

Towards a New Type of Social Support for Expatriates

Djidjoho Isaac Houngue^{1,2}

¹Faculty of Administration and International Exchange (AEI), Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire d'Etudes du Politique Hannah Arendt de Paris Est (LIPHA), Université Paris Est Créteil, Créteil, France

²Ecole Supérieure de Management et d'Economie Appliquée (ESMEA), Catholic University of West Africa, Cotonou, Benin
Email: houngueisaac@yahoo.fr

How to cite this paper: Houngue, D. I. (2024). Towards a New Type of Social Support for Expatriates. *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies*, 12, 652-668.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jhrss.2024.123034>

Received: July 24, 2024

Accepted: September 11, 2024

Published: September 14, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This paper examines how African missionaries cope with the lack of family in mission countries. New families take an interest in these expatriate priests and help them integrate. With 55 interviews with priests and 30 with families, we show the existence of a need among priests and a strategy of taming by families. This study demonstrates the need for a new type of support in the context of expatriation. Faced with both cultural and professional difficulties, expatriates turn to extra-professional support. Creating a new relationship with the families available to open the doors of their homes and integrate them into the family, these priests quickly find their fulfillment in a foreign land, and this facilitates their socialization. Their professional performance also improves. This article makes several contributions. Firstly, the expatriate's management of the lack of family support. Secondly, the ability to adapt to the new type of support provided by host families. Finally, we shed light on the little-studied situation of the diversity of local attitudes towards the presence of African expatriates in Western countries.

Keywords

Expatriation, Social Support, Family, Parish, Integration, Africa

1. Introduction

An expatriate would be “a highly skilled worker, with unique expertise, who is sent to another unit of the same company, located in another country, usually on a temporary basis” (Romero, 2002: p. 73). According to Drweski (2018), expatriation is defined as a round trip between the country of origin and the host country. Expatriates often leave their home countries in the hope of a brighter profes-

sional future (Ratynski, 2017). Social support, for its part, can be defined as an individual's perception of the general or specific supportive behaviors provided by people in his or her social network, which can improve functioning and/or protect against undesirable effects (Demaray & Malecki, 2002). A great deal of work has certainly been done on social support in organizations, support from colleagues, support from bosses, and so on. Other work has highlighted the links between perceived social support and school adjustment or maladjustment in adolescence (Meyland et al., 2015). Social support refers to interactions and resources from other individuals that can help a person cope with a difficulty (Wills & Fegan, 2001). The implications of the presence of spouses and children in a context where the executive expatriates with his or her family have interested several authors (Shaffer et al., 1999; Waxin, 2000). Most of these authors have found that social support is the primary factor in coping with the hardships of expatriation.

Clearly, very few studies have focused on the importance of social support outside the professional sphere. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the existence and functioning of social support outside the professional sphere. Faced with hostility from colleagues or other local collaborators, how do expatriates use this new type of support to manage their integration? This new type of support would like to show the availability of new families ready to get involved in the same way as the expatriate's personal family would. If the role of the family is proving to be an important dimension in the adaptation of expatriates (Waxin & Chandon, 2003), it has always been a question of the expatriate's family moving with him or her. The literature highlights the case of expatriates who bring their families with them. However, little attention is paid to the situation of the local breadwinner who fully integrates the expatriate and becomes a full-fledged member of his new family. This may seem a rather strange form of support, which could be similar to community support, but it still differs from it in terms of its characteristics. If we consider community support in a more global way, we can rethink in this article the social support of the particular family in a finer way through the experience of host families who aim to replace the expatriate's family.

Our article is set in the context of executives sent abroad and forced to leave without their families; they are geographic bachelors (Mérignac & Roger, 2006). According to Forster (2000), a growing number of companies are resorting to expatriation as geographical bachelors. In the absence of their families, geographically single expatriates are sometimes fortunate enough to find new relations on the spot, which can be referred to as "host families". Like local communities, host families guide expatriates with regard to behaviors, attitudes and conduct to adopt/avoid in the host country (Boulaïd & Yassafi, 2022). Our study focuses on the integration process of atypical unaccompanied expatriate African missionary priests in France. In particular, we seek to understand the impact of the absence of their families and, more specifically, how new families manage to tame these missionaries. Unaccompanied expatriation should be reserved for extreme situations where the unstable political and economic context makes it

impossible to ensure the family's safety (Mérignac & Roger, 2006). However, while maintaining ties with their families back in Africa, expatriate missionaries try to find alternative solutions at the mission site to make up for this family void. We are particularly interested in the missionary expatriate's readjustment to other people who come to be his host family, and with whom he tries to create new relationships.

Based on a direct interview survey with African priest expatriates, supplemented by a questionnaire survey of families in France, we seek to analyze the particularities of the adaptation process of expatriates who were not accompanied by their families and who allowed themselves to be tamed by other families. Our results suggest a number of important avenues for management science. Firstly, we show that there are certain categories of expatriates who are forced to live without their families abroad. Whatever the official arrangements for expatriates to be accompanied by their families, some expatriates escape this favor. Secondly, our study shows that these expatriates give science every reason to believe that any integration needs the support of other people. Deprived of their own families, expatriates engage in strategies to create new families in their mission countries. In the end, our study concludes that there are families available to welcome expatriates in foreign lands, provided they are known and recognized for their mission.

The article is structured in four parts. After a review of the literature on managing the lack of family and creating new relationships in a foreign land, we explain the methodology used to carry out this study. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the results.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Managing the Lack of Family

In the context of expatriation, the family is inclusively defined as any member with a blood tie, legal family bond or committed relationship with expatriates, such as parents, children (born or adopted) and spouses or partners (Boulaïd & Yassafi, 2022) Expatriation calls for mobility that distances the individual from his or her family. This is justified by the fact that it is generally the individual's application that is accepted, not that of his or her family. Hiring in a local or international organization is based on an individual's skills, not those of his or her family. While executives selected for expatriation may have been living as a couple prior to their departure, they are increasingly being offered mobility packages that do not necessarily involve relocation of the family unit (Mérignac & Roger, 2006). The individual called upon to take up new duties in a distant country receives the benefits associated with expatriation. The company contributes to the creation of decent living conditions for the expatriate. These benefits include airfare and sometimes accommodation in the host country, as well as many other favors that vary according to the size of the company.

The expatriate called upon to leave his family is faced with a dilemma that is

often difficult to manage. Richardson (2006) observes that, despite their remote involvement in the expatriation, the family plays a vital role, particularly the spouse and children. Especially when married with children, it is difficult to live without this family heritage. It's obvious that the new contract with the employer is not supposed to take into account the new employee's marital status. The expatriate, having accepted and signed his new contract, leaves for his new assignment. The expatriate, like his or her spouse, may find it very difficult to cope with this separation during the expatriation period, due to the distance involved. However, some tend to adapt better to their new environment despite the family's absence, especially if there is a consensus, from the outset, in favor of the international assignment (Cerdin, 1999). It is then up to the expatriate to reflect on the new management imposed by his distance from his family. This is a contextual understanding of expatriation (van Bakel & Vance, 2023; Schreuders et al., 2023). There are several possibilities:

- Developing modern means of communication

The aim is to maintain regular communication with his family back home. Telephone communication is preferred. Several authors have demonstrated the existence of social networks providing support for expatriates and their families during the stay (Briody & Chrisman, 1991). The possibility of using video calls becomes a godsend. But the most important thing is to stay in frequent and regular contact with one's family. This enables the expatriate and his family to exchange news and take an interest in each other's lives.

- Periodic return of the expatriate to his home country

The aim here is not to miss any opportunity to return and spend time with family back home. More specifically, expatriates take advantage of vacations and vacations to systematically return to their families. Returning home can be a critical moment in the regulation of family ties (Drweski, 2018). The most important thing for the expatriate is to see his or her family at least once a year, or several times, depending on possibilities.

- Periodically moving the family to the expatriate's home country

It's a question of offering vacations or time off to family members, and moving them to spend time with the expatriate in a foreign country. While this may involve considerable expense, it is also a way of combating distance and isolation for the expatriate. The joy of reunion is often greater than the joy of communicating on the telephone. The family's stay is often short, lasting only as long as a vacation or vacation.

- Moving the family permanently

Ultimately, it's a question of moving the whole family to live permanently with the expatriate in a foreign country for the duration of the assignment. This is an ideal that requires considerable financial and administrative investment.

2.2. Creating New Ties in a Foreign Country

The importance of the family in the expatriate's adaptation process has been

widely emphasized in the literature. Many authors agree on the crucial importance of social ties and their weight in the success of expatriation (Mérignac & Grillat, 2012). When the organization imposes on its executives living as couples to expatriate without being accompanied by their families, the expatriation is likely to be poorly received (Mérignac & Roger 2006). By living far from their families, expatriates inevitably need to rely on certain people to help them integrate. Links with nationals of the host country are the most valuable, and have been shown to have a positive impact on expatriate performance (Bruning, Sonpar, & Wang 2012). Expatriates, especially at the beginning of their experience, lack everything: information, attention, advice, suggestions, and support. Benuto et al. (2019) have observed that it is above all emotional and informational support that exerts the most positive impact on the development of post-traumatic stress in the affected worker. The receiving organization may be friendly or hostile. The expatriate may be accepted by his or her colleagues or be the target of negative feelings, particularly if the local team does not understand the motives behind hiring a foreigner for the job. There may be a physical dimension to hostility, such as the existence of xenophobic and dishonest behavior on the part of peers (Dong et al., 2022). Hostility from peer colleagues can be a source of great stress for expatriates. There are several recent works (Ljubica et al., 2019; Bader et al., 2019) on hostility in the professional sphere from peers. The reception of colleagues and the way in which the expatriate is received in the new work environment considerably influences his or her desire to return to a better atmosphere outside the organization.

Thus, the literature has largely focused on the interaction and socialization of managers with nationals of the host country, initially leaving aside the links maintained by the manager with the expatriate community (Johnson et al., 2003). Several studies have focused on the pronounced societal hostility towards expatriates (Posthuma et al., 2019; Gannon & Paeaskevas, 2019). As a result, expatriates feel the need to create an extra-organizational world outside their work environment, where they may be subjected to difficult organizational socialization.

Organizational socialization means that all the other members of the organization contribute to the integration of the newcomer into the organization. However, when the time spent working for the company comes to an end, the expatriate must return to another environment and experience something different from the organizational environment. It's only at this point that the focus turns to neighbors or other people with whom the expatriate seeks to familiarize himself. Expatriates thus need to build local social ties that will be a source of support in the process of integrating and adapting to the new living environment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). Expatriates must invest in the creation of new social ties, such as with nationals of the host country (van Bakel et al., 2017). According to Mérignac and Grillat (2012), the expatriate's relational network can be built with colleagues, professional partners, neighbors, and friends from the local community or the international community of expatriates present on site.

Missionary expatriates, on the other hand, pay particular attention to available people who can spontaneously offer their friendship. They are also attentive to people with the same or similar cultural and ethnic identities. Finally, the expatriate allows himself to be hooked by any person or family who introduces him into their home. This is how expatriates manage to find families, known as host families, who are willing to take on this welcoming role for the duration of their assignment in a foreign country.

According to [de Freitas \(2015\)](#), changing country, changing culture means, among other things, building a new life, making new representations and giving different meanings to what was familiar. And this is the mission assigned to host families with regard to missionary expatriates. What expatriates need is summarized in three categories of support according to [Mérignac and Grillat \(2012\)](#). Emotional social support includes listening, attention, demonstrations of friendship, intimacy and attachment. Instrumental support includes concrete actions that can help, such as services rendered (at work, at home, for children), or the lending of equipment or money. Informational support includes opinions, advice and useful information. These different forms of support reinforce expatriates' sense of belonging to a group, enabling them better to interpret the behavior and cultural codes of locals and adjust their own behavior accordingly. In the case of missionary expatriates, host families help them to be alert to common behaviors that may be considered odd or offensive by other people. These families can help them understand how to pay a bill, how to drive on this or that type of road, how to decode the behaviors and cultural traits that can be so disconcerting at the start of an expatriate assignment. A member of the host family is often delighted to play this role for the expatriate, accompanying him or her as they discover the cultural landscape of the host country. Thanks to the support of the host family, the expatriate gradually finds a certain balance in his new life; mastering cultural codes, creating new landmarks and establishing relationships all contribute to creating a new attachment to the host country ([Ratynski, 2017](#)).

3. Methodology

Within the framework of this study, as an epistemological posture, we adopted a qualitative approach in which we privileged comprehensive analysis, enabling us to highlight the how and why of the situations encountered ([Quivy & Van Campenhoudt, 2011](#)). By taking seriously the knowledge-building dimension and the researcher's involvement that it entails, the comprehensive approach allows the researcher to think through the tensions he or she is led to experience, rather than denying them or considering them as biases to be eliminated, either in his or her research field, or in his or her identity as a researcher ([Dayer & Charmillot, 2012](#)). Given that the author of this article is concerned with the phenomenon that is the subject of this study, the approach calls into question the idea of the researcher's exteriority to his object of study. We draw on [Schurmans \(2008\)](#), who cites three reasons to justify this choice in circumstances where the author is involved and concerned by the investigation: "The first is

that the researcher is part of the socio-historical community he is studying; he is marked by the institutions that, forged by history, structure this community, and he participates, in the present, in the structuring interactions that develop there.

The second is immediately linked to the first: the researcher's identity is the fruit of his "lived experience", throughout his biographical trajectory. This lived experience is constructed in a double movement: exteriority affects the person, thus participating in the constitution of interiority; and interiority, being permanently constituted, affects the person. The third reason is a consequence of the first two: the movement of interiorization of exteriority in turn affects exteriority through the person's participation in the interaction; the latter is, for others, an affecting other" (p. 95).

Our sample is made up of 55 African priests, the majority from French-speaking African countries. There are 3 Senegalese, 10 Congolese, 8 Togolese, 7 Beninese, 5 Ivorians, 8 Burkinabe, 7 Central Africans and 2 Gabonese. We also met 2 Nigerians and 3 Ghanaians who are priests from English-speaking countries on mission in France. We contacted 40 missionary priests in parishes in the Paris region and 15 in the provinces of Lille, Strasbourg, Lyon and Bordeaux. The author of this article has lived in the Paris region for several years, and has made several vacation trips to the provinces mentioned. He seized every opportunity to interview priests and families. The sample was built up gradually, right up to the day before this article was written. The priests interviewed ranged in age from 35 to 60. We then encouraged each of these contacts to put us in touch with other expatriate missionaries, to create a snowball effect. Our discussions with them revealed the need for expatriates to find useful families, essential to their integration.

Our sample has also been enriched by 30 people representing 30 families who have experienced the collaboration and welcome of African missionary priests. This is not a pre-established sample, but a gradual one. With an average age of 35, they are lay people, young people and adults, men and women, socially responsible people, capable of appreciating the usefulness of the presence of African missionaries in the Church of France. It is above all their words that we relay in this article. Some have spoken on their own behalf, while others have spoken on behalf of their families or other families, reporting their impressions and experiences of the African missionaries. These families have a proven affinity with African priests. They were suggested to us by people who recognized themselves as friends of priests and identified other families who welcomed African missionaries. Let's just say that the sample was limited to 30, given the rarity of the families targeted by our problem, families who maintain other ties of friendship with the missionaries outside the parish context. They are hard to find, and, therefore, few in number. We managed to find 20 families of French origin, 5 West Indian families and 5 families from Africa. It was with these families that we discovered the strategies implemented to tame the missionaries and become a host family for them. However, all the families and priests we met requested anonymity. The names cited in this study are fictitious.

Begun just outside the covid crisis in the third quarter of 2021, our investigations lasted 3 years and ended on the eve of the submission of this article in 2024. Lasting around 40 minutes on average, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed in a rigorous, verbatim format. We have 726 pages of material made up of transcriptions of our interviews with missionary priests and lay faithful. This material was subjected to qualitative analysis in the laboratory using NVIVO software. This software can be used to run various queries to display precise information, for example, comparing the results of encoding according to attributes. We grouped the verbatims by major theme and then by sub-themes. We highlighted recurring phrases, words, groups of words and expressions in each interview, in order to highlight certain similarities and divergences in the missionaries' relationships with their families. This painstaking work resulted in the constitution of a corpus that we used to present the empirical evidence of this article.

To carry out these interviews, we used a questionnaire to guide our dialogue. The questionnaire was designed by us with very specific questions about the relationship between African missionary priests and parishioners. Each priest was asked to tell us about his personal experience of dealing with the lack of his family and his integration into families in France. With the families, questions were asked about the desirability of maintaining relationships with African priests outside parish relations. Our interlocutors did not have access to the questionnaire prior to our meetings. We just took the time to inform them at the beginning of each interview of the general theme of our questions, which concern the integration of expatriate missionary African priests in France and the impact of local social support provided by parishioners in general and host families in particular. In some cases, their answers led to other questions not included in the questionnaire. In all cases, the interviews took place in a good atmosphere, so they found the subject to be topical and interesting. The corpus at our disposal will contribute to the development of several other themes. For the purposes of this article, however, we will focus on the behavior of families towards expatriate missionary priests from Africa.

No figures or percentages are given here, as we opted for a qualitative study. The classification of families we make in the following lines is the result of the analytical study carried out using NVIVO software. The categories were identified both in interviews with priests and with families. Whatever the rate of each category, the aim of this article is to show that there is indeed a category of families in France ready and willing to welcome and help integrate expatriates outside the professional sphere.

4. Presentation of Results

Our surveys have identified 4 categories of families who react differently to missionary expatriates. We present them in support of the striking and recurrent statements made by some of our interviewees.

- Christian families truly indifferent to the presence of African missionaries

These are the majority of families who pass for good believers. “I’d rather stay away from these foreign or African priests who are brought in to work here”, says Jeannette, a very committed parishioner in the Paris region. She is supported by Françoise, a faithful member of a neighboring parish, who asserts that “it’s better not to get too close to them, to avoid any kind of trouble”. They have a single objective in coming to places of worship: to adore God. “We don’t go to church to make friends. We just go to nourish our faith and respect God’s commandments. So we don’t think it’s a good idea to stop and fraternize with anyone,” says Benoit, a parishioner from Versailles. He adds: “I notice that the priest is a foreigner. I’m glad France welcomes them to help us in the Churches”. For him, then, his piety does not prevent him from noticing that the officiant is a foreigner. He’s happy about it, but makes no move towards the missionary. Angèle, a faithful member of the Evry diocese, says: “It’s only when we go to funerals, baptisms or weddings in church that I notice that the priest officiating has come from Africa. We don’t linger in greetings after the ceremonies”. So there’s no need to worry about who’s in charge of the ceremony. The most important thing is that the ceremony is celebrated, and that services are not missed on Sundays. In a similar vein, other devotees have given responses that testify to their indifference to the presence of missionaries. This was the case of Rodolphe in a parish in Toulouse, who said: “I’ve noticed that there are new priests in our parish, and they’re all African. I’m not the sort of person who gets on well with priests, so I stay away from them”. The same is true of his wife Antoinette, who adds: “I see that after the ceremonies, the celebrants wait at the entrance of the church to greet the faithful. It’s at these moments that I take the opportunity to greet them up close. If I don’t, I don’t see what can bring me closer to priests, whether foreign or local”. Alongside these families, who are totally indifferent to the African missionaries, there is a second category who have expressed a certain degree of satisfaction.

- Christian families are happy to have African priests to ensure a certain priestly presence in the Churches of France

“We don’t fail to express our joy and satisfaction at having them in our churches, without having any particular relationship with these priests,” says Jean, a faithful member of the Créteil diocese. In the same parish, Simplicie, a close friend of Jean’s and of a certain age, agrees: “It’s a good thing these African missionaries are available to help us. Otherwise, our young people in France wouldn’t want to commit to becoming priests.” Simplicie’s wife Agnès added perceptively: “Without them, we wouldn’t be able to have masses or other religious ceremonies, so we thank them for coming to help us”. All these people are simply in awe of the missionaries’ presence, without actually approaching them. This is also the case for Christelle, a parishioner from the diocese of Meaux, who says: “I admire the dynamism of the young African priest in our parish. He is close to the young people and accompanies them well.” In Paris, we met a 60-year-old faithful of French origin who told us how he felt: “We appreciate the

way African priests celebrate religious services. Thanks to them, we feel we've rediscovered the atmosphere of African churches, where ceremonies are lively and dynamic." In addition to these admirers of the missionaries, there is a third category of families who are closer to their priests.

- Christian families who are friends of priests

In some parishes, teams are mobilized to organize the welcome of priests from elsewhere. "We are sensitive to the presence of African priests arriving on mission in France. In our parish, many families are mobilized to give them a warm welcome," asserts Andreas, a team leader in charge of welcoming foreign priests in a Paris parish. Among these teams, which are present in several dioceses, are families who are committed to doing more for these missionaries. This is the case of François from the Diocese of Evry: "We met Abbé Louis in our parish; he is a Senegalese priest. 3 months after his arrival, we noticed that he was struggling to adapt. We approached him to help and support him." His wife Béatrice adds: "Priests in France don't usually have a cook. Our family is committed to offering a meal to priests at certain times. It's our way of supporting African priests in particular. And they're happy with the service we provide." So for these families, it's a question of providing a service to the priests with a view to helping them integrate.

More concretely, other families have told us about the gestures they make towards missionary priests to help them integrate. "In winter, we buy sweaters and coats for all the priests in our parish, with special attention to African priests who are discovering winter and snow for the first time," says Michèle, a parishioner from the Paris diocese. Gaston, who is very involved in parish life in Bordeaux, informs us that: "As we don't have a French driving license, parishioners have organized themselves to ensure the transportation of African priests who have recently arrived in France and who are looking to go and hold celebrations on the stations of our parish". In the diocese of Saint-Denis, we met Expédit and Simone, a couple from the West Indies, who told us: "As long as we don't get to know these African priests, they'll never have the courage to express their needs. So they can be with us and live in painful solitude. So we make an effort to invite them to our home and we see their precise need". In the same diocese, Paul, a friendly 70-year-old parishioner of French origin, confides: "As soon as our African priests feel they can trust you, they make friends with you and accept to live this friendship even outside the pastoral or parish context." That's what's happening right now with my friend, the parish priest, who often confides in me, believing that as a father with grown-up children of his own age, I might be able to understand him well. All these experiences show that some families are interested in and approach missionary priests with a view to helping them integrate into the French community. Other families take this dynamic even further.

- Christian families become host families for African missionaries.

The fourth category of family is made up of those who decide to maintain a very close relationship with the missionary priests. "We know you're far from your family. You can consider our family as yours here in France. That's what

we told the African priest on mission in our parish”, says the couple Pierrot and Juliette met in Créteil. This couple adds: “My wife and I agreed to set up a room in our home for the Alphonse priest sent to our parish. He was very happy with our family’s welcome. After a while, he became like a member of our family”. Other similar cases have been encountered in several other dioceses in the Paris region. “As they have no family in France, these African missionaries need to be welcomed by parish families in France. So, apart from our parish relations, we wanted to create a special bond between him and our family. This has been of great interest to the young Togolese priest, who finds our house a place to rest,” says Virgile, a parishioner from the diocese of Versailles. His wife Diane added: “He’s become a full-fledged member of our family. We have adopted him, and our children have not objected to our wish.”

Elsewhere in Bordeaux, we met families who have embarked on similar experiences by adopting one of the African priests who had come on mission to their parish. This was the case for Jacques, who said: “He’s not from our parish. We met him during a pilgrimage to Lourdes. We became friends. We invited him home twice. Now he’s very familiar to us and our children.” His wife Marie added: “He spends part of his vacations with us as a family. And when he has to go to Africa, he always stops off for a few days with us on the way there and on the way back.”

It’s not just parents who are interested in the involvement of missionary expatriates in families. “We were surprised by how quickly he became familiar with our children. We like the complicity that exists between this priest and our children. And through our children, this priest has become a member of our family,” asserts Bénédicte, a mother in the Paris diocese. The same is true of Father Jules in the diocese of Meaux. Gaetan, a 30-year-old member of his host family, reports: “Everyone in the family likes him. And for the festive season, each member of the family often gives a gift to this priest who is very close to us.” Brice, Gaéтан’s father, gave us a very useful piece of information: “We helped him manage his paperwork problems linked to his status as a foreigner, and this priest has remained attached to our family”. There are many host families in France who really and concretely help African missionaries to integrate. For the purposes of this study, we can limit ourselves to these examples.

- And what do expatriate priests have to say?

The need for a host family quickly becomes apparent to African expatriates coming to France. They feel the need for people nearby to provide them with timely explanations of cultural issues. Father François de Congo recounts how, in the town of Meaux, he ended up becoming attached to a family: “At first, I identified an elderly couple who were regulars at the Church to get answers about French culture and the parish; I remained attached to their family”. Other African expatriates have expressed their sensitivity to food issues. This is the case of Father Sylvain, a Congolese missionary on assignment in Paris, who finds that “the French like to eat a lot of raw vegetables and sometimes even raw fish and

raw meat; these are things that are not done in my culture in Africa. I need people to introduce me to French food”. Father Charles from Gabon, on mission in Saint Denis, shares his experience with us: “Today, I eat a lot of salted meat. I only eat red meat when it’s protruding. I finally overcame my fear of seafood and today I eat it with great appetite. My host family got me used to many other things in France”.

In addition, African expatriates who ask their host families questions about the way they greet people emerge as a major issue. This is the case of Father Louis from Burkina Faso, on mission in the diocese of Evry, who notices a big difference in the way people greet each other: “Cultural practices in France are different in every detail from cultural practices in Africa. In the African way of greeting, we give time to the person we’re talking to, and we ask about his family, his health, his home, his activities, his work, his field, and even sometimes the health of his animals. I ask my host family in France a lot of questions to understand, for example, their way of greeting each other, which is limited to a quick, simple *bonjour*.” Father André, a Togolese missionary from the Diocese of Paris, expresses the same feeling when he says: “I don’t know if the ‘*bonjour*’ is too much for the French. Here, even people who know each other go over each other’s heads if they have nothing to say. Barely a hello leaves their lips. I need to understand these behaviors and I’m asking my host family in France to help me understand the codes of French culture”.

Families also play an important role in expatriates’ dress habits. Father Alphonse, an Ivorian missionary he met in the diocese of Créteil, observes that “in France, clothing generally varies according to the season, and my host family bought me a lot of clothes to wear for each season”. In the same diocese, Father Bienvenu from Benin adds: “What impressed me was the fact that the first gifts that came from all over the place were coats and pullovers. My host family were very sensitive to the pain I could feel in the cold, especially as they themselves were born in France and could hardly stand the cold at times. They reassured me that I wouldn’t freeze to death in France if I took the necessary precautions.”

The priests who were lucky enough to find a host family shared their impressions with us. “People are happy to welcome me as a member of their family, and Monsieur Julien keeps telling me so in Strasbourg,” says Father Gaston from Togo. “We’re convinced that your presence in our home is a source of blessing,” says Father Augustin from Burkina Fasso, echoing the words of Simon and his wife Aude in Versailles. “When the parishioners understand how much we get from you outside the parish, they’ll all be looking for you to stay in their homes,” says Father Ambroise from Cameroon, recounting the words of his friend Edgard, who offers him a room in his family.

5. Discussion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the existence and functioning of a new type of social support outside the professional context. Based on the theo-

retical framework of managing family loss and creating new ties in a foreign land, we interviewed 55 African expatriate priests facing various human, professional and socio-cultural difficulties. We also approached 30 people speaking on behalf of 30 families. Several points emerge from the literature.

Firstly, our results confirm that there is indeed a very pronounced societal hostility about expatriates (Posthuma et al., 2019). And this sometimes manifests itself as nurtured indifference towards a foreign person (Gannon & Paeaskevas, 2019). This state of affairs fuels expatriates' desire to live in a haven of peace and tranquillity. Even in the parish, these hostilities are not hidden towards expatriate priests, as our results evoke the situation of Christian families indifferent to the presence of African missionaries. The physical dimension of hostility, such as the existence of xenophobic and dishonest behavior evoked by Dong et al. (2022), is reinforced and confirmed by our results.

Secondly, like all expatriates, missionary priests arrive in an environment that they gradually discover. Faced with the vicissitudes they encounter, they develop strategies for adaptation and socialization. In this way, they demonstrate their capacity for agency in a difficult working environment, even though they had not prepared themselves for such difficulties. Despite a hostile environment, in which cultural and professional issues seek to isolate the expatriate, he or she succeeds in meeting the new challenges of integration and socialization. This research therefore highlights the value of a contextual understanding of expatriation as developed by several authors (van Bakel & Vance, 2023; Schreuders et al., 2023).

Thirdly, we add to the literature on coping with hardship and stress during expatriation (Abbe et al., 2007; Michailova et al., 2023) by showing that integration is also achieved through the spontaneous support that some families provide to expatriates outside the professional context. When expatriates invest in their expatriation by resolutely committing themselves to the success of their mission, they find hands ready to support them. The host family phenomenon is an important dimension of our work, and one that enriches the literature. This type of support is an invaluable asset that has proved effective in helping expatriates to integrate both professionally and culturally.

Fourthly, this work reinforces the understanding of the central role of social support in the development of integration strategies (Schreuders et al., 2023), in this case, the ability of certain families to save the image of a Nation. Apart from their faith, which is a religious matter, there is nothing to compel these families to open their doors to strangers from nowhere. In so doing, their magnanimous gesture allows migrants to believe that in a country like France, not everyone is xenophobic. This result validates the work of van der Laken et al. (2019), who point out that proximity such as the frequency of humans can facilitate social support. We complement this result by showing that the type of support we study is not centered on the professional sphere but concerns society much more, and this is engendered by intercultural mixing. We enrich the literature by specifying the content of the social support given by host families to expatriate priests.

Fifthly, we have to admit that this new type of support addressed in this research takes the form of informational, emotional and fraternal support. Our findings echo those of Lauring and Selmer (2009) and Johnson et al. (2003), but with an added informational dimension. According to these authors, sharing the same reality facilitates social support. The reality that facilitates encounters between expatriates and these families has a religious connotation. And there's no question of a single encounter to encourage families' commitment to expatriate priests. It's only after several visits to the parish, or several encounters with expatriates in a professional context, that families spontaneously welcome expatriates as full-fledged family members.

6. Conclusion: Research Avenues and Work Limitations

Several avenues of research are emerging. The first is the influence of contextual factors in managing the lack of family for expatriates. We discover the impact of the family on the life of an expatriate. The importance of the family is essential in an expatriate's immediate environment. The absence of the family could have a very negative impact on an expatriate's professional performance.

The second would be to broaden our reflection on the sources and forms of social support that expatriates mobilize. We have focused on the family, which can be categorized as a source of private support. What advantages or interests do these families, who have nothing in common with expatriates, find in engaging in such a relationship with them? And what can these expatriates bring to the families who agree to welcome them?

This study has several limitations. The author of this article is concerned with the situation which constitutes the object of this research. The proximity of the author's research field may have influenced this study. The external validity of this research also remains questionable. The results are specific to a particular organization, the church, and, in this case, the parishes. The generalizability of our results to an entrepreneurial context remains highly debatable. Moreover, we have only dealt with one category of expatriates arriving from Africa. And our sample size remains small and convenient.

7. Managerial Implications

From a managerial point of view, this research invites organizations that welcome expatriates to rethink their management of expatriation. This work shows that we need to move beyond an over-optimistic interpretation that makes all parishioners good hosts for expatriates in the name of their faith. That's why we feel it would be worthwhile to think about supporting these parishioners so that they can welcome expatriates as a genuine resource, rather than a threat. This would help the whole parish to run smoothly. Expatriates who have succeeded in integrating, thanks to the support of their host families, can encourage other expatriates to come to France to strengthen the French clergy, whose average age is ageing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Abbe, A., Gulick, L. M., & Herman, J. L. (2007). *Cross-Cultural Competence in Army Leaders: A Conceptual and Empirical Foundation*. US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.
- Bader, B., Schuster, T., Bader, A. K., & Shaffer, M. (2019). The Dark Side of Expatriation: Dysfunctional Relationships, Expatriate Crises, Prejudice and a VUCA World. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 7, 126-136. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jgm-06-2019-070>
- Benuto, L. T., Newlands, R., Ruork, A., Hooft, S., & Ahrendt, A. (2019). Secondary Traumatic Stress among Victim Advocates: Prevalence and Correlates. *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work*, 15, 494-509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761407.2018.1474825>
- Boulaid, I., & Yassafi, M. (2022). Le rôle de l'accompagnement familial dans la réussite de l'expatriation. *African Scientific Journal*, 3, 789.
- Briody, E., & Chrisman, J. (1991). Cultural Adaptation on Overseas Assignments. *Human Organization*, 50, 264-282. <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.50.3.22555451v6206444>
- Bruning, N. S., Sonpar, K., & Wang, X. (2012). Host-Country National Networks and Expatriate Effectiveness: A Mixed-Methods Study. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 43, 444-450. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jibs.2012.5>
- Caligiuri, P., & Lazarova, M. (2002). A Model for the Influence of Social Interaction and Social Support on Female Expatriates' Cross-Cultural Adjustment. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 13, 761-772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190210125903>
- Cerdin, J. L. (1999). *La mobilité internationale: Réussir l'expatriation*. Éditions d'Organisation.
- Dayer, C., & Charmillot, M. (2012). La démarche compréhensive comme moyen de construire une identité de la recherche dans les institutions de formation. *Formation et pratiques d'enseignement en questions*, No. 14, 163-176
- de Freitas, M. E. (2015). Meus Encontros com os Estudos Organizacionais. *Farol-Revista de Estudos Organizacionais e Sociedade*, 3, 272-313.
- Demaray, M. K., & Malecki, C. K. (2002). The Relationship between Perceived Social Support and Maladjustment for Students at Risk. *Psychology in the Schools*, 39, 305-316. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.10018>
- Dong, L., Ren, H., & He, T. (2022). Conflicts between Expatriates and Host Country Nationals during the Acculturation Process. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research*, 10, 515-529. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jgm-09-2021-0079>
- Drweski, P. (2018). L'enveloppe familiale à l'épreuve de l'expatriation. *Dialogue*, 220, 87-97. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dia.220.0087>
- Forster, N. (2000). Expatriates and the Impact of Cross-Cultural Training. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 10, 63-78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2000.tb00027.x>
- Gannon, J., & Paraskevas, A. (2019). In the Line of Fire: Managing Expatriates in Hostile Environments. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30, 1737-1768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2017.1322122>
- Johnson, E. C., Kristof-Brown, A. L., Van Vianen, A. E. M., De Pater, I. E., & Klein, M. R.

- (2003). Expatriate Social Ties: Personality Antecedents and Consequences for Adjustment. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 11, 277-288. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0965-075x.2003.00251.x>
- Lauring, J., & Selmer, J. (2009). Expatriate Compound Living: An Ethnographic Field Study. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20, 1451-1467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190902983215>
- Ljubica, J., Shaffer, M., Tin, S., & McKouen, K. (2019). A Model of the Dark Side of Expatriate-Host Country National Relationships. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research*, 7, 137-156. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jgm-09-2018-0046>
- Mérignac, O., & Grillat, M. (2012). La constitution et la structuration des réseaux sociaux: Un facteur clé de succès de l'expatriation. *Management international*, 17, 117-131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1013681ar>
- Mérignac, O., & Roger, A. (2006). Mobilité internationale: Le cas de l'expatriation en cé-libataire géographique. *Revue Sciences de Gestion*, 52, 63-79.
- Meylan, N., Doudin, P., Curchod-Ruedi, D., & Stephan, P. (2015). Burnout scolaire et soutien social: L'importance du soutien des parents et des enseignants. *Psychologie Française*, 60, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psfr.2014.01.003>
- Michailova, S., Fee, A., & DeNisi, A. (2023). Research on Host-Country Nationals in Multinational Enterprises: The Last Five Decades and Ways Forward. *Journal of World Business*, 58, Article 101383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2022.101383>
- Posthuma, R. A., Ramsey, J. R., Flores, G. L., Maertz, C., & Ahmed, R. O. (2019). A Risk Management Model for Research on Expatriates in Hostile Work Environments. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30, 1822-1838. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2017.1376222>
- Quivy, R., & Van Campendoudt, L. (2011). *Manuel de recherches en sciences sociales* [4e éd.]. Dunod.
- Ratynski, G. (2017). Expatriation et identité: Une analyse avec les systèmes des états du moi de José Grégoire. *Actualités en Analyse Transactionnelle*, 158, 39-57. <https://doi.org/10.3917/aatc.158.0039>
- Richardson, J. (2006). Self-Directed Expatriation: Family Matters. *Personnel Review*, 35, 469-486. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00483480610670616>
- Romero, E. J. (2002). The Effect of Expatriate Training on Expatriate Effectiveness. *Journal of Management Research*, 2, 73-78.
- Schreuders, R., Carita, A., & van Aswegen, S. (2023). Towards a Dynamic Conceptual Model for Understanding the Impact of Social Isolation on SIE Women's Adjustment and Career Development. *Career Development International*, 28, 377-391. <https://doi.org/10.1108/cdi-06-2022-0148>
- Schurmans, M.-N. (2008). L'approche compréhensive et qualitative dans la recherche en formation. *Éducation Permanente*, 177, 91-103.
- Shaffer, M. A., Harrison, D. A., & Gilley, K. M. (1999). Dimensions, Determinants, and Differences in the Expatriate Adjustment Process. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30, 557-581. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8490083>
- van Bakel, M., & Vance, C. M. (2023). Breaking Out of the Expatriate Bubble in Denmark: Insights from the Challenge of Making Connections with Local Danes. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research*, 11, 21-42. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jgm-06-2022-0022>
- van Bakel, M., van Oudenhoven, J. P., & Gerritsen, M. (2017). Expatriate Contact with a

- Local Host: An Intervention to Increase Social Support. *Human Resource Development International*, 20, 215-235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2016.1248720>
- van der Laken, P., van Engen, M. L., van Veldhoven, M., & Paauwe, J. (2019). Fostering Expatriate Success: A Meta-Analysis of the Differential Benefits of Social Support. *Human Resource Management*, 29, Article 100679. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2018.12.003>
- Waxin, M. F. (2000). *L'adaptation des cadres expatriés en Inde: Ses déterminants et l'effet de la culture d'origine*. Thèse de Doctorat en Sciences de Gestion, IAE d'Aix en Provence.
- Waxin, M. F., & Chandon, J. L. (2003). L'adaptation au travail des expatriés: Ses ressentis et l'effet du pays d'origine. *Revue de Gestion des Ressources Humaines*, 47, 57-70.
- Wills, T. A., & Fegan, M. F. (2001). Social Networks and Social Support. In A. Baum, T. A. Revenson, & J. E. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of Health Psychology* (pp. 209-234). Lawrence Erlbaum.