

# Relocating Minorities: Realities That Often Go Unspoken

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**A**nyone who relocates anywhere for any reason, particularly internationally, takes on a minority status to some degree.

One is, by definition, “not from here,” and is therefore treated as an outsider, at least initially.

Some cultures are much less open to outsiders than others, and, unfortunately, some outsiders are less welcome than others.

With regard to business relocations, we in the United States, influenced by a half century or so of workplace diversity initiatives, often proceed on the unwarranted assumption that business relocations are done for business reasons, and that we select the best available candidate for the job without regard for that person’s identity beyond his or her qualifications or for how s/he might be received at the foreign location. Even within the United States, under the protection of considerable legislation forbidding most forms of discrimination, this might cause a problem. I’m sure we can all think of examples of sensitive situations where the “right” person is not defined solely by professional competence. When handling international assignments, it’s easy to forget that attitudes are different and such protective laws and internal corporate compliance policies are quite rare in the world.

Even in Europe, a region which is developmentally somewhat similar to the U.S.A. in its direction and values, job seekers still submit resumes with photographs and personal information such as age, marriage status, and number of children. Personnel



recruitment advertisements may still specify desired gender, age, or marital status. In other areas of the world, such as East or South Asia, the Middle East, or Africa, local minorities may have very restricted access to the workplace. Women, for instance, though seldom an actual minority, are subject to gender discrimination in many if not most developing regions.

Instead of globally projecting the U.S. perspective that the “best qualified” candidate should always get the job, disregarding other differentiators that in the U.S. we have chosen to exclude from consideration, let’s look at the global situation from a comparative



social science perspective and consider the challenge of ethnocentrism. Very simply, ethnocentrism assumes the worldview of one's own culture to be central to all reality.<sup>i</sup> Relative degrees of ethnocentrism can greatly effect how outsiders are treated. In general, the cultural rules of behavior within tightly ethnocentric cultures do not apply to outsiders, as, in a very real way, humanity is "our group" and outsiders, then, are considered not fully human. "We are the world" could be the defining statement of ethnocentrism

**Raise Your Hand If You're Ethnocentric**

We may or may not be surprised to learn that most cultures of the world are still strongly ethnocentric, and the degree to which they tolerate outsiders is often limited by "how much like us" the outsider is, where likeness includes such aspects as physical appearance, local language competence, behavioral patterns, and communication style, any of which may be as or more important than professional competence. As an indication of ethnocentrism, the recent Pew Global Attitudes Project<sup>ii</sup> asked more than 45,000 people in 47 nations for agreement/disagreement in

response to the following question: "Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others." In only four countries did more than half disagree (answers in combined percentages of participants who Completely Agree or Mostly Agree): Germany (42), France (32), Britain (31), and Sweden (21). 55%

Least Ethnocentric Nations	Score (%)
Sweden	21
Britain	31
France	32
Germany	42
Spain	50
Canada	52
United States	55

of Americans agreed with that statement, a larger percentage than Canada (52), Spain (50), or the European countries listed above. In this respect, despite having some of the strongest laws in the world to support diversity in the workplace (Singapore is also a model in that regard), the U.S. is not at all the most "ethnorelative" of nations.

Most Ethnocentric Nations	Score (%)
India	93
Indonesia	89
Tanzania	87
Bangladesh, South Korea	86
Pakistan, Ethiopia	82
Bulgaria	81
Turkey	80
Kenya	79
Malaysia	77
Lebanon, Morocco	76
Venezuela, Mali	75
Mexico, Ghana	73
Peru, Egypt	72
China	71

20 of the 47 nations queried in that survey had scores above 70, indicating very strong ethnocentricity. These countries range from India, the highest at 93, through Indonesia, Bangladesh, South Korea, Tanzania, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, and Turkey (all with scores in the 80's) to Malaysia, Lebanon, Morocco, Venezuela, Mali, Mexico, Ghana, Peru, Egypt, and China (all with scores in the 70's). We can expect that most outsiders will be viewed with some suspicion in these countries.



Both the top and bottom of this list, India and China, are frequent expatriate destinations. However, ethnocentricity expressed as the assumption that “our culture is superior” does not overlap completely with exclusion of outsiders. India, for instance, with the highest ethnocentricity score on the Pew survey, tolerates tremendous ethnic and linguistic difference from north to south and east to west within its own borders (mostly because of the overriding social divisions of caste, which trump ethnicity) and it is fairly tolerant of foreigners (who fit easily into the “professional” class). Japan, on the other hand, has a Pew survey score of 69 (recall that the U.S. score is 55), but the country is very homogeneous with low tolerance of foreigners. In fact, in a recent *Forbe’s.com* Commentary,<sup>iii</sup> Chana R. Schoenberger describes Japan as “a regime designed to keep out virtually all foreigners and maintain the ethnic, social and cultural dominance of the Japanese in their own country.” Japan maintains this preference for ethnic purity in the face of strong economic pressures to grow its workforce, and its refusal to allow low-skilled, low wage foreigners into the country means that there is a totally inadequate supply of domestic or day care workers, effectively excluding most Japanese mothers from the workplace.

Let us consider “tolerance,” by the way, as the lowest level of social integration, a step below acceptance, with the latter being a requirement for effective collaboration. One may at first be merely tolerated as a minority expatriate and have to work hard for a long time – a year might be a minimum - to become accepted as an insider, as, more or less, an equal. Even then, one may always retain the label “the American” or whatever the nationality of origin.

## Who’s In; Who’s Out

Additionally, traditional gender role differentiation in Japan remains strong and presents Japanese women with a nearly impenetrable “bamboo ceiling.” While foreign companies are permitted to send female executives on assignment to Japan, this often creates considerable discomfort in the workplace, to some degree for the expatriate executive, but equally for the Japanese males who are unused to having a female as a superior. Their adaptive stance has been to treat this strange presence as simply foreign, rather than female, as there are established respectful but exclusionary patterns for dealing with foreigners, even as bosses. Another tactic is to give the foreign woman “honorary male” status, which then requires the expatriate so labeled to find a male mentor in order to understand the role expectations. Such exclusionary behavior applies even to senior female expatriate executives in Japan, and there are other countries even less receptive to female management, such as the more conservative Islamic states of the Middle East, for example, Saudi Arabia.

Gender (being female, for instance) by itself can provoke bias, but it may also be behaviors unacceptable for the local female role that cause trouble. A female colleague – let’s call her Norma – tells the following tale. A biracial American woman (Mexican and Filipino) and an HR professional married to a Lebanese Arab, Norma accompanied her husband on an assignment to the Arabian Gulf, her first experience outside North America. Because her husband speaks Arabic, they chose to live in an Arab rather than an expatriate neighborhood. For the first year, Norma did not work, and in order to fill her free time, which was

considerable since she spoke little Arabic, she threw herself into her hobby, gardening. Every morning she worked in her shorts and T-shirt on her hands and knees in the soil, planting and tending her flowers and a few vegetables in a small plot in front of the house. Her neighbors, who earlier had at least greeted her in Arabic, ceased speaking to her, and soon no one in the neighborhood was speaking to her husband either. The problem was not that Norma was foreign or biracial or unable to speak Arabic; it was that, in the Arabic culture, respectable women, especially those with professional social status, do not work with their hands, do not garden, do not get down on their hands and knees in the dirt, and certainly do not appear in the public eye with their legs and arms uncovered. Because Norma's husband was an Arab his employer had not seen any reason for cultural training, and the family had not requested a service that could have established the basis for a much more successful first international assignment. So, the problem in this case was not the ethnocentrism of the culture, per se (since Norma was, by marriage at least, part of an Arab family), but that Norma's "foreign" behavior as a female provoked anger and rejection.

Acceptance of gender equality is rare in strongly ethnocentric cultures, with homosexuality and cross-gender identities even less acceptable, particularly in the workplace.

An open attitude toward "otherness" is a hallmark of the movement from ethnocentrism toward the other end of the cultural sensitivity spectrum, ethnorelativism – stages of greater recognition and acceptance of difference.<sup>iv</sup> The understanding and acceptance that there are multiple and equivalent ways for groups to organize and interact with their

world is essential to global collaboration. Some countries and cultures are far more ethnorelative than others.

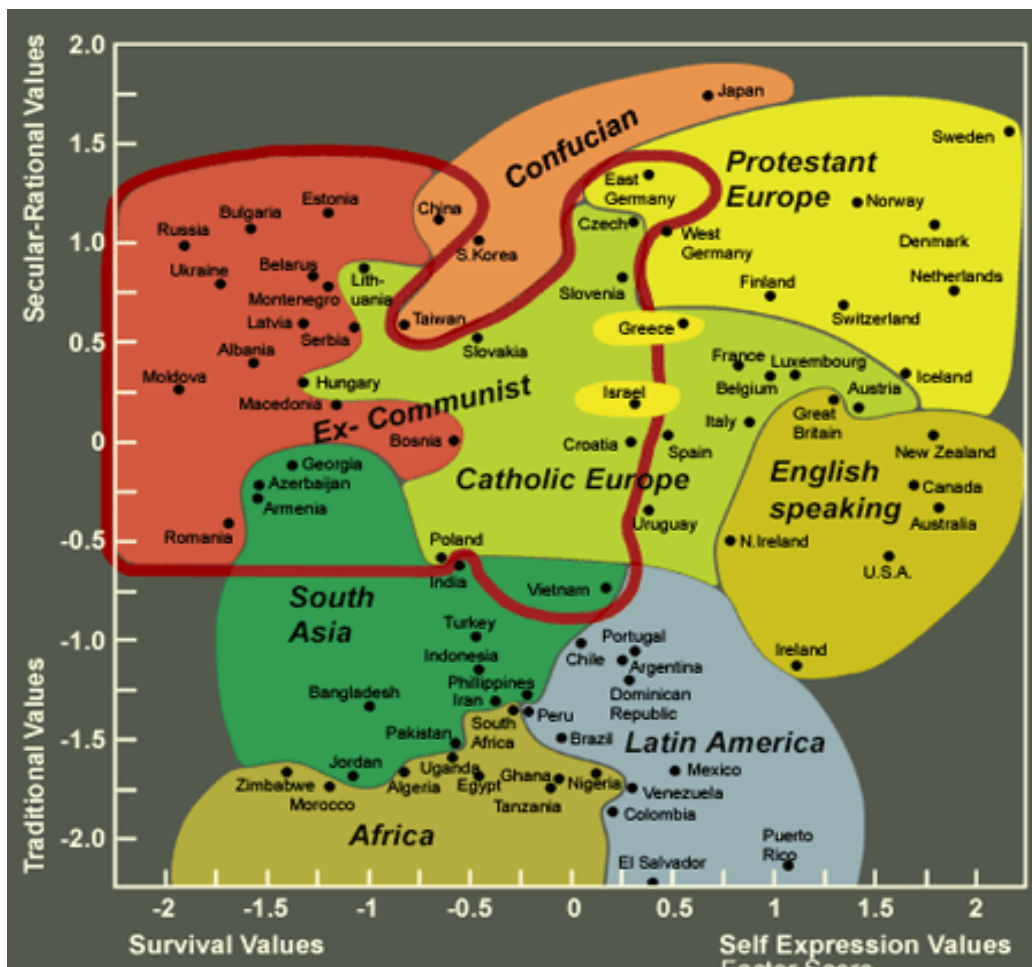
### Mapping Progress

Another interesting measure of acceptance of "otherness" is presented by the World Values Survey. The WVS has tracked changing values in nations around the world for the last 30 years, attempting to provide a comprehensive measurement of all major areas of human concern, from religion to politics to economic and social life. Many different values are closely correlated and can be grouped in two basic dimensions of cross-cultural variation, Secular-Rational values,<sup>v</sup> and Self-Expression values,<sup>vi</sup> as indicated on the map below (see the endnotes for definitions of these dimensions).

When country averages on these two scales are plotted against each other, the map reveals very interesting groupings. In short, the countries in the upper right quadrant, highly developed (high GDP) with strong Secular-Rational and Self-expression values, show a rising sense of subjective well-being and increasing emphasis on quality of life, all of which is "*conducive to an atmosphere of tolerance, trust, and political moderation.*"<sup>vii</sup> Notice the overlap with the Pew survey results of least ethnocentric nations (and the apparent exception of Japan, which scores highly as a secular-rational nation, but is not nearly as strong in its acceptance of self-expression).

Such cultures do not feel strongly threatened by difference and have a high tolerance for "otherness." These "culture(s) of trust and tolerance" make relatively more comfortable destinations for "minority" expatriates.<sup>viii</sup>





Unfortunately, when we look at the nations represented in the upper right quadrant, there is not much overlap with the most frequent expatriate destinations, as listed in the recent biennial GMAC *Global Relocation Trends Survey Report for 2008*<sup>ix</sup>, namely the United States, China, and the United Kingdom.

China, India, and Russia are the most frequent among emerging destinations, with the same three listed as the most challenging, for both expatriates and administrators (in both cases, the same as in the 2006 survey).

Of these five countries, only the United Kingdom (as Great Britain) is located in the upper right quadrant.

The United States is in the lower right, both Russia and China are in the upper left, while India is in the lower left. Very simply, countries on the left side of the map are struggling with the provision of life's necessities for large percentages of their population. Their people are growing up in an atmosphere of existential insecurity, their values are focused on survival, and there is relatively strong mistrust of outsiders (potential rivals for limited resources). For those on the bottom half of the map (including the United States), traditional values are strong, religion is very important, and the outlook is nationalistic.

Outsiders, particularly “minority” outsiders, need to work hard to become insiders. In summary, the greatest of opportunities for global businesses, and thus for expatriation, are primarily in rapidly developing nations, which are generally not very tolerant of outsiders.

Most Frequent Destinations	Most Frequent Emerging Destinations	Most Challenging Destinations (For Expats & Administrators)
United States	China	China
China	India	India
United Kingdom	Russia	Russia

### It’s Not Easy Being Green

Unfortunately, the features that mark one as a “minority” outsider are often the very features we have mandated in the United States as beyond consideration for workplace decisions. The top 20 most developed nations<sup>x</sup> in the world are Western European and North American, with the exception of Japan; Most of these nations are struggling with integrating their minority populations into the workplace and mainstream society. The rapidly emerging nations are primarily Asian (China, India), Latin American (Brazil), or Eastern European (Russia), and they have not begun to address the issues of inclusion. In these nations, and more strongly in less developed nations, there is a prejudice against dark skin and to some degree against women in management. Prejudices against particular ethnic or religious groups abound in the developing world, and there is little legal protection from discrimination.

A U.S. not-for-profit training firm which frequently places students and young professionals abroad for training programs was informed not long ago by a Chinese hotel group that they would accept “only white people.” That association was discontinued.

A young Taiwanese-American associate who recently spent two years working in Shanghai had an African-American roommate who experienced horrible

discrimination and ridicule. Older Chinese can be equally cruel about obesity (which, until recently, has not been a frequent occurrence in a developing country with well over a billion people to feed). The Chinese are singled out here only because, as a major ethnocentric expatriate destination, examples of discrimination against various categories of otherness are frequent.

### A Cautious Optimism

So, what is to be done about this? In America, despite our own failures at eliminating various forms of discrimination, we still become indignant at examples of prejudice abroad, particularly in the work place. One thing we must recognize is that the United States of America, the most economically developed nation in the world, has only begun to effectively address this issue of workplace diversity in the last half-century. Nearly all nations proceed from a homogeneous and ethnocentric base, and only when their development has advanced from materialist to post-materialist values (that is, there is at least one generation which has matured without survival concerns), can the attitude of openness and acceptance necessary for the reduction of overt discriminatory behaviors arise. (In American this began amidst post-World War II prosperity within the burgeoning middle class.)



Attempts to foist our still developing values on nations which have not reached the requisite state of economic, political, and social development are futile and will be resented, as we have seen, for instance, in U.S. interventions to promote democracy in the Middle East. (The necessary conditions for the development of democracy are the same as for the development of ethnocentrism.)<sup>xi</sup> At the corporate level, there may be a cautious receptivity to minority expatriates, since outsider minorities may be less provocative than minority employees hired locally (one can justify the expatriate in terms of special knowledge or skills).

Nevertheless, as revealed in the WVS and its numerous publications (see the final endnote, for example), the younger (and, particularly, urban) generation in all these nations is much more open and adaptable than their parents. They have been exposed via electronic media to the world youth culture, for instance, to the African-American hip hop culture (as an older European generation was exposed to the African-American jazz culture after World War II), and can exhibit more inclusive behavior. Younger minority expatriates will find much greater acceptance by their peers in developing countries. Likewise, younger women in management will find much easier acceptance by their male, and occasionally female, peers (except perhaps in the more conservative parts of the Arab world), who may have been educated abroad and returned with a greater acceptance and appreciation of diversity.

Finally, when sending minority expatriates abroad, it is important that their “majority” expatriate colleagues model the respectful behavior generally found in the U.S. workplace, so that it can be

replicated within and disseminated from influential corporate environments in the developing world. Even when the corporate environment is friendly and accepting, the personal environment of the expatriate, especially outside the boundaries of the expatriate community, may be less tolerant. With all this in mind, minority expatriates should be carefully selected and thoroughly prepared for the more challenging expatriate environments around the world, including a cross-cultural training in which there is an opportunity to speak openly with a neutral cultural resource about the treatment of minority outsiders. The world is changing, the developmental direction is clear and encouraging, but the slow rate of change means that expatriate assignments for minorities, particularly in the developing world, may remain very challenging for a long time.

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<sup>i</sup> Milton J. Bennett, *Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*, in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, ed. R Michael Page, Intercultural Press, 1993, p. 30.

<sup>ii</sup> (Pew Global Attitudes Project, <http://pewglobal.org/> , 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Chana R. Schoenberger, *Forbe's.com* Commentary, “Japan’s Shrinking Workforce,” May 29. <sup>iv</sup> Op.Cit., Bennett, p. 22.

<sup>v</sup> The Traditional/Secular-Rational values dimension reflects the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not. Other orientations near the traditional pole emphasize the importance of parent-child ties and deference to authority, along with absolute standards and traditional family values, and reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. They have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook. Secular-

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Rational values reflect the opposite of these preferences. Orientations have shifted from Traditional toward Secular-rational values in almost all industrial societies.

<sup>vi</sup> The second major dimension of cross-cultural variation is linked with the transition from industrial society to post-industrial societies, which brings a polarization between Survival and Self-expression values. The unprecedented wealth accumulated in advanced societies during the past generation means an increasing share of the population has grown up taking survival for granted. Priorities have shifted from emphasis on economic and physical security toward subjective well-being, self-expression, and quality of life. The Traditional/Secular-Rational modernization process is not linear; as societies complete industrialization the move toward a knowledge society takes a new direction, toward increasing emphasis on Self-expression values that give high priority to environmental protection, tolerance of diversity and rising demands for participation in decision making in economic and political life. *These values also reflect mass polarization over tolerance of outgroups, including foreigners, gays and lesbians and gender equality. Child-rearing values shift from emphasis on hard work toward emphasis on imagination and tolerance (my emphasis).*

<sup>vii</sup> Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World, discussion by Ronald Inglehart, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)

<sup>viii</sup> Let us note that, with the pressures of increasing immigration on these northern European economies and the internal clumping of foreign groups, resistance to and intolerance of these groups is increasing.

<sup>ix</sup> GMAC Global Relocation Trends, 2008 Survey Report, p. 13.

<sup>x</sup> 2007/2008 United Nations Human Development Index Rankings: Iceland, Norway, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Netherlands, France, Finland, United States, Spain, Denmark, Austria, United Kingdom, Belgium, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Italy

<sup>xi</sup> See *Modernization Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Inglehart & Welzel, Cambridge, 2005.