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Producing migrant encounter: Learning to be a British expatriate in Singapore through the Global Mobility Industry

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Abstract
Culture shock is when the experience of difference is seen to emotionally overwhelm a migrant. In this paper, I look at how the Global Mobility Industry, an industry that acts as an outsourcer for international human resource management processes, seeks to treat culture shock in the corporate expatriate. Through arguing that different cultures become medicalised as a risk to the expatriate, the paper makes two key points. First, there is a need to understand the way in which migration industries play a role in producing how migrants experience migration, with the paper illustrating a way through which we can conceptually engage with how the Global Mobility Industry manages encounter. Second, through this I argue that there are spaces out with the ‘contact zone’ through which encounter is learnt, highlighting a need and providing a theoretical basis for how research on migrant identities can explore different sites through which migrant subjectivities are produced as part of their journey’s abroad.

Keywords
Expatriates, culture shock, migration industry, Global Mobility Industry, encounter

Introduction
At a talk given to the American Wives Club in Rio de Janeiro in 1954, anthropologist Kalvero Oberg reported on ‘a common syndrome, a sequence of behaviour and attitude’ that he observed when he, as a government official, was explaining Brazilian culture to newly arrived Americans (McComb and Foster, 1974: 358). Published later in an anthropological journal, Oberg theorised adjustment to a new culture as a transitory experience, a four-stage process in becoming an ‘expatriate’, adjusting to the new cultural environment. The first stage is the honeymoon stage where the expatriate is ‘fascinated by the new’. This is a ‘pleasant’ but ‘superficial experience’ of the country abroad (Oberg, 1960: 178). These feelings are seen to subside, due to ‘the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar
signs and symbols of social intercourse’ (McComb and Foster, 1974; Oberg, 1960), resulting in the second phase: culture shock. Here the expatriate is assumed to experience a range of negative emotions: hostility, aggression, frustration and anxiety with the country that they are in. The third phase of adjustment indicates the overcoming of culture shock, where the expatriate is ‘beginning to open the way into the new cultural environment’ (Oberg, 1960: 178). This leads to the fourth stage of adjustment where the expatriate ‘operate[s] within the new milieu without a feeling of anxiety’ (Oberg, 1960: 178). Oberg then describes culture shock as a ‘disease’, where the symptoms of culture shock are both physical and emotional manifestations of frustration:

Some of the symptoms of culture shock are: excessive washing of the hands...a feeling of helplessness...fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations...excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured; great concern over minor pains and irritations of the skin; and final, that terrible longing to be back home...to talk to people who really make sense. (1960: 177–187)

Culture shock as framed by Oberg becomes seen as a psychological disorder, the normal emotional experience of expatriates to encounter. As a so-called disorder, it is normative within management and popular accounts of expatriates, ‘part of our everyday vocabulary’ (Marx, 1999: 5), the assumed normal experience of the expatriate to difference. With the failure to adjust to the new cultural environment being the most commonly cited reason for the failure of an expatriate assignment (Black et al., 1999), the experience of culture shock becomes something that organisations seek to control, especially as a failed expatriation is disastrous to the organisation with the direct cost estimated at 1–3.5 million dollars for a four-year assignment (Black et al., 1999: 15). In this paper, I explore how the Global Mobility Industry, hereafter the GMI, works to try and ‘cure’ culture shock. In doing so, I explore the ways in which the expatriate is made subject through the mechanisms that move them abroad, showing how we can see the GMI as site through which migrants learn how to manage encounter. Through this the paper makes two key points.

First, I argue that there is a need to understand and theorise the way in which migration industries mediate the experience of migration. This reflects recent calls in the geographies of labour markets that have highlighted the need to develop research on the role that labour market intermediaries play in the constitution of migration (Scott, 2013). For example, Findlay et al. (2013) argue that the recent focus on individualised accounts of migration, for example those that seek to ground understandings of migrant identity, has meant that we have a poor understanding of the ‘knowledge practices that govern who is selected to move by other actors who control access to international work opportunities’ (146). This type of work then seeks to re-situate the sites in which we study migrant identities by looking at the ‘in-between’ spaces of migration, for example the production of an idealised ‘good worker’ in recruitment agencies (Findlay et al., 2013; Shubin et al., 2014). However, through this paper, I argue that there is a lacuna in the way in which we understand migration industries as a site in themselves, as work on the migration industries does not engage with the ways in which these industries function. For example, the focus on the increasing commercialisation of international migration (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013) looks at the structures of migratory flows rather than the ways in which migration industries work to produce migrant identities. This paper therefore redresses this balance by offering an understanding of how the GMI manages encounter and, in doing so, produces an expatriate subjectivity.

Second, in arguing that the GMI acts as a site of encounter, the paper illustrates that there are spaces outside the ‘contact zone’ – the ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other’ (Pratt, 2008: 7) – that encounter is both managed and understood. Migration is associated with a dislocation of identity through encounter with
the Other, through a moment of liminality or an ‘interstitial space of transition between cultural frames of reference’ (Butcher, 2011: 7). Hence accounts of migration often examine how migrant identities are produced, performed and negotiated through everyday encounters with place (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Dunn, 2010). Here, encounter becomes the focus of analysis where the migrant negotiates their/the host culture’s difference in the contact zone. Brenda Yeoh and Katie Willis, for example, look at this, arguing that transmigrant identities are constructed through the ‘everyday experiences of sameness and difference’ in the contact zone (2005: 271). This literature, explored in more detail below, provides rich accounts of the negotiation of space, illustrating the ‘importance of self-understanding and personhood for migrants, while also highlighting how dynamics of feeling impinge upon where we belong and with whom’ (Conradson and McKay, 2007: 172) – that the negotiation of space and understanding of the self within migration are inherently intertwined.

However, through this paper I argue that by focusing on the contact zone, we miss an understanding of the ways in which encounter is managed and migrant subjectivities are produced through the mechanisms through which they move. Drawing upon the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006), I argue that by reconceptualising migrants as mobile subjects, we shift our empirical focus from ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002) or understanding how migrant identities are produced at ‘home’ and ‘abroad’. As Cresswell (2010) highlights, there are three ways through which mobility, and mobile subjects, can be understood – the fact of physical movement, the representation of movement that gives its shared meaning, and the experienced and embodied practice of movement. This upsets notions of migrant identity as being produced in spaces of ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ and looks to explore the ways in which subjectivity is produced in the ways and spaces through which people move (Knowles and Harper, 2009; Schapendonk and Steel, 2014). As recent work in mobilities has illustrated (Schapendonk and Steel, 2014), migration can be seen as an ongoing journey, as opposed to a singular event. By reconceptualising migrants as mobile subjects the paper provides an example of a way in which migrants come to understand – or learn – what it means to be an expatriate through the sites that they interact with as part of their migrant journeys.

The paper therefore explores one site through which the migrant is made subject through their relocation abroad – the GMI where the expatriate is taught what they ‘need’ to do in encounter through the treatment of culture shock. The paper draws upon Foucauldian understandings of the subject to look at how we can understand the mobile subject, seeing the ‘expatriate’ as a subject of knowledge, a discursively produced object to which individuals can orient themselves towards. Although there are many different theoretical approaches to understanding subjectivity, the paper views the subject as a habitual body, seeing habits as ‘contextual knowledges’ (Alcoff, 1999: 18) ways in which the body is conditioned by discourse. Drawing upon Foucault, habits can be seen as socially produced knowledge: ‘predicated on accumulated cultural knowledge that in turn informs subjective interpretation’ (Butcher, 2011: 10). This approach sees the body as trying to habitually fit within the subject position that is offered to them by discourse. That is, habits, produced from knowledge about who and what an expatriate should be, are discursively produced. The habitual body of the expatriate becomes one that migrants can orient themselves towards, with the GMI acting as a site of interpellation. The individual is directed towards the norm by societal pressures: ‘Bodies are “directed” and they take the shape of that direction’ (Ahmed, 2006: 15). In this paper I argue we can see how the GMI directs the migrant to experience encounter in particular ways, through producing knowledge of ‘expatriate’ habits.
It is here we can see the intersections between how we understand the mobile subject as a Foucauldian subject, as a way of thinking about how the subject becomes fluid and reproduced in and through different cultural contexts. As the paper will illustrate, this is key in thinking about culture shock. As Oberg (1960) highlights, culture shock as a psychological disorder is caused by the loss of the habitual, the everyday know-how of the migrant, routines such as eating, shopping and driving that they are used to at ‘home’. Habits, the practices through which we negotiate the world, can be seen as central to the ‘generation and cementing of suites of practical competencies for getting by in everyday life and making place meaningful’ (Bissell, 2015: 128–129). Changes to habits and routines then can be destabilising, as Ehn and Lofgren (2009) highlight: ‘the loss of such self-evident routines . . . shows how necessary they are both for personal identity and for social organisation’ (110). Culture shock can be seen as a form of disorientation where the migrant, in losing their frames of reference for habits and routines, also loses their sense of self. Direction then to a subject position becomes critical, with the GMI acting as one way through which the migrant is directed to a different ‘self’, that of the expatriate.

The GMI directs itself at supporting the management of expatriates, providing services that assist with the relocation of expatriates and their families (Cranston, 2014). In this paper, I look specifically at two services of the GMI that focus on relocation: destination services and intercultural management, though the provision of these often overlaps with one another. The provision of these services are the sites of knowledge about relocation that work to treat culture shock, a collection of different, mobile and disparate sites that exist physically at ‘home’, ‘abroad’ and in the journeys in between, rather than a distinct and bounded field. Destination services is a catchall term that is used to describe a variety of location-based services. This includes helping the migrant find a home, managing the rental process, settling-in services like helping open bank accounts, advising on schools and providing overviews of the area. Intercultural management focuses on preparing the migrant for life in a different cultural context, providing skills and knowledge, rather than the information-focused destination services. The services provided come in a number of different formats, both pre- and post-departure: self-help books, websites, CD-ROMs, blogs and forums, classroom-based learning where migrants are taught about the location or culture they are going to or are in or the direct employment of a destination service provider or intercultural trainer for the migrant and their families. These services are provided both by large relocation companies, such as Cartus, with 2400 employees in 18 offices (Cartus, 2015) or one-person companies operating out of home offices. For organisations moving employees to Singapore, the formalised parts of destination services are offered by 91% of companies and intercultural management by 56% (Industry survey, October 2012), although these services are also taken up by self-initiated migrants more widely through books, websites and courses.

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork that conceptually ‘followed the expatriate’, from a subject of knowledge in international human resource management to an identity orientation in Singapore. It draws upon multi-sited fieldwork, with human resource managers, the GMI, as well as British migrants in Singapore, in a variety of formats from semi-structured interviews (59 in total), textual and visual analysis, attendance at events and conferences (9 in total), and other forms of participant observation. These interviews were carried out both in the UK and in Singapore between July 2011 and September 2012 and were accessed through networking and snowball sampling. The research presented looks at interactional formats of destination services and intercultural management, such as classroom-based learning, webinars and online training where access was granted; discussions about destination services and intercultural management at Global Mobility
events; non-interactional forms such as self-help books; as well as interviews with HR managers and service providers about the explanations and rationales behind the services offered. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Drawing upon this research, in the next section, I offer a framework for how we can understand the GMI as a site of encounter through the disorder of culture shock. First, in reviewing literature on expatriates, I explore the way through which we can understand sites of migrant identity, showing how we can theorise the GMI as part of the psy-disciplines in how they act as the experts of subjectivity. The ‘Treatment – Managing encounter’ section, looking at the services of the GMI more closely, argues that the industry acts as a site through which encounter is managed, by learning to explain the loss of self as being caused by difference, framing difference in terms of national culture and being taught coping strategies that involve a refuge from difference.

Subjectivity, encounter and the GMI

As a critique of the grand narratives present in studies of globalisation and transnationalism, where people were often perceived as symptomatic of global flows, research in social and cultural geography that looks at migrant identities turned its attention to exploring how these identities were grounded or embodied (Dunn, 2010). As suggested above, within this literature on expatriates, the migrants’ encounter is the focus of analysis, where the reaction to difference is felt and produced in the ‘contact zone’ as an expatriate identity. The ways in which a migrant experiences difference then is seen to be the way in which migrants negotiate their place – and identity – in their new surroundings (Fechter, 2007; Knowles and Harper, 2009; Walsh, 2006, 2011). For the expatriate, their identity would be constructed as a reaction to cultural difference primarily in two ways. First, through practices of belonging, either to a diasporic or to an expatriate culture. For example, Butcher (2010) illustrates the ways in which some Australians in Singapore seek ‘national’ spaces, such as Australian bars, as social and material practices designed to reproduce a sense of home or comfort. For these migrants, this is seen as a way in which they negotiate an Australian expatriate identity abroad. The second way in which cultural difference is negotiated is through Othering where constructed boundaries would act as markers that define expatriate identity, with Fechter (2007) illustrating how expatriates would use taxis in order to keep themselves separate from Indonesia. In countries where white people are a racial minority, these practices of belonging and Othering worked to produce a white identity for white migrants, showing how ‘race, and ethnicity are made, literally produced, in the scenes of everyday life’ (Knowles and Harper, 2009: 17). For example, Leonard (2010) shows the fragility of a heroic white adventurer discourse through which British expatriates in Hong Kong use expatriate clubs as a ‘confinement to the familiarity of white/national cultural reproductions’ (120). These types of practices – of belonging and Othering – show how research on expatriate identity focuses on performances that are negotiated through encounter, where identity becomes defined in relation to what it is not through the contact zone. This research shows the ways in which identity is produced in relation to the social, material and imaginative geographies and histories of place (see also Coles and Walsh, 2010; Conway and Leonard, 2014; Walsh, 2014).

However, by focusing analysis on the migrants’ relationship to place, and how identity is produced through this, this research misses an understanding of how migrant encounters are produced in other sites, such as the GMI. That is not to say that this research eschewed accounts of migrants’ mobility, but the focus of this research was the migrants encounter
with a specific location rather than how we can understand their identity is produced through actors and sites which intersect with their journeys abroad. Specifically, by focusing on performances of migrant identity, it misses an understanding of the sites through which migrant subjectivities are produced. Reconceptualising migrants as mobile subjects (Cresswell, 2010) then allows us to combine understandings of the journeys through which they move abroad and their grounded identities in place. In this paper I focus on thinking about how we can understand encounter – an embodied practice of movement – as produced through migration industries – a site in which movement is represented. That is, we can connect an understanding of migrant identity with that of subjectivity, seeing identity as a ‘limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one is’ (Weedon, 2004: 19).

This connects, and advances, recent work that looks at the in-between spaces of migration, what some describe as the ‘black box’ in understanding mobility (Lindquist et al., 2012). For example, some have turned their attention to the ‘limited understanding of the mechanisms through particular forms of worker’s identity arise in relation to recruitment practices and the migration realities that such processes create’ (Shubin et al., 2014: 466). This research looks at the production of ideal migrant workers by Latvian recruitment agencies, showing how recruitment discourses are fragile and contested. However, building upon this work, this paper argues that we also need to understand the mechanisms through which migrants are made subject. As such, the paper does not examine the ways the migrant performs, or responds to, an expatriate subjectivity offered by the GMI, but how the GMI acts as a site of encounter which produces a mobile subject. Specifically, the paper looks at how we understand the GMI as a site which is not physically located in a bounded place, such as ‘home’ or ‘abroad’, but acts as a conceptual space of knowledge about relocation. This knowledge works to produce norms of the expatriate in encounter, working to ‘manage’ culture shock.

The loss of self seen to be produced by culture shock offers the potential for the direction towards a different habitual body, for example the expatriate offered by the GMI. This management of culture shock is a form of biopower, with the GMI part of ‘a set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became object of a political strategy’ (Foucault, 2007: 1). Therefore, in seeing culture shock as a disorder, we can see that encounter becomes visible to the organisation, meaning it becomes subject to the surveillance and control of the organisation, the ‘play of calculated gazes’ (Foucault, 1991: 193). It is the way in which the GMI produces the habitual body of the expatriate through destination services and intercultural management that the rest of this paper focuses on. In doing so, the paper illustrates how the expatriate encounter becomes an object, or object of control, through the medicalisation of culture shock. The rest of this section will illustrate how we can see the GMI as being part of the psy-disciplines, illustrating how individuals are directed to take up the subject position offered to them by the GMI.

The GMI then can be seen as part of the psy-disciplines that work to direct the individual towards certain habits and behaviours. Rose argues that the psy-disciplines work as ‘expertise of subjectivity’ producing technologies of subjectivity that exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship with what one might term ‘techniques of the self,’ the ways in which we are enabled, by means of the languages, criteria and techniques offered to us, to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health and fulfilment. (1999: 11)
This draws upon Foucault’s (1986) writings that highlight that the government of the self is not merely done by others but also by the self. Psy-disciplines work through knowledge, by turning the self into a knowable subject which can be managed – or in this case, encounter into a known process that can be easily negotiated by the migrant. However, importantly Rose (1999) illustrates that we are persuaded to use techniques of the self because they are advocated by experts, a ‘claim to social authority’ (3).

As culture shock is seen as one of the primary causes of a failed expatriation, the GMI mobilises themselves as being expert in preventing a failed expatriation, through providing the ‘treatment’ to culture shock. This claim is made through experiential knowledge. First, it is made on the technical know-how like that based on locations, for example the importance of understanding the specificities of place, the ‘local, local, local’ derived from being ‘natives’ of the city in which they provide services (Julia and Abigail, Destination Services, July 2011). Second, and relatedly, this claim is based on empathetic knowledge, based on the personal history of expatriation of the person providing the services: ‘I was an expat my whole life so it’s, you know, grown up an expat so I know what people go through and I can empathise’ (Holly, Intercultural Management, September 2013). This is often framed from the perspective of having had a bad experience with culture shock, highlighting that the individual knows what can go wrong, and how to prevent it. For example, Callum, an International Human Resource Management consultant discussed his services in the context of his expatriate history as being able to understand people in a similar situation: ‘So you know it really goes back to how you relate to the experiences of somebody who is having such different experiences to you’ (February 2012). The GMI makes claims to expertise then on tacit knowledge, a portrayal of being expert in knowing relocation, one that becomes a commodity that is sold and consumed to expatriates. What the industry does is produce a conceptual shift from the unknown to the known, turning the unknown experience of the impact of living in a different culture into an expected and known experience which can both be managed and sold to the migrant.

It is through these claims to expertise that the GMI can be seen as a psy-discipline in the management of the assumed psychological disorder of culture shock. As Rose highlights ‘the expertise of subjectivity has become fundamental to our contemporary ways of being governed and of governing ourselves . . . expertise provides this essential distance between the formal apparatus . . . and the shaping of the activities of citizens’ (1999: 10). That is, the shaping of activities is not seen as an operation of power, but a normal and naturalised part of ourselves. What is important here to note is that it is the claims on the authority of that knowledge that acts as a way in which the subject is directed, by acting as a societal pressure. It becomes a way through which migrants are taught about encounter, and by extension, taught about themselves as ‘expatriates’. As the next section will illustrate, the GMI in producing knowledge about the ‘normal’ experience of the migrant to encounter can be seen as acting as a technology of subjectivity in producing norms of encounter that migrants are directed towards as they go abroad. It is through this, that I argue that we can see the GMI, in acting as the experts of relocation, acts as a site through which encounter is managed.

**Treatment – Managing encounter**

In this section, I look at the ways in which the GMI acts to manage the expatriate body through encounter. In this way, we can see the industry working in a similar way to ‘engineered contact zones’ (Mayblin et al., 2015: 4) where encounter is managed through spaces such as workshops and where the participants are taught about prejudice and its
effects (Wilson, 2013). As the section will illustrate, the GMI acts as a site through which a ‘normal’ expatriate experience in encounter is produced, and sold, to the migrant. The first part of the section looks at how the expatriate is taught that culture shock is the normal emotional response to encounter. This is not to suggest that the emotions we associate with culture shock do not exist, but rather to highlight how through destination services and intercultural management these emotions become framed as being caused by different culture, closing down other explanations as to why the migrant might be feeling the way in which they are. Second, I look at how difference becomes framed in terms of ‘British’ and ‘Singaporean’ culture, working to produce homogenised and essentialist views of culture that help the expatriate to interpret differences in habitual behaviour as being caused by culture. Third, I look at the ways in which the expatriate is taught the ‘normal’ response to encounter, working directly to produce ‘norms’ of expatriate experience. Collectively, I argue through the services provided, the migrant is taught how to manage encounter and through this, what it means to be a British expatriate in Singapore, a subject position that they are directed towards in the so-called liminal moments of being abroad (Butcher, 2011).

Losing habits

To cure culture shock, part of what expert advice does is teach the expatriate to recognise the illness of culture shock and how to treat it. This is the recognition of disorientation – the loss of habitual know-how such as shopping for groceries, eating and getting to work – that causes an array of negative emotions. For example, one respondent suggested a benefit of intercultural training as:

Helping people understand the concept of culture shock and how to recognise the signs and the symptoms of it. And then how to deal with those signs and symptoms, so when you start to experience it and what to look for in your family members as well, so that you can help each other so even if you don’t realise you are going through it. (Eve, Intercultural Management Company, May 2012)

Here we can see that the emotions associated with culture shock are produced as a normal part of the expatriate experience which the migrant needs to be aware of. It is in this way expert advice about culture shock works to teach the migrant what emotions they should expect to experience in encounter. Eve, for example, highlights the way in which the space of intercultural management acts as a learning space: ‘we have got to be careful that the training doesn’t become an environment for a counselling session. There will be an element of that, but you are there to be educated’ (Intercultural Management Company, May 2012). In this way, the expatriate is being educated about encounter, the reason that they are experiencing these emotions is as a normal reaction to cultural difference.

However, others suggest that destination services can provide a form of counselling. Rather than an educational space, this is more of a direct claim to the scientific, medicalised expertise that we associate with the psy-disciplines where we see culture shock as a form of therapy where migrants are in need of expert help. This is something that Elise highlighted:

Well I just sit down and let them really, give them the chance to rave and rant. I think they need to, to release all that and then, because I don’t affect, even if it is being told to me, it does not affect me. I am there as a bin, I am just a receiver. (Destination Services Provider, April 2012)
For Elise, part of her services involves the migrant expressing their frustrations to her, while she listens. After this, she will help them address these frustrations, what she describes as their fears:

I think they are actually trying to justify their fear. And that is where I really work hard with them when I have that sense that they don’t want to beyond their fear, but then the moment they say yeah its different. (Elise, Destination Services, Provider April 2012)

Therefore, although Elise constructs the services that she offers as being a therapeutic space, the services she offers work in similar ways to Eve’s. First, by letting the migrant let off steam while Elise does not react, culture shock becomes seen as something normal. Second, the expatriate is taught the reason that they are experiencing these emotions is because Singapore is different.

The management of culture shock through the GMI therefore regulates both the normal and expected emotions that expatriates will face when encountering difference – the migrant is taught that emotions like frustration and anxiety are a normal part of the expatriate experience, a necessary part of their adjustment to living in another country. Through this, migrants are taught a label to explain the negative emotions they are experiencing in encounter – culture shock. This results in the different culture being produced as the cause of disorientation and discord, it is to blame for frustration or the disorder of culture shock. The management of culture shock then works by ‘aligning subjects with collectives by attributing ‘others’ as the ‘source’ of our feelings’ (Ahmed, 2004: 1). However, as Katz (1999) suggests, emotions such as anger expressed in road rage are not directed towards the other driver, but are an expression of the driver’s ‘own dumbness’ their inability to carry out their routine (26). Emotions become misdirected at others, rather than the self. Therefore, we can see culture shock as a way through which the expatriate is directed to Others as the source of their negative feelings, they are caused by difference, in particular different culture. Different culture here becomes seen as a threat, due to the emotional response it elicits and the danger this poses to the expatriate’s stay abroad. The migrant is therefore taught that for the expatriate, culture is ‘discord’ (Hannerz, 1999).

**Framing habits**

With the negative emotions associated with culture shock set up as a normal response to encounter, intercultural management more specifically works to give the expatriate labels to explain difference in habits – British and Singaporean culture. Much of intercultural management is based upon social psychology theories about culture, from which there are many intercultural theorists, for example Lewis (2006), Storti (2007) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). One of the most notable however, is Geert Hofstede’s theory on workplace culture. Hofstede (2001) defines culture as mental programmes or software of the mind, unconscious ways of thinking, feeling and acting (e.g. habits) which are derived from the social environments in which one has grown up and collected their life experiences. He sees this as something that can be measured and compared between nations, using five dimensions: power–distance, uncertainty–avoidance, individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity and long term/short term. His social psychology perspective in using survey data on IBM employees equates statistical differences between employees in different countries as being symptomatic of cultural differences. There are good reasons to critique this essentialist and homogenising understanding of culture, but here I want to illustrate the ways in which intercultural training stabilises understandings of cultural difference into easily understood knowledge of culture for the expatriate. Hofstede’s
theories utilise an understanding of culture that renders it into an understandable, comparable and consumerable form: ‘culture through graphs is the commodification of a certain form of knowledge through which their client understands’ (Dahlen, 1997: 177). This works in similar ways to ‘cultural’ events where a consumable and easily understood form of culture is produced, for example, as Walsh (2011a) highlights in the context of Dubai, ‘British’ events which draw upon imperial histories, or ‘Emirati’ events that are located in a backwards notion of the desert. The GMI then acts as a context through which culture becomes an object that individuals can be directed towards when trying to make sense of themselves.

This means that the expatriate is provided with knowledge through which they can profile what their British ‘cultural values’ are through the GMI. For example, in a virtual training programme designed to assist the expatriate to ‘bridge cultures’, the expatriate can profile their personal values in order to ascertain how prepared they are for an overseas assignment. You click on each door in a corridor mapped with the world and are asked a series of questions with multiple-choice answers, for example in ‘relationship with other’ you are asked ‘how do you perceive your family’, where you chose from ‘parents and children are responsible for their own maintenance and decisions’, ‘extended relatives handle issues on behalf of others’ or ‘related people should be managed by older members of the family’. After answering all of the questions you are told what your ‘relationship with other’ personal value is and how this may lead to conflict with other cultures. The CD-ROM in profiling the expatriate’s individualism–collectivism score is again highlighting the idea of different culture as discord, highlighting the ‘conflict’ that expatriates face.

These distinctions are portrayed in nationalistic terms. For example, this example from a webinar shows how Hofstede’s theories can be used directly: ‘We are shown a screen shot from Hofstedes’s website and how to build a cross-country comparison of cultures. This is so you can look ‘how you may be perceived by another culture”, as this is ‘a really easy way for you to answer what kind of problems, what kind of issues, how am I going to fit into this country, how different is it from the thing I really know’ (Field notes, September 2011). This webinar sets up the idea of difference for the expatriate, rather than question whether the people in the country we are going to are different, the emphasis is on ‘how different is it from the thing I really know’. In Hofstede’s research, there is a significant difference in the power–distance dimension between the UK and Singapore. The UK’s low score on this dimension means that people believe that inequality in society should be minimised, that superiority is not inherent and reward should be based on achievement. This is in contrast to Singapore, which is seen to have a hierarchical society (Bravo-Bhasin, 2009: 59). This idea is reinforced through self-help destination services guides, which tell expatriates that the Singaporeans have ‘respect for authority, structure...they are not trying to change’ (Understanding Singapore, Online Video Guide, 2011). This means that Singaporeans are seen not to challenge superior’s opinions or that ‘it’s uncommon for junior employees and management to socialise’ (Expat Arrivals, 2011: 32).

Intercultural training is therefore seen as being able to give migrants the knowledge that they require to understand other cultures. This is seen as part of a cultural competence that is necessary for the migrant to manage ‘change and different cultural frames of reference’ (Butcher, 2011: 91). One trainer gives an example of this:

In the role-play try to break down communication barriers based on the problems that people have faced, for example Singaporeans not speaking up, not sharing knowledge. We role-play to trash it out, to look at what the problems are—it’s not that they refuse to share, it is that they are uncomfortable about speaking out in big groups. The problem is expressing themselves, not
language ability, just not as expressive, not as forthright. (Milly, Intercultural Management Company, March 2012)

Through role-play, Milly is suggesting that learning about cultural differences, why Singaporeans are different, is part of the ‘trashing out’ or resolution of cultural differences. In the role-play, the expatriate can take part in what could be described as an ‘enactment of difference’ where differences are recognised, explained but not critiqued (Wilson, 2013). In this way, it is not about trying to become like a Singaporean, but recognising and explaining the differences between the ways in which a Singaporean and British person act. The expatriate is taught how to adapt their habits so as not to offend.

However, we can again see how the GMI acts as a site through which the encounter is managed. By providing a tick-box explanation of difference, it again closes down other explanations that could explain how people behave. Sara Ahmed writes about how, through encounter, ‘the ‘figure of the ‘stranger’ is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as a ‘stranger’’ (Ahmed, 2000: 3). This, Ahmed argues, means that the stranger is ‘produced through knowledge, rather than as a failure of knowledge’ (Ahmed, 2000: 16). Heather Hindman (2007) has suggested that in the context of Americans in Kathmandu, expatriate training ‘frames how they will experience difference, prefiguring their experience abroad’. For the British expatriate in Singapore, the framework sets up a distinction between the habits of the British expatriate culture and that of its Other – Singaporean and Asian. These types of encounter with difference teach the expatriate knowledge of what being British is and what being Singaporean is, and that these are inherently different.

Rebuilding habits

With the GMI providing the expatriate with the normal way in which to understand cultural difference, they also teach the expatriate the appropriate way to respond to difference by following normal expatriate behaviours in Singapore. Through destination services the provision of local, every day, knowledge is seen as a way of teaching the expatriate ‘coping strategies’ (Julia and Alison, Destination Services, July 2011) to deal with the loss of the expatriate’s habitual know-how. The practical information provided to the expatriate becomes part of the emotional management of the expatriate, teaching the expatriate how to negotiate encounter. However, the provision of practical information targets the everyday life of expatriates, with differences in day-to-day life abroad, such as eating and getting around being seen as obstacles that the expatriate needs to overcome. These services attempt to address the loss of routine, by providing the expatriate with information to readdress their habitual know-how, the ‘need to recreate a home as soon as possible’, home being seen as the ‘safe, predictable and routine’ (Julia and Alison, Destination Services, July 2011). They advertise themselves as providing the expatriate with the ‘practical’ information required to be an expatriate in Singapore. Through managing expatriates’ expectations about everyday life in Singapore, destination services again work to produce a norm of expatriates as being different from the local.

To provide an example of how this works, the webinar designed to prepare the expatriate for life abroad, looks at gathering information about the host country as a preparation tool, which suggests is a ‘basic analysis tool for you to find out what is going on in that country, how different it is for you, and if you are really prepared to go abroad and say yeah I’m going to live in this country. How to do this? Go online, country profiles, websites’ (Field notes, September 2011). The future expatriate here is invited to consider the extent of the
differences between the country they are from and the country that they are going to. However, in going and finding out the information about the country you are going to, or being provided with it, you find out what is ‘normal’ for expatriates in Singapore. For example, destination services suggest that accommodation is of ‘a high-standard’ in Singapore with expatriates tending to live in condominiums often with pools, gyms, tennis and squash courts (ExpatArrivals, 2011). The imagery of Singapore in an online video ‘look-see’ guide also highlights this; the apartments the expatriate is shown around are modern and spacious. In a destination services course in the ‘housing types’ slide, three types of housing are highlighted; the condo with security, fences, swimming pools, gyms and barbeque pits, semi-detached houses and bungalows. In a course, we are told that the price depends on how close you are to the city and the size of the house or flat that you are looking at. The graphic on the slide highlights that the prime residential areas are 9, 10 and 11 – the centre of Singapore, and also 15–16 in the East and 18–19 in the North-East (Destination Services Course, March 2012). This information therefore produces the idea that expatriates in Singapore should live in particular areas and in particular types of housing.

This reinforces ideas from the literature that looks at an expatriate identity is produced through Othering with, for example, Fechter (2007) suggesting that the decision of where to live for expatriates in Jakarta was a way in which expatriates tried to actively distance themselves from Indonesia (63). While we cannot make this clear distinction in Singapore there is an imaginary of areas considered as ‘expatriate’ and those which are local – an image that is taught to the migrant through the information provided by destination services. That is, where an expatriate lives is not just produced as a reaction to difference in the contact zone, but in sites like the GMI. This means, as a way of dealing with the emotional response to difference, normal expatriate behaviours are produced, ones which migrants are ‘directed’ to by the GMI.

As well as producing norms of what it means to be an expatriate, destination services also provide the expatriate with an appropriate response to difference. Going back to the look-see video, clicking on the ‘go shopping’ section, a video is opened where the cameraperson asks a current expatriate a series of questions about shopping whilst the shopper goes round a wet market. The location of the video, a wet market, serves to emphasise difference; it is perhaps the most different shopping experience to Britain you can find in Singapore. The viewer is taught an appropriate emotional and physical response to the wet market, that ‘if [the wet market] makes you feel squeamish, well known brands can be found in many shopping malls’ (LookSeeVideo, January 2012). The expatriate is taught that being at the wet market, a different kind of shopping and eating, can make you feel sick. This is the production of Singapore as abject, as David Sibley (1995) highlights feelings about Others get attached to places. At the destination services course, we are told that because a quarter of people in Singapore are foreigners, we are likely to find our fellow-country men in the supermarket and to go to Cold Storage as that caters for the foreign market. The audience is being taught that a coping strategy to deal with difference is going to the international supermarkets to find fellow British expatriates. Destination service providers also suggest this, that expatriates are often frustrated that they cannot find a particular product that they want: ‘I say all you do is go to Cold Storage [large supermarket chain] and ask them, just directing them to a place where they will feel something that is actually quite familiar to them’ (Destination Services, March 2012). Supermarkets like Cold Storage even stock products from the British supermarket Waitrose (Field Notes, March 2012). We can see this again as reflecting ideas about how expatriate identity is produced through encounter through practices of belonging where the migrant seeks spaces of comfort in
the familiar (Butcher, 2010, 2011), these are ideas that are also sold to the migrant through the GMI.

While destination services are sold as ‘practical’ information, we can see that it also works to teach emotional responses by addressing the routine and habitual. In rebuilding routines for the migrant, destination services outline normal expatriate responses to difference in everyday life so that they can also become part of the routine. The shopping example illustrates this with food, the expatriate learns that wet markets might make them squeamish because they are different, but they can go to the supermarket Cold Storage to find food products that they are used to, and in doing so they will find fellow expatriates. In this way, by teaching the expatriates to overcome culture shock, by reorienting the expatriate, practical information serves to modify the expatriate’s everyday habits as being different from the local ones, different types of shopping, different types of living. Importantly, destination services as a site, both pre- and post-departure work to direct the migrant towards this way of negotiating cultural difference, showing how Othering and belonging as a response to cultural difference are not only produced as a response to difference in encounter, but in anticipation to the potential of this response – culture shock.

Conclusions

This paper has looked at repetitions of expert advice that teach the migrant how a British expatriate habitually does encounter in Singapore. We can see that this expert advice, framed as the treatment of culture shock, acts as apparatus that produces encounter through the sites that the migrant interacts with as part of their migrant journeys. It teaches the migrant about their encounter with another culture, namely that it will be different and how to react to this difference. In doing so, it closes down other explanations as to why expatriates might be feeling the emotions associated with culture shock, other reasons to explain their anger or frustration. So rather than the migrant learning encounter through the ‘contact zone’, they are taught the normal expected experience of a British expatriate in Singapore through the GMI as a site. In particular, through the management of emotions, expectations and habits, different cultures are portrayed as a risk to expatriates, as a risk to their emotional well-being, routines and sense of self. It produces a norm of (different) culture as discord, one that becomes medicalised and subject to control. Difference as danger becomes established through the mechanisms through which the (corporate) expatriate moves abroad, with this paper illustrating ways in which this is actively taught to the migrant. Through this, we can see two key points.

First, the paper illustrates a way through which we can understand the role of migration industries in producing the experiences of migration. That is, it illustrates a way in which research on migration industries can engage with social and cultural geographies of migration, as well as the ways in which migration is structured (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013). For example, we can see that the way in which difference is produced and sold through destination services and intercultural management as being at odds with both the cosmopolitan and emancipatory potential that is assumed both in geographies of encounter and global migration. Geographies of encounter often highlight the ‘potential for the forging of new hybrid cultures and ways of living with difference’ (Valentine, 2008: 324), with, for example, the presence and interaction of people seen to provide the opportunity for the development of cross-cultural competencies (Vertovec and Rogers, 1995). This helps to explain why global migration is sometimes assumed to produce cosmopolitan subjects. However, by looking at how encounter is produced through the GMI, we can see how
mobility is not necessarily a precondition for engagement with the Other, not even a meaningful engagement that might bring about change. Instead, the normal position for the British expatriate in Singapore is being given the labels to explain difference and how to react to this difference—by seeking like-minded people.

It is in this way that we can see how the GMI, in producing the habitual body through encounter, also produces the expatriate as a mobile subject. In teaching the migrant how to do encounter, it provides the migrant with the norms of expatriate identity, for example, where a normal expatriate lives or shops. This shows how the expatriate as a subject is produced through the mechanisms that move them abroad, one which helps us understand the ways through which they negotiate cultural difference abroad by giving them ‘a framework in which to encode their experiences’ (Hindman, 2007: 127). Most clearly, we can see that the GMI produces the expatriate as being different, helping to produce and reproduce notions of privilege for this group of migrants. This builds upon previous research on expatriates that looks at how identity is characterised by a difference between the migrant and local population (see, for example, Fechter, 2007; Knowles and Harper, 2009). Within this, there is often a goal, either implicitly or explicitly, to expose the ways in which notions of privilege are reproduced for the expatriate, for example, in terms of lifestyle or race (Conway and Leonard, 2014; Fechter, 2007; Fechter and Walsh, 2010; Knowles and Harper, 2009; Leonard, 2010; Walsh, 2006).

However, by looking at the GMI as a site of encounter, we can see how entrenched these understandings of privilege are, and how they are not produced through encounter, but through other actors and sites. Rather than neo-assimilation (Waite, 2012) or even engagement with the Other as being a goal, difference is produced as an expectation, not something to adjust to, but as something that the expatriate needs to overcome in their emotional journey. The work that the GMI does in trying to cure culture shock highlights the labour involved in producing difference for the expatriate, one that becomes attached to certain habitual bodies. In producing not just the expatriate, but the British expatriate, the GMI reproduces notions of a privileged identity, one that becomes raced and classed in the everyday practices of difference both on the ground in Singapore and more widely. It becomes, as Caroline Knowles and Douglas Harper (2009: 17) note, a way of ‘thinking about, categorising, and ordering people’. The GMI then becomes a way through which Singapore as a collective becomes Othered, as being different from the expatriate. But, it also becomes a way through which the expatriate as a category of migration is produced as privilege, working to make certain kinds of mobility both possible and desirable for certain groups of people (c.f. Cresswell, 2010).

Second, and relatedly, the paper illustrates a way in which the negotiation of difference can be learnt by the migrant through sites other than encounter. This is not to say that place does not matter, that we should see ‘privileged migrants as being detached from place’ (Walsh, 2011: 43) but rather to argue that the way in which migrants come to understand encounters, and themselves, is also produced through the sites through which they move abroad. Therefore, although the literature that looks at how expatriate identities play out in place shows the ways in which their practices work to make distinctions—between home and abroad, or different groups of migrants—this does not go far enough in highlighting and understanding the multiple sites and ways in which migrant identities are produced. This means that we need to see research on migration moving beyond the methodological and ontological logic of spaces of the nation-state (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002), to think about the processes by and through which people move. While we can see clearly how this is provided for the corporate expatriate through the psy-disciplines of the GMI, we can argue that other migration industries work to produce migrant identities in similar ways. Engaging
with migration industries helps us understand the multiple and complex ways in which migration is produced, negotiated and performed, ones which do not focus solely on place, but engage with migration journeys (Schapendonk and Steel, 2014). This illustrates a need for future research on migration, and migrant identities, to think more widely about the sites through which migration comes to be understood, changing their empirical lens to look at the country of origin, destination and the mobility spaces and processes in-between.

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Note
1. The expatriate is a highly contested term. Its technical definition within transnational organisations refers to someone who moves abroad with the intention to return ‘home’, but in practice it is usually used to refer to white migrants (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Fechter and Walsh, 2010). In reflection of these debates about who the expatriate is, I use ‘expatriate’ to refer to an organisational identity and ‘migrant’ to refer to British emigrants abroad.

References


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