Between Two Worlds
Using Meta-Fields to get Richer Data from Complex Populations

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Abstract

Researchers are familiar with the constraints and difficulties in researching and understanding complex populations. For example, children, expatriates and international negotiators can be defined as complex populations to collect data from because of one main feature that brings them together: they live between two worlds. It this paper, we introduce a new methodology to conduct research with complex populations by using marketing as a meta-field to the understanding of management issues with expatriates. We present here a compilation of findings and methods we have been using in researches aiming at understanding expatriates' adjustment process through their relationship with brands. These researches have been conducted with a longitudinal approach with participants from all continents for eight years. We learned from the results that using marketing as a meta-field associated with the step-by-step methodology enables to unearth deep feelings, emotions and concerns that prevent expatriates from thoroughly adjusting to the host culture.

This article is organized as follows. We first introduce the concepts of paradox management and complex populations and their specificities as well as the difficulties researchers face when conducting research with them. Then, we introduce the use of meta-fields to circumvent research hurdles. Next, we explain our step-by-step methodology based on projective techniques in using marketing as the meta-field to understand the underlying difficulties expatriates go through during the adjustment process. We conclude our article in discussing the main outcomes of eight years of research on the topic and highlight the main limitations.

Keywords: Paradox management, longitudinal research, meta-field, expatriation

Introduction

People who live between two worlds should be able to manage paradoxes. Some do it naturally, like the children while some others have a hard time trying to handle contradictions, like expatriates and international negotiators. Paradox has been defined as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). Thus, managing paradoxes does not come naturally to most adults, mainly to the ones having been raised in non-paradoxical cultures.

However, managing paradoxes is not an issue for children because their imagination overrides their vision of reality. While growing up and being socialized, children live between their own world and the world of adults which are clearly contradictory (Karsaklian, 1995; 2006). Children's world is characterized by the words yes and possible while adults' world is made of no and impossible. By the age of 7, children are still very dependent on their parents

at the same time that they search for autonomy (Piaget, 1993). And pre-adolescence is the phase of all paradoxes. Socialization is a tough process to go through.

Then, when the children become adults and are well socialized and comfortable with the behavioral patterns of their culture of origin, they are expatriated (Quelch, 1999). This means that they will need to leave some of their deepest values and beliefs behind in order to get used to new ones. They need to unlearn to make room for learning new behavioral patterns as stated by Tung (1987), Stone (1991), Yavas and Bodur (1999) as well as by Stroh et al. (2005). Expatriates should navigate between two worlds: their home and host cultures. As it is harder to unlearn than to learn, for some people expatriation can be a traumatic experience. Indeed, acculturation can be a tough process to go through (Black et al., 1991).

Some adults won't be expatriated, but they might turn into international negotiators for their home country company. They will then travel very often and work with people from several other cultures. When they negotiate abroad, they are expected to take into account their company's constraints (goals, interests, strategies…) and the ones of their partners at the same time, what can often be contradictory. Unlike expatriates, they don't live abroad but they work abroad. While they don't need to acculturate, they need to abide by the same local rules as expatriates. International negotiators live between two (or more) cultural and corporate worlds (Karsaklian, 2016a; 2014).

Researching expatriates as a complex population

In order to be respectful of the length limits for this paper, we will focus on expatriates as one representative research sample of complex populations.

Expatriate is defined as someone who lived and worked overseas (McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002) and refers to foreign job assignments for a specific period of time (Wang, 2008). The term expatriation is more often than not associated with the labelling of a highly-skilled individual who is sent by their employer to work outside of their home country in a subsidiary or private entity for a contracted period of time which requires a specific temporary immigration status and the receipt of employer relocation (Beaverstock, 2008).

When a person moves to another culture, the problem is not the difficulty inherent to the host culture, but the difficulty linked to the difference between home and host countries. When first examining adjustment among expatriates, researchers focused on obvious aspects such as food, weather and daily customs, but more recently, authors added other related dimensions that are adjustment to the job, interacting with host-country individuals and to the general nonworking environment (Stroh et al, 2005).

Many factors affect the adjustment of expatriates such as selection mechanisms and criteria, previous international experience, cross-cultural training, individual factors, job factors, organizational culture, organizational socialization as well as various non-work factors (Black et al., 1991).

Economic and social factors are working to increase global competition and global operations, and subsequently an acceleration of traffic in expatriation and repatriation. The number of expatriates is large and increasing at rates that parallel growth in global business (Harrison, et al., 2004). As a matter of fact, number of researchers envisage a future where job insecurity is the norm; where work is increasingly 'precarious' (Kalleberg, 2009) and careers are boundaryless (DiRenzo and Greenhaus, 2011). The dynamism inherent in a globalised world has changed the psychological contract between workers and employers (Smithson and Lewis, 2000).

One main issue with expatriates is that companies often send people on international positions that are capable but "culturally illiterate" (Black and Gregersen, 1999). Black et al. (1991) represented the expatriates' adjustment process with what they called the U-curve of cross cultural adjustment, which states four stages: <u>Honeymoon</u> (excitement with novelty),

Culture shock (uncomfortable feeling), Adjustment (gradual new culture acceptation), and Mastery (ability to live in the new environment). Businesspeople are not free from culture shock experienced in daily life in a new cultural environment (Jun and Lee, 2001).

Difficulties when researching complex populations

Having access to complex populations is difficult, there are no specific methods to collect data with them, there is need of multi-method and multidisciplinary approaches and the cultural variables should be taken into account when designing the research protocol.

As a matter of fact, expatriates are very busy people. They are constantly juggling with two parallel responsibilities (reporting to the headquarters back home and managing the local settlement) and as they are often in charge of a geographical zone they travel very frequently and are not always willing to talk about their adjustment issues. Expatriates have often been interviewed with questionnaires, sometimes with open-ended questions to give more freedom for their responses. However, their inner feelings and difficulties in acculturating can hardly be investigated through questionnaires. It is imperative that the methods used to investigate expatriates' acculturation process are able to capture subjective and qualitative information.

The lack of specific methods to conduct research with complex populations makes their access even more difficult. A more indirect approach is needed to dig deeper into such subjective and qualitative data. Using methods from psychology, sociology, ethnology and other human sciences can help unearth the needed information enabling to work with this type of population.

Complex populations are often deemed as being universal. The use of universal methods for data collection can indeed lead to the impression of homogeneous behaviors while masking the inner feelings of participants. Although projective techniques have been used in business disciplines, they are still not tailored to analyze these specific populations. Finally, the research methodology should integrate cultural differences in order to take into account differences in modes of expression of participants (Karsakian, 2011b).

Circumventing research difficulties by using marketing as a meta-field

Because they need to adjust locally while maintaining their loyalty to their home culture, expatriates experience constant tension between the two cultures. There should be limits to their acculturation because they are not immigrants; however their ability to behave as required locally is indispensable to their survival in the host country.

This situation triggers emotional instability mainly during critical phases in the acculturation process. Consequently, structured questionnaires, direct questioning and online interviews are unable to unearth the information researchers need in order to better understand phenomena linked to this population. Expatriates are reluctant to admit their inability to adjust locally, or to understand the local culture or the difficulties at work they might be facing as a result of the lack of cultural adaptation.

In an attempt to identify the underlying factors that both prevent and help expatriates to adjust to the local culture, we conducted a series of studies by using a multi-method approach articulated with meta-field topics. The advantage of this methodology is a) to provide more freedom for expatriates to express their ideas and feelings and b) give an indirect approach to sensitive topics. We opted for using marketing as a meta-field to better understand the underlying difficulties expatriates go through during the adjustment process.

From the marketing standpoint, we understand expatriates as consumers, and their consumption patterns are altered when they live abroad (Karsaklian, 2012b). Their relationship with brands and advertising is different from the one they have in their home country. Expatriates as consumers is an understudied field in marketing although they

represent a growing market target and their relationship with global and local brands can be the key to understanding their subsequent relationship with their host cultures.

As already stated by Aaker (1991), the growth of global consumer segments pushed companies to seek to strengthen their brand's equity in an increasingly competitive marketplace. In this ever-moving world, products disappear but brands continue to exist and provide consumers with the needed stability. When people buy a product, they are not simply buying its functional features but are also acquiring certain symbolic features that are incorporated in the brand (Aaker, 1996).

With the globalization of markets, there are more opportunities to create market potential through stimulating demand for products with universal appeal (Hassan et al., 2003). Johansson and Ronkainen (2005) state that research shows that one of the most common features of a globally integrated marketing strategy is the adoption of one brand name around the world, whereas Callow and Schiffman (2002) talk about how advertising interpretations are dependent on cultural factors of the viewer (Karsaklian, 2016b).

Thompson (2004) evokes an emerging stream of consumer research that suggests a far more encompassing and significant interrelationship between cultural processes and structures and brand meanings that just the brand image. Brands create unique identities for a firm's products in the eyes of its consumers (Keller, 2003). According to Strizhakova et al. (2008), consumers co-create brand meanings and brands become powerful because of their multiple meanings including self-identity, group-identity and national traditions. As one of the fundamental social processes in every culture, marketing communication has been used to exert a strong impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Watson et al., 2002). When individuals feel positive they believe that the environment is safe, thus a positive frame will generally be more effective than a negative frame (Chang, 2008).

Expatriates clearly change their consumption behavior when they are abroad, because brands' messages refer less to the product and more to the consumers' values and aspirations. Although many brands target global audiences, researchers and practitioners in marketing have been neglecting this growing target that is composed of people who are never locals, but try to survive in several different cultural environments.

The role of brands in expatriates' cultural adjustment.

Previous research (Karsaklian, 2011a) has demonstrated that expatriates use brands as helpers in their adjustment process to the host culture. From the marketing point of view, using brands to help expatriates to adjust to the host culture means creating a long term relationship with them because they tend to be loyal to those brands in all countries in which they are sold. Brands become the known references expatriates can rely on when everything else in their new environment is stranger to them. Thereby, Erdem et al. (2006) advise companies to execute communication campaigns that reinforce brands' ability to either reduce risk (Karsaklian, 2009c) or generate group identification. These suggestions would perfectly fit in with the risk-aversion situation experienced by expatriates and their social acceptance needs.

In addition, brand familiarity plays a critical role in a trustworthy relationship with expatriates. Johansson and Ronkainen (2005) state that esteem for a brand is correlated with its familiarity level and celebrity endorsement can be a solution for unfamiliar brands, because the celebrity world is one of the most powerful sources of cultural meaning at the disposal of the marketing system and the individual consumer (McCracken, 1989).

Therefore, celebrity image can be defined as the perceptions about an individual who enjoys public recognition as reflected by the celebrity associations held in consumer memory (Seno and Lukas, 2007). When expatriates see local or global celebrities endorsing some brands, they understand that these brands are well accepted in the local market and are less

reluctant to buy them. According to Shimp (2003), the most important attributes determining effectiveness of the endorser are credibility with trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The attractiveness of a brand can be explained by the esteem consumers have for a brand, by the attractiveness of the endorser and/or by the brand name itself. We also believe that the country of origin can play an important role in consumers' attitudes towards brands, either if it is linked to the brand, to the endorser or to the consumers' nationalities (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004).

Indeed, global brands are well-known and consumers in general don't know with certainty where they come from. But expatriates relate to them differently as brands guide their choices in the points of sale. They might start consuming brands they were not used to buy in their home country but as they are familiar with them they tend to trust them. One possible consequence of this is that expatriates can become loyal to these brands during and after their sojourn abroad. In addition, when expatriates find brands from their home country, they tend to introduce them to the local consumers they start connecting with. So expatriates can also be a vector of brand penetration in foreign markets.

A multi-method approach for interviewing expatriates

Humans are complex beings and thus to understand the experiences lived, it is necessary for the researchers to immerse into the phenomena and observe what may reveal itself in the process. The series of researches we presented here, aimed at understanding the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience of participants by describing objects and situations precisely as they are experienced by them (Mills, 1997).

Projective techniques are appropriate methods to unearth feelings, emotions experienced by interviewees and have been largely used by psychologists to uncover deep-rooted thoughts by asking consumers to project themselves on something or someone else. They involve the use of stimuli that allow participants to project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs onto other people or objects (Morrison et al, 2005), and uncover a person's innermost thoughts and feelings.

Those techniques are based on the idea that unconscious desires and feelings can be explored by presenting a participant with an unthreatening situation in which the participant is free to interpret and respond to ambiguous stimuli. The five major subtypes of projective techniques are association (Inkblot and Hand Test), Construction (Draw-a-person and TAT), Completion (Sentence completion test and Picture study), Arrangements/selection (Szondi test and colour test) and Expression (Projective puppet play and handwriting analysis). In the researches presented here we used a set of projective techniques with expatriates for them to narrate their experience with brands during their sojourn abroad.

Using narratives to unearth deep emotions

When telling about their experience, participants respect the chronological order of happenings and create a sense-making situation as narratives convey experience through reconstituting it (Squire, 2008). Narrative meaning is created by establishing that something is a part of a whole. Narrating is telling a story in the form of a causally-linked set of events, happening and situations that affect human beings. Narratives display the significance that events have for one another (Denning, 2000).

Among the qualitative techniques using narratives, the actantial model, developed by A.J. Greimas, is a tool that can theoretically be used to analyze any real or thematized action. In this model, an action can be broken down into six components called actants. Actantial analysis consists in assigning each element of the action being described to one of the actantial classes. Greimas' (1983) Structural Semantics attempts a grand formalization of the narrative content by introducing the notion of "actant" (agents) that are central to the Greimasian approach to narrative. This author studied the role of all agents in a narrative, in

relation to their contribution to the plot. After researching a large sample of narratives, he came up with a typology that, since then, has been widely applied. Hence, the actantial model is composed of six actants and three axes, as follows:

- **The axis of desire**: includes a subject and an object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. For example, a fire-fighter is a subject aiming at saving people in a burning house, who are the objects.
- **The axis of power**: comprehends the helper and the opponent. The helper assists the subject in achieving the object of his desire, while the opponent aims to prevent him from reaching it. In our example, the helpers for the subject are everything that the fire-fighter can use to extinguish the fire and to save people: water, ladder, etc. The opponents are the fire itself, the wind and other elements preventing the fire-fighter from accomplishing his mission.
- **The axis of knowledge**: includes the sender and the receiver. The sender is the element requesting the action from the subject and the receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken. Continuing with our example, the sender is the fire station and the receivers are the people who were saved, their neighborhood, and the city where the house is in.

In the series of researches we have been conducting for eight years, we combined different projective techniques using marketing as the meta-field to understand expatriates' behaviors. In most of them, our aim was to understand in which measure global brands, as well known references, could play a role in helping expatriates to adjust, and how could advertising help expatriates to understand the behavioral patterns accepted in the host culture (Karsaklian, 2008). Global brand was defined by Steenkamp et al. (2003) as the one that the consumers can find under the same name in multiple countries, while Holt et al (2004) see global branding as the one that relates to a standardization of products, packaging and communications.

During our series of researches we often chose content analysis to study participants' responses, which is an accepted method of textual investigation (Silverman, 2006). As Marvasti (2004) points out, the method offers convenience in simplifying and reducing large amounts of data into organized segments and our reading was based on the textual data from verbatim transcripts (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). Indeed, consumption experience is associated with both feelings of great intensity and translation of ongoing activities into reportable stories (Carù and Cova, 2008). In the specific case of cross-cultural research, conduction of personal interviews is analyzing cultural meanings and practices through which members of a culture construct social reality (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). No quantitative approach could provide this type of data. The chosen methodology was useful to gather specific answers to narrow questions without searching for a wide variety of data, as recommended by Czinkota and Ronkainen (2001).

A step by step methodology to collect data with expatriates by using meta-field topics
The main advantage of using meta-field topics is giving an even more indirect appearance to indirect questioning. Using marketing to understand the underlying issues in the expatriate adjustment process reinforces the subtle character of projective techniques used in this methodology which is constituted of five main steps, as follow:

- Step 1 - Informal and free conversation about a meta-field topic to create empathy
- Step 2 - Use of projective techniques with both verbal and non verbal exercises
- Step 3 - Use of story reading techniques
- Step 4 - Use of storytelling and narratives
- Step 5 - Use of a case study

Step 1 - Informal and free conversation about a meta-field topic to create empathy

Creating a favorable environment prior to conducting research is paramount when working with complex populations. Though it may be seen as a waste of part of the time allocated to conduct the research, it pays off when respondents feel comfortable because they feel engaged in an empathetic relationship with the researcher. The informal conversation, as for example about shopping experiences in general, breaks the ice and takes the respondent away from the position of the one who is interrogated. Thanks to high involvement, respondents feel more willing to participate in the research.

Step 2 - Use of projective techniques with both verbal and non verbal exercises

As listed before, there are several projective techniques and not all respondents feel comfortable with them all. Short exercises using some of them allow all respondents to find the most appropriate way for them to participate in the research. It is imperative to use both verbal and non verbal exercises to enable all participants, independently of their cultures, to feel comfortable with the exercise. As an example, words' associations and images' associations (Karsaklian, 2008) are complementary. They can be operationalized both orally and through writing and drawing.

Step 3 – Use of story reading techniques

The text presented to participants should be authentic and original. It should have been written by a person from the same population (an expatriate) not being part of that specific sample. This is of extreme importance because the story should sound real and expatriates should be able to relate to it. A fictitious story can appear as being less plausible and will benefit from less engagement from the interviewees. Participants are asked to read the story and to react to it (Karsaklian, 2009b). They give their opinion about the situation depicted in the story, how likely they think that situation is to happen, if similar situation had already happened to them, if they would/would not want to face the same kind of situation, how did that situation make they feel, if they could relate to it, if they know or heard of someone having experienced similar situation, and so forth.

Step 4 – Use of storytelling and narratives

Using the same story as for the reading phase is possible so that after participants have finished reacting to it they are asked to describe how the story would unfold as per their vision of it. Participants are asked to describe what would be a logic continuity to that story according to them.

Another story can also be presented to participants. This is useful when the researcher aims at exploring a different topic or issue or gives the same topic a different angle. The story should have a beginning and participants should only elaborate on its continuity - describe what would happen after the described situation. Here again, the story presented should have been written by an expatriate not being part of that specific sample so that participants can relate to it.

It is worth noting here that respondents are not necessarily story tellers or story writers and asking them to write a story can be intimidating. In order to have participants feeling more comfortable with this exercise, they should go through a very quick story writing exercise as 'training' prior to getting to the main story. Using Greimas's model for the training proved to be efficient in helping respondents to build a plot.

As a matter of fact, it seemed that writing a story with inhuman characters was a tough task for the participants to accomplish (Karsaklian, 2009b). They spent between 10 and 30 minutes to write down the story and seemed to be somehow disturbed by the exercise. However, some stories were very enlightening: *When you first arrive in a new country, you feel lost and confused. The first things that you see at the airport are billboards, and when*

they are about brands that you already know you feel a bit at home. After a while, local brands will become part of your life. You will feel more secure and less lost.

When I arrived in the airport, I felt as the only fish in the ocean, because I didn't know anyone. Then, there was an ad for Heineken beer and I went to a bar to drink it with some Lay's chips while seeing ads for cars and watches at the bar's TV, and was wondering in which McDonald's I would have dinner that evening.

Step 5 - Use of a case study

The last step of this multi-method approach to researching expatriates is to use a case study as a projective technique (Karsaklian, 2012a). The case features managers dealing with international business issues including marketing decisions. Although the case study is fictional, all situations described in it are based on real life situations experienced by international managers. While analyzing the case, participants identify themselves with some of these managers and, agree or disagree with some of their decisions, behaviors and opinions. Respondents are expected to give advice about what those managers should have done and what they should do now when facing the situations described in the case. Special focus is given to adaptation to cultural differences as it relates to the situation expatriates are experiencing.

As the case is based on field experience, the likelihood that participants will at some point be able to relate to the situations described in it is very high. Participants project themselves in one or more characters or situations and are able to explain and give advice about how to manage these issues.

The main benefit provided by the use of the case study is that participants are required to take distance from their own thoughts and actions so to understand reactions and situations they have been experiencing. Analyzing the case turns out to be the same as analyzing themselves as part of an international staff and their reactions in past and future situations. It creates a mirror effect that leads them to be more reflective about their own behaviors. In other words, the case study is about the interviewees rather than the characters in the case.

Although steps from 1 to 4 provide very relevant inputs, the main goal of this methodology is having participants to get familiar with the research process as it unfolds. The more they participate in each step, the more involved they are in the research. By feeling comfortable, they express their ideas unrestrainedly and are perfectly at ease when they are asked to analyze the case study which is ultimately where the researchers want to take them to.

Main findings of eight years of research with expatriates using marketing as a meta-field

The results obtained from this series of researches are relevant to two main fields. The first one is management as the main field studying expatriates' adjustment process because they are managed within corporations. The second one is exploring the understudied however growing market which is expatriates' behavior as consumers in the marketing field.

Outcomes of our research demonstrate that expatriates use marketing as a way to juggle between the two worlds as much as a tool enabling their adjustment to the host culture. Their relationship with products, brands, advertising, and shopping change during their sojourn abroad. While they tend to buy more global than local brands, they take advertising as guidelines for acceptable local consumption behavior.

Expatriates' relationship with brands

Expatriates use local brands to leverage their acculturation to the host country and global brands to reduce risks and anchor their link with their home country. Indeed, at the first stages of the expatriation curve, expatriates find it easier to connect with the values of brands than with local people. Local populations have been raised within cultural values different

from those of the expatriates. In some cases, the cultural distance between home and host countries is very big and values between the two cultures can be very different or even opposed. This makes it difficult for expatriates to find common ground with local people readily.

This fact explains, in some extent, why expatriates tend to turn to brands they can relate to. It is well-known, in marketing, that brand communities integrate members by federating them thanks to the use of the same brands (Schembri et al., 2010). Thus expatriates can choose between integrating a local or a global brand community

In addition, results from our researches demonstrated that brands were used to satisfy two main needs of the expatriates: homesickness and the search for quality (Karsaklian, 2009a; 2010a).

Homesickness. Expatriates used home countries' or global brands to recreate situations similar to those they had back home, like long Sundays' lunches prepared with products from the homeland in which *the brands were our relatives*. As it was stated by one respondent when seeing home countries' cars on the streets: *my heart is filled with joy and my day becomes sunny*.

Quality. Although some of the expatriates are used to buy local brands to better adjust to the host culture, they prefer familiar brands for specific uses such as body care products and delicate clothes' washing. They are however often disappointed in well-known brands when they notice that the products under familiar brands are not the same as is back home. Some of them thought that *it was a counterfeit Coca-Cola, because it was sweeter* or a *strange Pepsi, as it was sweeter and spicy*. As a matter of fact, local adaptations of products sold under the same brands are confusing to expatriates who think they are buying the same products but end up experiencing something different as stated by one respondent: *I was looking for my shampoo Elsève from L'Oréal and I found Elvital. I hesitated to buy it because to me it was not the same product. And when I used it, I noticed that the result was indeed not the same.*

The findings indicate that global brands are precious helpers in expatriates' adjustment by providing practical safety and emotional comfort. The potential of a loyal relationship between global brands and expatriate citizens appears to be greater because of the ambiguity linked to the contextual differences. Familiar brands are perceived as helpers by the expatriates when they experience ambiguous situations linked to the new cultural environment. One could argue that the search for familiar brands intervenes at the beginning of the adjustment curve, but results from this set of researches demonstrated that they are also used during other periods like the crisis as well, when nostalgia is stronger than their willingness to adjust.

Discussion and implications for researchers

In this paper, we aimed at presenting an innovative methodology to conduct research with complex populations. We named three of them: children, expatriates and international negotiators. We selected expatriates as a representative complex population with which is it tough to collect data because they are of difficult access, there is lack of a specific methodology to interview them, a multi-disciplinary approach is needed to dig deeper into the needed subjective and qualitative data and to which integrating cultural variables is paramount.

The series of studies conducted throughout the years and across countries demonstrated that using topics from a meta-field helps to gather the needed data with better research conditions. Indeed, by being indirect, the methodology presented here helps

expatriates to answer more freely about a topic in which they project themselves without having the feeling that they are disclosing personal or embarrassing information about their adaptation to the host country.

The step-by-step methodology proved very efficient because it enables to create empathy with the respondents and as a result, establishes a more favorable atmosphere for the interactions that will follow. The combination of verbal and non verbal methods as well as of projective techniques enables all participants to feel more comfortable with some of them, instead of being imposed only one method. It makes the whole research time spent with them more casual. Participants experience the research process from the inside rather than being submitted to it.

The experiential approach to the research certainly favors the mutual understanding between the researcher and the participants by bringing them closer and giving the experiment a conversational tone rather than a formal and interrogatory one. The step-by-step approach to the data collection process enables participants to get used to the researcher as well as to the exercises, enhancing the degree of complexity and depth by taking them gradually from very simple activities to more complex and revealing ones. It helps participants to go through a learning curve which in turn enables them to be more and more performant by the end of the five phases.

For several years, researchers have been using qualitative research techniques such as storytelling and other projective techniques to study multiple topics. However, they have rarely used a combination of them with the goal of enhancing the level of difficulty and depth of the data collection gradually. Moreover, and at the best of our knowledge no prior researchers have been using meta-fields to understand the underlying reasons for success and failure in expatriates' acculturation to host countries.

By using the meta-field approach our research demonstrated that expatriates use the same criteria to select and reject brands as they use to select and reject people. Their criteria are based on values and familiarity. Anything or anyone too different (packaging, taste, brand name) is likely to be rejected (Karsaklian, 2010b). They search for people with whom they share values and have common ground and this is true for their adjustment both in professional and social settings in the host country. This explains the existence of expats' communities in all countries. Instead of venturing towards the unknown, numbers of expatriates choose to live and work with people from their home culture. These people are unknown as well, however they share the same culture, language, and probably have similar consumption habits. They supposedly share the same set of values. Although this lifestyle doesn't help them to thoroughly benefit from the international experience, it gives them the assurance they think they need. As stated by Carù and Cova (2008), in an experiential perspective, consumers are less interested in maximizing their benefits and more focused on gratification within a given social context.

The methodology described here was appropriate to explain expatriates' feelings and their attitudes towards brands. The multi-method approach to projective techniques aiming at a deeper understanding of the underlying aspects of expatriate adjustment to host countries has proven efficient as well as using a meta-field such as marketing. Expatriates clearly change their behavior as consumers when they are abroad because brands' messages refer less to the product and more to the consumers' values and aspirations. Although many brands target global audiences, researchers and practitioners have been neglecting this growing market target which is composed of people who are never locals, but try to survive in several different cultural environments.

Indeed, the average length of expatriates' assignments is three years and after re-entry they often start preparing to move to a new destination. It is of interest to researchers to use appropriate methods to understand expatriates' relationship with marketing or other related

fields to explain expatriates' behaviors. Using methods that allow going deeper in consumers' feelings provide researchers and practitioners with more accurate information which is a better basis for adequate decision making in management. So far, expatriates were deemed as a restricted niche market, but the increasing number of professionals moving around the world should encourage researchers in the fields of management and marketing to know more about them.

Limitations and further research

Although our research has provided probing results, it was limited to one complex culture and to one meta-field. While one of the benefits of using meta-fields in research is contributing to knowledge advancement of two or more fields with the outcomes of one single research we could expect different results if other meta-fields were used to reach the same objectives. Further research should fill in this gap.

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