culture and language; how accompanying partners cope with the loss of status that comes from leaving professional lives behind; how the strains of running a household in an unfamiliar culture add to the isolation of losing day-to-day contact with established friends and family.

Through rich interviews conducted with families followed over a period of two years, Mary Haour-Knipe shows the processes of change and adjustment at work. Her findings will be of interest to students of wider issues of migration, to those who study the family under pressure and to families who are thinking of moving abroad to live in a new culture.

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FOR GEORGES,
ANNE AND PATRICK

PREFACE

Why this book?

This book developed over almost twenty years. Around 1982 the author did a small pilot study of women who had followed their professional and executive husbands to Switzerland, attempting to investigate whether the stress of moving abroad resulted in illness. The women talked of a great many stresses (the death of a parent, for example, when one is too far away to help, or a 'surprise' pregnancy), and hassles were even more prevalent (misunderstandings with neighbours, for example, or not being able to find basic food items taken for granted at home), but *nobody* reported any illness. In fact some of the women reported being in better health than usual. I was surprised, and went back half a year later to discuss the finding with the same people. By then, some of the children had been ill, and others were experiencing adjustment problems that were worrying their mothers; some of the women were concerned about career problems their husbands were having; others talked about difficulties in relationships with extended families and friends in their home country. The women all remained in good physical health, but some described themselves as depressed, and in fact were in the midst of re-evaluating their lives.

Two major conclusions developed from that preliminary study. The first was that for the particular problem of transcultural migration it makes more sense to look at the family than to look at the individual: it is the system as a whole that reacts. The second conclusion was that a longitudinal design is necessary. What needs to be studied is a process, not a state of being: it is more valuable to examine stories as they unfold, effects as they spiral upwards or downwards. Whereas what is perceived to be an end state is by definition difficult to influence, a developing process, in contrast, may be modified through intervention from an employer, a group, a colleague or a friend.

Grounding

The study of families moving to a new culture comes out of, and contributes to, three different literatures. Studies of *migration* have tended to focus on refugees or economic migrants. Such migrants often have significant problems indeed, but it is difficult to pick out what may be due to the migration itself as opposed to the other factors linked with the change of location. A thorough examination of the short-term stresses involved in moving to another culture – and of coping – among relatively privileged migrants for whom 'all other things are equal' should help increase understanding of the process for all migrants. Coming at the problem from the other side, there has been a great deal of discussion in management circles of 'expatriation'. Employees have always been posted away from their home country, but the number of such postings may well increase as both business and non-government organisations (NGOs) 'go global'. Transfers of executives and professionals are expensive. They also involve a certain amount of risk since it costs a very great deal to bring an employee home early: adjustment problems of the family are often given as the reason for such failures.

From the point of view of the *stress* literature, migration with a family can be considered a moderately stressful event. Change itself is sometimes considered to be stressful, and moving involves many elements of change, but at the same time is usually chosen by people such as those who participated in this study. This raises the question of why people might actually choose to do stressful things, or as Aaron Antonovsky once beautifully put it, 'the potential glory of stressors'.

From the point of view of the *family* literature, finally, such an experience is likely to affect the family and the way it functions. Even more important, though, is that this is a study of families which generally function well. The study thus provides a rare opportunity to examine how basically healthy families cope with new experiences that can be very perplexing, and with temporary loss of the comfortable and known social structure that had surrounded and supported them. Studying the way well-functioning families handle stress can perhaps demonstrate how other families might better do so.

The study began as a doctoral thesis at the University of Geneva. The first round of interviews was initiated in May of one year in the late 1980s; the last interviews were completed by January almost three years later. Then began a long latent phase. I had in the meantime become heavily involved in an entirely different theme of migration research. The new field of work was gratifying, urgent and involved great commitment. It seemed to be taking place in vivid colour, whereas the family study was in pastels. Colleagues assumed I had completed the thesis process years ago, and the family study slid further and further down the list of things

to do. People started raising their eyebrows when I said I was still working on it. More than once I decided to let it go. But a large body of incomplete work is an uncomfortable thing to carry around. What made me finally get down to writing up the study was a combination of internal pressure, of commitment I had made to the people I studied, of feeling that it would be a waste to let it go, of gentle and not-so-gentle urgings from husband and mentors. Later, support and encouragement came from other friends and colleagues, including, after a while, even some of those in the HIV/AIDS world (so that I could get the thing done with and concentrate on another aspect of somewhat diverse professional fields). The thesis version of the study was defended to the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of the University of Geneva in September 1999.[1]

Acknowledgements

An author's personal motivation in making such a study is better stated from the beginning rather than being left to supposition. In common with a great many migration experts who have names that do not fit where they live, I grew up in a family in which ancestors had either emigrated across oceans or gone to settle at frontiers. I had a father who, as a public health physician, enjoyed moving on to new challenges, so that by the time I reached adolescence our family had moved several times between both coasts of Canada and the United States. Immediately after finishing university I transported myself to the opposite side of the North American continent, then in due course married a European and eventually moved to Switzerland.

As for this study, a project of the duration and complexity of this one builds up a large number of people to whom thanks are due. I would like especially to acknowledge the assistance of the following:

First and foremost, there are those who were interviewed. Forty-five families gave evenings and weekends, from two to a total of almost twenty hours of their time, to a stranger who said she was doing a study. For some of them, an evening at home was a rare and precious gift to give. All of them took a risk: of discussing the problems and the pleasures of moving, of letting somebody into their homes to observe them, of being misunderstood, of breaches of confidence. The obvious needs to be repeated: without the generous participation of these families there would have been no study.

Around the central core of families interviewed are a host of others who helped, listed in the following paragraphs in approximate chronological order.

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1 Pieces of this work have been presented at several conferences, as well as published in articles (Haour-Knipe, 1997 and 2000) and as a thesis (1999).

Although it was not yet evident at the time, transition between the pilot stress study and the family study was provided by stints at the mental health division of the World Health Organisation in Geneva. Marcus Grant commissioned a background paper about stress in international employment settings, and Norman Sartorius later widened the task by requesting an article on the effects of geographical mobility on the children of international employees.

Jean Kellerhals, as thesis director, later provided critical structure, and by his intellectual rigour helped clear up fuzzy thinking at several intervals through the years. It was also Jean Kellerhals who permitted me to go off on my own with the project, nevertheless being generously available to discuss the study when asked.

David Reiss, whose book on the family's construction of reality provided the conceptual starting point for the study, also offered some excellent pragmatic suggestions, and, more importantly, enthusiastic encouragement at the very beginning, which convinced me that the effort was worth pursuing.

Thanks are due to the several people who started 'snowballs' as interviewing began, providing names of families arriving in Geneva, and/or access to people who could do so, as well as, at a second stage, to the director of the international school, the parents committees, the three campus principals, and the secretaries who respectively gave permission and then sent lists of names of arriving students. Truly adequate sampling at a third stage was assured with the help of M-L. François and W. Hutmacher of the Geneva public education department, whose permission led to the complete listings of families who arrived during the year the study began. The Geneva Société Academique provided a small grant which helped cover some of the expenses of carrying out the study.

Even behind a highly qualitative study there hides a considerable amount of computers and statistics. Daniel Glauser deserves special thanks for writing a program macro for treating the interview data, and patiently teaching me how to use it. This technology elegantly replaced the old scissors and pile method of sorting data, and also allowed the researcher to stare fascinated at the screen as the computer did the work for a while. As for other programmes and statistics, not all visible in this text, Liz Low, especially, patiently offered explanations and assistance at various points.

Very special thanks are due to Amal King and Myriam Vandamme. Both are professionals in their own right, in transition at the time. They spent many weeks as volunteer research assistants, doing the tedious, solitary, and tiring work of coding interviews. Having each interview independently coded by three people provided a vital check, and our discussions of each family often led to valuable insights. Their generous unpaid efforts at tasks essential, but invisible in the final product, are deeply appreciated.

It was with Merrijoy Kelner that I originally gained experience in qualitative research, and she has been a mentor and friend ever since. Merrijoy read the first hundred pages of the first draft of this book, and asked some pertinent and courageous questions only a good friend would dare to ask. Edgar Heim and Liz Low carefully commented on a much later draft, and Barbara Hornby on one after that. Liz Low took the process innumerable small steps further, patiently nursing the manuscript through a number of subsequent revisions. Thanks are also due to the necessarily anonymous study participant who read the final manuscript to check confidentiality, and to those who helped me prepare to defend the thesis version. As for the editors, changes at Taylor & Francis – and the amount of time it took to get the study through the thesis process and into book form – meant that the manuscript was in the hands of four different editors. Comfort Jegede and Mari Shullaw were particularly important in bringing the book into being.

Two influences are all-pervasive. The first is that of Aaron Antonovsky. It is his concept of 'salutogenesis' that provides the epistemological basis for the study. It is Aaron who taught so many of us to look for what goes right, for health and growth, as well as for what goes wrong, for pathology. 'Sense of coherence' is his concept, and discussions of it in this book, including those that are critical, are shaped by the talks we had, in several different countries, at conferences, over meals, in our respective homes, and on long walks. With his support and encouragement Aaron mothered the project, especially throughout the data analysis. It was his gentle lecture about commitment that got me back to the study when I might otherwise have let it go quietly into oblivion. He patiently read and commented on the initial outline and several later versions. By the time Aaron died, suddenly and unexpectedly, the book was progressing under its own impetus, but I miss his wisdom, and I miss his friendship.

The second all-pervasive influence is, of course, that of my immediate entourage, neglected friends who have stuck by, and Madame Vidal, who has known what to do to keep our physical environment in order, and thus allowed me to steer a course more tranquil than it would otherwise have been. Finally, fundamentally, there is my family. Georges' practical support amounted to the functional equivalent of a research grant for several years, when elementary fairness would dictate that perhaps *I* should take a turn earning money, so that *he* could be free to pursue his own interests. His moral support and encouragement have been unstintingly warm, occasionally caustic, always total. As for Anne and Patrick, they grew from being just barely past needing a baby sitter at the time of the first interviews, to being 'launched', living on their own, getting on with their lives with a little less maternal attention than I might have wished, coping far more than just adequately with their studies, transforming from children to interesting young adults and even colleagues and friends.

Especially in recent years, when 'the family book' has had to be fitted in around other professional obligations, when it occupied literally countless evenings and weekends, my own family has been supportive, always there, far too often taken for granted. The book is dedicated to them, in heartfelt gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION

The study site

With its large international community, Geneva is a good place to study migrants. One-third of the population is foreign, and another third consists of Swiss people from other cantons, who may well speak another language, and who often consider themselves as foreign as those from other countries. It is also a good place to make a study of relatively privileged migrants – or expatriates. Several major international organisations and several multinational corporations are based in the city, thereby also attracting the offices of numerous smaller organisations and companies. There is a university, and a cultural and artistic life surprising for a city of some 400,000 inhabitants, with, for example, an international-level orchestra, several theatres, numerous art galleries. All of this means that there is a constant movement of foreign professionals and executives, transferring with their families to take up what are usually planned to be relatively short-term assignments.

The North American family moving to Geneva is hardly isolated. The English-speaking community is large; it includes people from Great Britain and its former empire, and also from countless other countries. No less than eleven churches and two major private schools offer their services in English. English-language books, movies, and videos are easy to come by, and there are several English-speaking clubs, and a theatre group.

Some 7,000 Americans and Canadians were officially listed as living in the Geneva region the year the people studied here arrived, with others (not counted in Swiss statistics) living across the border in France, a 15-minute drive away. Thus there are available not only English-speaking, but specifically American and Canadian communities. Some of the organisations catering primarily to the North American community include the American church, community centre and library; a Women's Club; a radio station; several special interest groups such as dancing, bowling and hiking groups, and groups organised by both American political parties. Many of the American-based multinational corporations have wives' clubs, and

arrange regular activities, including the celebration of traditional holidays such as Halloween.

To make an overseas posting acceptable to their employees, most multinational companies guarantee the same standard (or – more correctly – the same style) of living as they would have in North America. This means that the North American family will usually live in a house. The vast majority of Geneva's other residents, certainly including Swiss colleagues at the same socio-economic level, live in rented apartments. The real estate consequence is that there are several neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city containing a Swiss developer's version of American-style housing. These houses are relatively expensive. Some have been bought by Swiss people, and some are occupied by foreigners from other countries, but many are owned or leased for their personnel by multinational companies. Chances are thus high in some neighbourhoods that many of the neighbours will be fellow North Americans.

Several other factors concerning the geography of Geneva affect the social relations of its sub-communities. An alliance – somewhat surprising to the non-initiated – between ecologists and the residue of a policy of national agricultural self-sufficiency left over from World War II, protects a good two-thirds of the canton's 246 square kilometres as agricultural land. Thus the centre of the city is densely urban, surrounded by a very thin zone of suburban houses and then by open fields. The suburban zone would be the norm in most North American cities. In some Geneva neighbourhoods, such as one inhabited by thousands of middle- and upper-level employees of international organisations, the landscape goes abruptly from six-floor apartment buildings to land that is used for farming.

The centre of the city is thus densely populated, with, it has been said, an automobile density the same as that of Los Angeles in a city that was laid out long before the car was invented. The public transportation system functions well, but traffic problems are monumental for those who eschew it, and the style of driving resembles that of Paris or New York more than that of the wider open spaces of most of North America.

The city of Geneva sits at the end of Lac Leman, out of which flows the River Rhone. Lake and river effectively divide the city into two halves: the possibility, or lack thereof, of getting across one of the four major bridges is a major factor determining where people choose their housing in relation to their offices, and even who they will visit during the day. Driving across the city from one end to the other may take about 20 minutes on a Sunday morning, or up to two hours at the end of a working day.

Partly because of the instability of the foreign population, who rarely plan on settling in Geneva when they arrive, partly because of the relatively sedentary nature of large segments of the local population, and partly because of the housing arrangements described above, there is relatively little social permeability between the American and the local

Geneva populations. Although exceptions abound, the myth that 'you won't meet the Genevans' is current; most Americans have been told this, and arrive expecting not to meet the locals.

Both the large international community and the North American community are made up mainly of people working for multinational companies and international organisations, and their families. The communities are thus relatively homogeneous in socio-economic status (upper middle class), age (babies may be born to these families, but there are few elderly), and life stage (young adult to middle-age families). Since most people arrive for a limited stay the communities' memberships are also constantly shifting. A proportion of these communities large enough to be dominant is made up of people who make transcultural moves very frequently, the 'Gypsy aristocrats' or the permanently rootless.

Belonging to the North American community is strictly voluntary: it is perfectly possible to avoid the North American networks altogether. Many people choose this route in hopes of integrating elsewhere. For those who wish to join in, many activities are available and, since there are invariably many other newcomers eager to meet people at any given time, someone who does wish to do so and to belong to groups can quickly and easily become very busy.

An important differentiation in the international community is that between the newcomers and the old timers, between those who have recently arrived and those who remain foreigners, but are more or less permanently settled in Geneva.[2] There is little interaction between the two sub-groups, except for certain old timers who serve as bridges, specialists in helping the newcomers adapt, some professionally as paid consultants, house-finders etc., and some as volunteers. Many of the latter are women, and pillars of such organisations as the American Women's Club.

The newcomer group thus tends to form a cohort interacting a great deal with each other, to some extent with the old timers, and very little, if at all, with the natives. The most marked characteristic of this community is that relationships remain superficial; friendly and pleasant, but not intimate. They have been described as 'fleeting friendships'. Talking about real problems is very difficult, although in certain sub-groups complaining, the '*discours misérabiliste*', is the norm. While being socially isolated under such circumstances is to some extent a question of choice, being emotionally isolated is quite another matter, as will be discussed later (Chapters 4 and 6).

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2 In contrast with many other European countries, and with Canada and the United States, Switzerland has no policy of encouraging immigrants to become citizens. Many would say the *de facto* policy is quite the opposite, since acquiring citizenship is onerous, in terms of both effort and finances. The result is that a good many residents from other countries remain foreigners, living in the country for years, even generations, without attempting to obtain Swiss nationality.