
Breaking out of the Expatriate Bubble

How to Make Intercultural Connections and Friends

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Chapter 2

How do expats make new friends abroad?

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Introduction

How do expats build a social network when they are abroad? To get an idea of what shapes the expat social network 72 expats from many different nationalities and all around the world were interviewed. These expats were asked to think back to when they first arrived in the host country, and how they built their social network. This was sometimes hard because most expats didn't really think deliberately about who they contacted.¹ The Pakistani expat in the Experience section on p. 215 "never had a strategy" and Jennifer, a U.S. American expat in Egypt, said: "You don't choose your friends that much." These interviews resulted in a process model which is presented in Figure 2.1. The model starts with having the motivation to make new friends, getting in touch with potential friends and building a relationship with them. Each stage is influenced by many different factors, and it can be helpful to understand how it works, and also know where one can influence it.

Stage 1: Wanting to make new friends

When expats and their families move abroad, they move away from a large part of their existing social network, and they will need to make new friends in the host country. Like Becky, a U.S. American expat in Denmark, said: "It's like you're starting from scratch. [...], it's like: 'okay, I have no friends.'" In this first stage of the process of making friends abroad, it is about how motivated expats are to make new friends. Partly, this is influenced by their personality, how extrovert they are. Some people want a lot of friends around them, others are perfectly happy with only a few. Extroverts generally have larger social networks than introverts.² Another aspect is how much time and energy expats have for making new friends (and keeping up their current friends, also those at home), for example due to long working hours or as one gets older.³ This is also

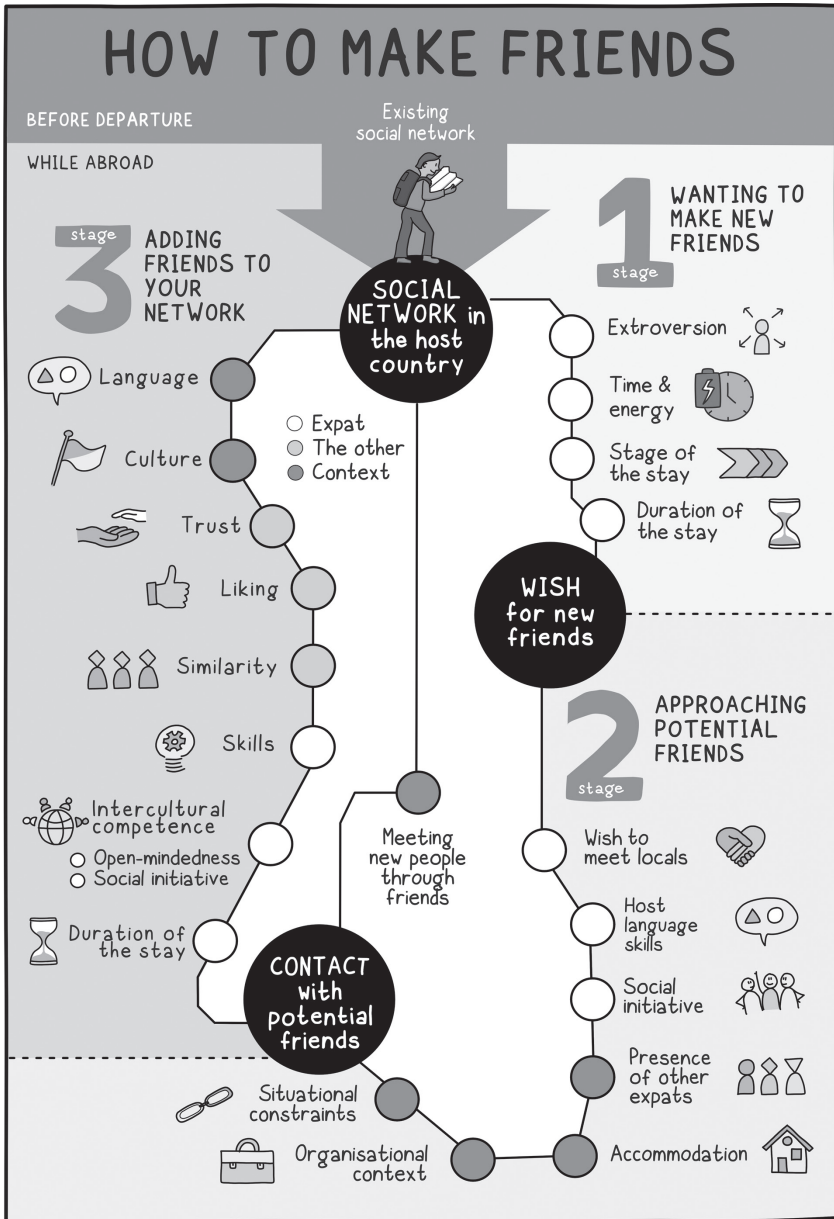


Figure 2.1 How do expats make new friends abroad? Illustration by Heldermaker.

related to where the expat is in their stay: when they have only just arrived, they will be busy with settling in and don't really have time or a wish to meet new people.

In the beginning, I just met like, probably like five, six people. And I said, like, that's enough for now. You know, and I settled down with my friends in the beginning, and I didn't really socialise anymore, up until the end of the year. Then I started socialising again and I met so many nice people.

Ali, a Lebanese expat in Romania

How long the expat is planning to stay will also influence their motivation to make new friends in the host country. Jennifer, the U.S. American expat in Egypt, thought at one point that she was leaving Egypt, so she somewhat lost interest in making new friends because she didn't see the point if she was leaving anyway.

Many expats don't go abroad by themselves; they take a partner and possibly children with them. They may also already know some people in the host location too because they have been there before, for example, because they have been travelling there for work purposes before they were sent there on an assignment. This means they already have a beginning of a new social network in their host country. The advantage of going abroad as a couple is that expats and their partners have a readymade support system in place; someone who goes through the same challenges of moving to a new country and settling there. Networks of married people are often more centred around the family and the neighbourhood.⁴ Ernst, a German expat in the United States, brought his family and enjoyed spending most of his time with them:

I have my family, so... That was really nice when I came here that we were like a little group together and there was nobody... I wasn't hanging out with anybody else after work [...] So we got really close. That was a really nice time.

Bringing a family can also be a challenge, however, because both the expat and their partner will experience stress related to the move abroad, and they might be less able to support the other. Especially if the whole family is moving, much time will be spent in the beginning to settle in as a family, find a good place to live and choose a school. Single expats probably have a higher need to build a new social network and are usually more flexible in building relationships than, for example, expats who have (young) children. Jack, a British expat in the United States, was single when he arrived:

...from an expat perspective, it's probably the easier way and easier thing to happen, you don't have to worry about moving the whole family over here, but at the same time, you think of things being a little bit more lonely... The one thing I found was that the first few months are difficult, but at the same time it does really make you proactively try and find people to interact with outside of work.

This motivation of making new friends can change over time, as the new social network is being built. Once the expat is happy with the state of their social network, they will be less motivated to go out and make new friends. As Ali from Lebanon says: "Now, I socialise a lot with my current friends, but I don't, I'm not making any new friends like, oh, since the last two years. I, okay, I have a lot of friends and I think that's enough." And the motivation can increase again when people leave, or when the expat has more time and energy, for example after the first busy period of settling in has passed. The level of motivation is very important for the next step of getting in touch with potential friends.

Stage 2: Getting in touch with potential friends

Once expats want to meet new friends, they have to create opportunities to meet new people. This can happen in a variety of contexts, like the neighbourhood, school, work, at a club or association, at home, via friends, at a public going-out place, on vacation, at church, at a party or on the internet.⁵ Expats also meet people through their partner, their children (often at an international school) or during language learning activities (e.g. language school or tandem initiatives). Also, social network sites exist that are specifically targeted at expats, and help them meet other expats and sometimes also locals. InterNations is the largest global expat network with more than 4 million members, with many events that are ideal for meeting other expats. Adriana, a Brazilian expat in Italy, said: "InterNations was kind of a salvation for me, because I had friends now." Many expats also use Meetup, which is not specifically for expats, but offers opportunities to meet people in the new host country. For the British expat Jack, Meetup was a way to socialise with people in similar situations without necessarily having to join a social group. It can also be about joining some people on a trip or when they go out to a bar one night. The many expat groups on Facebook offer another opportunity to meet other expats, and expats also used WhatsApp, LinkedIn and dating apps to meet new people. Some social networks are specific for the host country, like WeChat in China, and it is good to figure out how these networks work in that (cultural) context. WeChat helped Daan, a Dutch

expat in China, make a lot of new friends. It is very easy to connect with someone on WeChat; people are not very hesitant to add you on WeChat because it is not linked to their phone number, and they could block you again if they want to. Daan made friends through the 'People nearby' function, where he simply started chatting to those around him. "And out of the 10 people, 3 or 4 start talking back, you know, it's very easy to make friends and then say, okay, let's meet for drinks tonight." The app can also translate, so a language barrier is no problem. The question is sometimes whether someone really is interested in becoming a friend. Oliver, a British expat, sometimes felt like a 'token foreigner' for some Chinese who asked to connect with him on WeChat.

So, what influences who an expat meets and who might become a potential friend? Two categories of factors can be distinguished, namely those related to the expat, and those related to the context the expat finds themselves in. So, let's talk about the factors that are tied to the expat first. An important one is the attitude of the expat, and what motivates them. Many expats are very much interested in meeting locals, and they will put more effort in trying to meet host country nationals. Heike, a Swiss/German expat in Argentina, said: "I think naturally you'll have contacts to a lot of other expats just because of your own situation. But it's always the goal to meet locals and stay with the locals and have local friends" (see also Chapter 4 for the benefits of contact with locals of the host country). However, expats who do not speak the host country language may have difficulty connecting with locals of the host country. Lars, a Danish expat in Egypt, commented that one makes friends with those one can communicate with, which, for him, excluded Egyptians who did not speak English. Expats can also feel shy about using the host language in conversations when they are not very proficient. Emma, a U.S. American expat in Egypt, felt very nervous about speaking Arabic, so there were only a couple of people with whom she would speak it. Syed, on the other hand, the Pakistani expat in Turkey (see the Experience on p. 215), did manage to communicate with his Turkish neighbours: "We use our mobiles, hand gestures and try to explain. [...] We were understanding us very well." Another aspect is that expats need to take initiative to meet people. Being socially proactive is an important skill to create opportunities to socialise with others. As Thijs, a Dutch expat in China (see also the Experience on p. 1), notes: "You know, I've learned over time living in another country, people are not going to come to you, you have to go out and meet people and make that effort." This 'social initiative' is an important skill to make new connections in the host country and helps adjustment to the new culture.⁶

The second category of factors has to do with the context; the location the expat has moved to has certain characteristics that influence who the

expat meets. For example, if the expat chooses to join one of the many expat associations (often organised per nationality) or live in a neighbourhood where many other expats have settled, they are more likely to meet those other expats in everyday life. And the other way around, like Peter, a Swiss/Belgian expat in China, said: “[...] because I’m alone here, I mean, I am the only Westerner, I never meet any other Westerners. I only speak to Chinese.” A basic rule that has been confirmed in much research over the years is that the closer people live to one another, the more they interact.⁷ Geographical proximity matters. The presence of other expats may lead to expats remaining in the so-called expat bubble. Jennifer, the U.S. American expat in Egypt, said: “When I first came, I came basically at the same time as a lot of other foreigners, and I think that [...] kept me in a small bubble.”

The type of accommodation an expat chooses also shapes who they meet. Many younger expats mentioned that their form of ‘communal’ living led to new friendships, because they shared an apartment, or started in a hostel or Airbnb before they found something more permanent. On the other extreme, one expat in this study, Ernst, the German expat in the United States, lived on a property so big that he couldn’t see his neighbours and didn’t need to walk his dog anymore. Obviously, this also impacts the amount of contact he had with his neighbours. It is important to realise that the expat has a choice in this matter, and that choosing where to live is not just about the accommodation itself, or where it is located with regard to the workplace and the school of the children, but also has effects on who the expat will socialise with. For example, during my PhD I met one Shell expat in London who chose not to live on the “Shell street” which had 24 houses and a Dutch primary school, but instead lived half an hour away in an English neighbourhood and sent their children to a local school. You can imagine how this choice influenced their social network – instead of their daily life being around other Shell expats and their children playing with other Dutch people, they met English people. Emma, the U.S. American expat in Egypt, had the same motivation that made her choose to live outside of a compound in Egypt:

If you are just moving here like as a single person thinking you want to know more about the culture, I cannot understand why you would live in a compound because it is like living in the U.S. I don’t get it. Like why are you in Egypt, if you want to live in a house that looks just like an American house? I don’t understand that at all.

Of course, though, in some countries there is not really a choice other than living in an expat compound, for example due to safety reasons (see

Box 2.1). It is important for expats and their organisations to consider the options in the host country and their priorities in terms of who they would like to socialise with when choosing an accommodation because having local friends in the host country is very important to feel good there.

Box 2.1 Living in an expat compound

Dr. Reto Wegmann, Senior Advisor of Swiss Ibex LLC, Lecturer at the University of Lucerne

Making friends with locals is much more difficult when expats do not live among the local population, but rather in expat compounds. A compound is a gated residential community, which usually offers all kinds of amenities such as shops, pools and gyms. We generally see two reasons for this to happen or for this to even be the norm: security management and cultural norms.

The first reason, security considerations, applies to expat employers operating in high-risk contexts like Afghanistan, South Sudan or parts of the Sahel. In these regions, employers are faced with the dilemma that, while local integration might be desirable, they are also bound by their moral and legal duty of care towards their employees. Employees need to be protected from harm, both as a measure for occupational health and safety but also to keep operations running. The employers often impose several security management measures on the expat, such as limitations to freedom of movement, and living in a secured compound. This, obviously, makes it more difficult to integrate with local communities. While private companies might just withdraw if security considerations limit business and leisure activities too much, other employers (UN agencies and non-profits like NGOs, charities or faith-based organisations) tend to stay operational even in war zones and failed states. Their expats usually live in a self-contained compound.

The second reason, cultural isolation, applies whenever expat employers do not want to submit themselves, as an organisation or as agents for their individual employees, to certain local rules and laws. A widely known and frequent example of such a place would be Saudi Arabia, where organisations do not always want their employees to submit to all local rules (e.g. about alcohol, sexuality and role of the woman). Staff from Europe, Asia and from the Americas tend to stick to living in compounds, where no locals are offended and where authorities might turn a blind eye, when expats stick to their own customs and habits.

In the overlapping field of these two considerations, there is a grey zone of risks which is very difficult to handle for employers due to privacy issues. Personal characteristics of the deployed expats, like religion or sexual orientation, might pose a security risk for them. For example, the possession of the Bible on the Maldives is equally illegal as are male homosexual acts in Qatar. These security risks are tied to very private characteristics of the expat that the employer is often unaware of. In such cases, compound living also might be a reasonable alternative to full local immersion.

The workplace is another context that brings people together, and for expats who start a new job, this is the first place they will start looking. In some cultures, it is very normal to make friends at work, but other cultures have a stronger divide between work and private life. The Netherlands is one example, as an English expat from my PhD research commented:

[...] especially at the beginning, because the only people you know are the people you work with, and you never get invited out with them. That's just really... If you didn't know that was just part of the culture you would almost feel as 'they must not like me,' 'what I am doing wrong' or... This is really jarring.

Other aspects of the organisational context also influence who the expat meets, for example whether there are social events in the office that bring people together, and how many other expats work there. When I came to Denmark in 2013, I was the only expat in my department, so I mainly met other Danes at work, some of whom became friends, even if also Denmark has a divide between work and private life. An organisation can also arrange a buddy for newly arrived expats (Chapters 7–9 will dive deeper in this potential support option) and help out with all the practical matters that heap up when an expat arrives. This will free up time to socialise, and also reduce the expat's need to seek this support from their (new) friends. The job itself also influences who an expat meets. Thijs, the Dutch expat in China, had to build international relations for his job, so he met other expats more easily. On the other hand, Lars, the Danish expat in Egypt, felt that being a manager made it more difficult to make friends through work "because you cannot be friends with your employees, and they are the ones you spent most of your time with. At least for me I cannot." Carmen, an Italian expat in Portugal, was also hesitant to make friends at work because she works in human resources (HR), and sometimes she

has to communicate bad news as well. And simply being an expat can also present a barrier to make friends with local colleagues. Chantal, a Belgian expat, experienced this in an NGO in Malaysia, where the local employees did not want to hang out with the expats who earn much more: “I understand that when you earn three times their salary, they’re upset”.

Finally, several situational constraints influenced who the expats were able to meet. One example is the opportunities expats have to socialise, such as events organised by a Chamber of Commerce but also the presence of clubs and associations, whether primarily for expats or locals. Safety can also be a concern that affects where one goes and whom one meets. Erika, a German expat in the United States, compared Portland, Oregon, where she was comfortable with talking to strangers sitting on the benches at the waterfront, to New Haven, Connecticut, where she never really felt safe. In Nigeria, Lakshmi, an Indian expat, was restricted by her husband’s company guidelines, which prescribed that they always had to use a personal driver and not public transportation. She also felt unsafe visiting some of the local markets with her “expat face”. Another situational element is the level of economic development of the country. For example, Anna-Lena, a German expat, went out much more than in Germany: “[...] in South Africa compared to Europe, and you have much bigger value for your money. So, you have more to just have fun”. And in 2020, COVID-19 restrictions also influenced who expats were able to meet with, with most events being cancelled and relationships being built online instead. I will delve into this topic later in this chapter (p. 63).

Finally, expats often also meet new friends through an existing connection, for example their partner. Expats with children also often meet other parents through their children. This ‘snowball’ effect is a very easy way to meet new friends, because simply by being with friends they might meet new friends. Many expats say that they met a particular person and that their network grew from there. Of course, this depends on the extent to which the friend invites them for activities or events where they might meet new people, but the expat can also specifically ask to meet new people, like Heike, the Swiss/German expat in Argentina: “So many locals I met through referrals from other people I knew, because I was specifically asking to meet Argentines.” In the model (Figure 2.1), this snowball effect is shown as a shortcut to Stage 3 because the expat doesn’t have to do anything to meet those people.

Stage 3: Adding friends to your network

Once an expat is in contact with a potential friend, many aspects influence whether that person becomes a friend and is added to the host country social network, or not. Those factors can be divided in three

categories: those related to the expat, those related to the other person and those related to the context.

The expat

We start with the factors related to the expat, and the first one is the often-limited duration of the expat's stay. I have already mentioned that this influences the expat's motivation to make friends in the host country, but it also means that new friends might be about to leave, and that people are less likely to want to become the expat's friend. Chantal, the Belgian expat in Malaysia, says:

[...] the problem you have with the expat is the turnover. Even when you eventually have a friend, they leave. And that's also one of the reasons why locals socialise a bit less with us, I think for some they are, they just see us as we just pass, you know. Would they invest in someone that will go anyway?

The second expat-related factor is their intercultural competence, sometimes also called cultural intelligence, which is key to building new relationships across cultural borders, including friendships. It can be defined as "the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures"⁸ – we will look more closely at intercultural competence and how to develop it in the next chapter. A starting point of intercultural competence is gathering knowledge about how things are done in the host country. Daan, the Dutch expat in China, comments how expats need to consider that locals have a different culture and background, and that it is important to know how they think and how they would react to you to be able to avoid issues and conflict. It also helps for expats to be open to people from other cultures and the different ways in which they may do things; such openmindedness is very important to build new social relations in the host country. Always say 'yes' to opportunities is advice often given to new expats. Emma, the U.S. American expat, says:

[...] if my Egyptian friends want to do something, or they want to go somewhere, or they want me to meet other people, I ALWAYS say yes. Because I'm not just going to meet an Egyptian, I am not going to find my new best friend by walking down the street and say "excuse me sir, do you speak English, can we talk? Do you want to be friends?"

The third component of intercultural competence is skills. With regard to making new friends abroad, social initiative is a key intercultural skill. As

mentioned earlier, social initiative is needed to actually meet new people who could become friends, but it also helps develop the relationship further by inviting the other to do something together.

Third, other skills such as social skills and host language proficiency help build an intercultural relationship. Ilse, a German expat in the Netherlands, made a particular effort to teach her son social skills:

Everywhere I went I tried to start a conversation – also for my child so he could see: “you just have to try”! Try, and make mistakes and never mind if it is embarrassing – you just laugh and it’s fine (laughter).

The expat’s proficiency in the host language is particularly relevant if one wants to befriend people from the host country itself. Marjorie’s (Hongkongese/U.S. American expat in Argentina) host language proficiency has developed over time; she now feels much more comfortable trying to speak Spanish while making new friends.

The other person

When an expat is trying to build a relationship with someone, we also have to consider the other person. For example, the potential friend should also want to make a new connection. This is why it can sometimes be difficult to meet with locals, because they have their existing social network and are not necessarily looking for new friends – they might not have the time and energy for creating a new social relationship on top of maintaining the ones they already have.⁹

When the other person is also interested to build a relationship, it is the similarity between the expat and the other person that is a key factor for the development of the relationship. There is a wealth of research on the similarity-attraction hypothesis that shows that individuals with similar attitudes are more attracted to each other,¹⁰ and that one needs some similarity in background, lifestyle, attitudes and values to develop the relationships to a higher quality.¹¹ Some common ground is important to build a relationship, and one way of meeting like-minded people is through activities and hobbies. Adriana, the Brazilian expat in Italy, recommended doing things one enjoys doing because it is a way to meet like-minded people. When meeting other expats, an important common ground is that they also have to adjust to life in a new host country. This is also called adjustment empathy.¹² Pablo, a Spanish expat in China, said: “... they were going through the same thing. And that was what made it fun. Because you were sharing the same frustrations. You were sharing the same excitement, you were sharing similar situations, right.” Dissimilarity can slow down the development of a relationship, and one form of dissimilarity is

a different cultural background. Cultural differences can be a barrier for the development of the contact¹³; for example, in my PhD research one expat was pregnant, and when the baby arrived, she felt her host should reach out to her. However, in the Netherlands, the custom is for the new parents to send out a *geboortekaartje* (a card to announce the birth) to all their friends and family, which also specifies how and when the new parents want to be contacted. The Dutch host was waiting for this to arrive, and this led to a breakdown of the contact, because both were waiting for the other to reach out. Another barrier can be the English language proficiency of the local if the expat doesn't speak the host language. Many locals feel 'shy' about using English or deem their English proficiency too low. Becky, the U.S. American expat in Denmark, said: "...my neighbour doesn't speak any English, so he doesn't ever try to talk to me because he knows, I just speak English."

Similarity is one of the ingredients that makes someone like the other person, and this liking is, obviously, also an important catalyst for the contact because you want to spend time with the other person. Shared fun and humour are important elements to push a relationship forward.¹⁴ Dolores, a Spanish expat in Germany, when asked why she selected particularly those people, simply said: "Because I like them." And this works both ways – if someone feels the other person likes them, it is more likely that they will also like them in return. This reciprocity of liking¹⁵ helps a relationship develop, through wanting to meet more often. It is important that this social initiative comes from both sides. Chantal, the Belgian expat in Malaysia, became somewhat frustrated with always being the one who was suggesting things, and concluded that they just didn't care so much for doing things together, otherwise they would have come up with something. Repeated social interactions will also build trust, which is a key factor to build a friendship with someone.¹⁶ Ali, the Lebanese expat in Romania, says:

And I wouldn't call anybody a friend just like that, it takes some trust, you know, like some actions that they've done or some situation that had happened, and if that person stood by me in those kinds of situations, I would consider that guy a friend.

The context

Finally, contextual factors also influence whether someone becomes a friend. I will discuss two in more detail, namely culture and language. The culture of the host country provides the context in which the new friendships are made. I already mentioned that cultural differences

Box 2.2 How to make friends in Denmark

Since 2014, Denmark is consistently ranked in the top five of countries where it is difficult to make local friends, as is shown in the annual survey of InterNations, the global network for expats. As The Local.dk headlines, Denmark “‘world’s worst’ for making friends,”²¹ but why do expats find particularly Denmark difficult for making local friends? In a chapter I wrote for a book about informal networks in international business,²² I dove into all the books I could find about Denmark – written by historians, anthropologists and other expats – to answer this question.

An important thing to know about Denmark is that it is a very homogeneous nation with little past experience with immigration. The historic losses of territory in the 19th century have led to the Danes turning in on themselves, focusing on their own ‘tribe’ where they find community and unshakeable trust, as the British ambassador to Denmark Sir James Mellon observed in the 1980s. Historian Jespersen describes Danish mentality as a circle of people sitting around a campfire “shoulder to shoulder around it, with their backs to the darkness outside the circle of light from the fire.”²³ *Hygge*, which is an emic Danish concept which reflects an “atmosphere of security, warmth and inclusion,”²⁴ is an important part of this. *Hygge*, however, also carries a pressure to conform to the point of being coercive.²⁵ As one author states: “*Hygge* always has its backs turned on the others. *Hygge* is for the members, not the strangers.”²⁶ This homogeneity and inward-looking mentality makes it more difficult for outsiders to be part of the social circle. Danes often have an established social circle that dates back to their time in ground school, since they spend the years from age 6 to 16 in the same class with the same classmates. It is no wonder that many expats observe that Danes all seem to have friends that go back to childhood.

Closely connected to homogeneity is the value that Danes place on equality – the famous Law of Jante that states, among others, that nobody is better than others. When everyone is the same, it is easier to create the trust that is the backbone of Danish society. Anthropologist Anne Knudsen adds: “The important part is the inclusiveness: we want to include you, but that is only possible if you are equal. It’s what peasants do.”²⁷ This value of equality can make things difficult for newcomers because you can’t ‘get a seat at the table,’ where everyone is equal, unless you are invited in. Another

complication is the norm that Danes only talk to those they know and that introductions are usually not made, because this would only highlight your outsider status, and make you lose face.

A third important aspect that sheds light on why it can be difficult to make friends with Danes is the divide between public and private life. The Danes' private zone only covers family and friends, which can be interpreted as cold and difficult to access by those who come from a culture where there is less of a divide between work and private life and more spontaneity. Danes spend their time outside of work with family and friends, so expats should not expect their Danish colleague to become their friend outside of work. Danes also value privacy, which is why they do not appreciate unannounced visits to their home. The unfortunate thing for expats is that Danes also value the other's privacy, which means that they will not easily strike up conversations with an expat, since the expat is a stranger.

Language is another complicating factor. Even though Danes often are proficient in English, not all of them feel comfortable speaking it in front of other Danes. Together with the fact that the language is an important part of 'being Danish,' Danes often switch to their native language, especially outside the large cities. Social life, naturally, takes place in Danish, and Danes often are reluctant to include those who do not speak Danish. As one Dutch expat who participated in the corona study mentioned later in this chapter (p. 63) wrote:

I need social contacts/people around me. To me well-being means having friends over/being invited. So far, I feel a bit lonely, the Danes are not super welcoming, and they don't make any effort in talking English to me. (Though I try to talk in Danish and they compliment me for that.)

The added difficulty for expats is that many Danes are not used to hearing their language spoken with an accent. Expats seem to have an easier time in large cities such as Copenhagen, but there an often-heard complaint is that Danes too easily switch to English which doesn't help the expat learning Danish.

So, what should you do if you find yourself in Denmark and you would like to make local friends? First of all, it is important to not

take it personally and realise that Danes also don't reach out to fellow-Danes. They have an established social network and are not actively looking for new friends. This does not mean they might not want to meet you; but it does need an effort to participate in local life, learn (some of) the language, and join in some of the social rituals (there are many of them in Denmark!). Joining a club or association is a great way to make Danish friends; almost all Danes are member of one or other association, where their community spirit is expressed, and trust is built. A final recommendation is to learn to read between the lines of what the Danes say. An unfortunate consequence of valuing privacy is that Danes don't easily give invitations for fear of imposing. Don't sit around and wait for them to invite you!

can be a barrier for the contact itself, but culture also influences how people socialise, and what the best way is to meet new friends in that particular country. One already mentioned example is whether expats are likely to make friends in the workplace. One of the aims of my research is to raise awareness for these cultural differences as well as gather knowledge so expats know how to best go about to make new friends in their host country. The expats mention a great number of cultural differences that affect their socialising, which is valuable knowledge for new expats to have when trying to make friends in a particular culture.¹⁷ In Box 2.2 I have more extensively written about the situation in Denmark, where certain cultural characteristics explain why many expats feel it is difficult to connect with the Danes. My colleagues Sven Horak and Jong Gyu Park have contributed Box 2.3 about making friends in South Korea. Countries also differ in terms of accessibility of the local population, or how open the locals are to becoming friends with expats. As mentioned, Denmark is a country where expats find it very difficult to make friends with Danes, and Danes are often described as cold and standoffish. Although part of this difficulty can be explained – and hopefully solved – by knowing more about the culture and how the Danes themselves socialise (see Box 2.2), some of it also seems to be rooted in the historical context in terms of residential mobility in a particular country. Residential mobility is the number of moves of an individual in a country, and the United States and Australia have high rates of residential mobility, where Japan and Denmark have low rates¹⁸ – although there are regional and individual differences. This high residential mobility of the United States – one of

Box 2.3 How to make friends in South Korea

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South Korea (Korea hereafter) developed its economy over recent decades to one of the top 10 leading economies in the world.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, the number of foreigners in Korea also increased. Expats, however, paint an ambiguous picture of living and working in Korea. According to a survey conducted by InterNations in 2021,²⁹ expats praise the quality of the Korean healthcare system, its affordability and the country's transportation infrastructure. Also, almost all expats questioned say they feel safe in Korea. In contrast, when it comes to the "ease of settling in," InterNations' index ranked Korea among the worst destinations in the world for expats. Korea ranks low in the categories "feeling at home" and "making local friends." In the following, based on our research on informal networking and our own experience of living and working in Korea, we provide some clues why making friends in Korea may appear difficult and what expats can do to become better socially integrated.

Central for understanding how to socialise and make friends might be the fact that Korea is a homogenous culture, with a comparatively low level of immigration. Korea is a peninsula surrounded by water on three sides and a closed border to North Korea. Today the proportion of the population in Korea who are foreigners is approximately 4.4%, most of them from other Asian countries. Conventionally, Korea is described as a collectivist society that scores low in general trust (i.e. trust to foreigners) and high in particularistic trust. Traditional ideals characterizing Korean society are reflected in community orientation (i.e. in-group), conformity and social hierarchy based on the Confucian value and norm system. For understanding social relationships in Korea, it is important to understand social structures. While general trust and rather open social relationships are typical in Western societies, the distinction between in- and out-groups is important in Korea.

Analogous to *guanxi* networks in China, Korea can be best described as a network society. The most common informal networks in Korea are *yongo* and *inmaek* networks. *Yongo* consists of three traditional ties which are very difficult or even impossible

for a foreigner to acquire: kinship and blood ties, ties to people from the same region or hometown and ties to people who have attended the same educational institution, high school, college or university. Given its members' backgrounds, *yongo* is rather homogenous, and it is closed and exclusive. *Yongo* can be seen as a determinant in distinguishing between in- and outgroups. It can happen that outgroup persons "are treated as 'non-persons' and there can be discrimination and even hostility."³⁰ Since *yongo* is important in business as well as in private life (a distinction not so important in Korea anyway), not having *yongo* is at times challenging for expats, as it is often instrumentalised for getting things done and to get ahead in life. *Inmaek*, which is closer to Chinese *guanxi* ties, refers to a network one develops in the course of life. *Inmaek* is used to help less-fortunate people secure a job or promotion, although this sometimes results in the employment of persons who lack suitable qualifications or skills. In principle, *inmaek* ties can be seen as positive and feature high levels of solidarity and goodwill. Compared to *yongo*, expats can develop *inmaek* ties in principle, and that is what we recommend expats to focus on, since forming *yongo* ties may simply not work.

However, these informal networks also are now to the advantage of foreigners. A new extension of traditional *yongo* ties are ties concluded at the workplace, so-called *jikyon* and *eobyon* ties. They refer to ties among people from the same company, industry or profession. These ties are based on similar values as *yongo*, and can be seen as *yongo* 2.0.³¹ The main reason workplace ties are increasing in significance is that employees who only possess little or low-quality traditional *yongo* see the chance to get ahead in life and their careers in *jikyon* and *eobyon* networks. There are also dynamics observed in relation to *inmaek*. Today, Korean media more often use the term *global inmaek* when Korean celebrities and well-known businesspeople are shown in photographs with foreign celebrities, implying that there is a friendship-like relationship. The desire to have *global inmaek* can be seen as a new but significant form of networking for Korean professionals in the globalisation era. This is reflected in the desire to travel abroad and the increased preference for working abroad among Koreans.

In sum, the current development dynamics of traditional Korean social ties work to the advantage of expats, who can focus on developing friendships based upon workplace-related ties or *global inmaek*. What would that look like in practice? In Korea, co-workers

frequently meet after work for dinner or on the weekend for leisure activities. It would be unwise to reject offers for these activities, especially when one wants to develop friendships further. Moreover, there are plenty of other opportunities to develop *global inmaek*. Cultural associations such as Alliance Française (France), the Goethe Institute (Germany) and others operate branches in Korea that can serve as a hub to make new friends. International service clubs (e.g. Rotary and Lions Clubs, etc.) and several business- and industry-specific associations (e.g. Chambers of Commerce) can support profession-oriented networking. Also, there are many foreign universities and academic institutions doing alumni work in Korea. For the religious expat, Korea has many religious communities one can get involved in. As there are plenty of opportunities for expats to socialise and make friends in Korea, the biggest challenge might be just to start, become proactive and from time to time get out of the expat bubble.

the most mobile nations in the world¹⁹ – might explain the observations Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist, made already in 1936, about how U.S. Americans more quickly acquire friends to whom they can easily say goodbye (see p. 34 in the Introduction). With many people – friends – potentially moving away, U.S. Americans are motivated to make more friends, and are eager to talk to strangers. This can come across as strange to those who come from cultures where you don't really do that. I myself had such an experience during one of my first visits to the United States. I was walking along the beautiful Sunset Cliffs in San Diego, when a guy with a surfboard climbed down the cliffs to the otherwise deserted beach and started talking to me. I was surprised and wondered first if anything was wrong, and then what he wanted from me. It turned out he just wanted to chat and that was fun – I just wasn't used to having conversations for no apparent reason with complete strangers. I have also heard many people say that U.S. Americans are superficial, and this is why it is crucial to have this knowledge of cultural differences in socialising. For U.S. Americans it is very normal to invite people to a barbecue at their home, and expats could easily end up interpreting such an invitation with their own cultural lens, and then get disappointed when the expected friendship doesn't develop.

The second contextual factor influencing if an expat becomes friends particularly with locals of the host country is the language of the host

country. If the expat doesn't speak the host language, it is important they have a language in common with locals to be able to become friends. Countries differ in terms of their English language proficiency,²⁰ so "in a country like Egypt where the English is very bad, I would need to learn it [Arabic] to make more local friends." [Lars, the Danish expat in Egypt]. Also, locals of the host country are not always willing to switch to English. Mihaela, a Romanian expat in France, comments how the French expect foreigners – or at least people who live in France – to speak good French. And even if locals of the host country are willing to switch to English, learning the host language can still help to make friends with locals because many "feel more comfortable speaking in their own language" [Alejandro, a Peruvian expat in Denmark] and "it will be more difficult for this person to integrate you in your life because his life is normally happening in German" [Dolores, the Spanish expat in Germany]. The Netherlands and Denmark are two examples of countries with a small host language, and a high English language proficiency. The enthusiasm with which many Dutch and Danes speak English to expats does not really make it easier for them to learn the language. In the Netherlands, you can buy a button which says '*Spreek Nederlands met mij*' (speak Dutch with me), which is a nice way to highlight to the locals that you are up for the challenge.

Building a social network during a pandemic

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to normal life in many respects, people were still moving abroad, leaving their social network behind. In spring 2021, I decided to follow several newly arrived expats in Denmark in their efforts of trying to build a new social network at a time when COVID-19 restrictions put a severe limitation on socialising opportunities. Fifteen expats shared their experiences with me for a few months in early 2021, until most of the restrictions in Denmark were lifted in by May 2021. Particularly the restrictions of cafes and restaurants being closed until 21 April 2021, the assembly bans (maximum five persons) and the recommendation to stay at home and only socialise with those you live with are relevant for their experiences.

A first observation reinforces what has been highlighted in the very first chapter of this book; how important social relations are for well-being (p. 21). Several expats comment on how they felt lonely or isolated. A Spanish expat (see also the Experience on p. 41) mentioned how she was getting tired of the "social deprivation" that the lockdown caused. Trying to make new connections – despite the circumstances – helped: an Italian expat went on some hikes and "it lightened my mood noticeably." Obviously,

the COVID-19 pandemic impacted social life dramatically for a period, especially during lockdowns; many socialising opportunities were no longer possible or severely limited due to the restrictions. Many people were working from home for an extended period, and those who could go to the office faced restrictions such as a limited number of people one could have lunch with at the same time. The only social interaction an Italian expat got in her workplace were work-related chats in the corridors. People were also often hesitant to meet in person due to the risk of infection.

The pandemic not only added an extra layer of difficulty by presenting various barriers for socialising, it also changed the way in which people socialised. Contact often moved online, if people met physically it had to be in smaller groups or one-on-one, and the venue of many social interactions changed, for example from a restaurant or café to the home or outdoors. This presented its own challenges, for example, not everyone was ready to invite people to their home. The Spanish expat in the Experience on p. 41 also talked about how she would love to connect more with her colleagues. She would normally do this by grabbing a beer after work, but since that was not possible, she postponed it because she felt it was a bit too formal to invite them home for a dinner.

Outdoor meetings were also heavily influenced by the Danish weather; the lockdown started in winter and by the time spring arrived, restaurants and cafes were opening up again. A Polish expat said during lockdown: “The rain basically means no social life.” A final, important, way in which the lockdown changed social life was that expats had to find new ways of making friends. A French expat comments: “I had to use another way; I had to get out of my comfort zone to actually get to meet people. I did things that I would never have done to try to make friends.” Many resorted to Facebook and other social media to meet new people, since they couldn’t meet them through work or a yoga class.

While some expats felt lonely, not everyone reacted the same to these limiting circumstances. As mentioned earlier, aspects such as extroversion and the stage of the assignment influence the need for social connections. A Spanish expat only wanted to get social again after the few first months after her arrival and, by then, restaurants and cafes were opening up again. Other expats didn’t feel this need for social connections as much and were content with focusing on other things. One Swiss expat said: “[I] am not having difficulties being alone. Keeping myself busy with my own business, reading and trying to learn Danish as much as I can online.”

An important factor that influenced how much expats wanted to socialise is their fear of infection. A U.S. American expat hadn’t made any effort yet to meet people in person because she wanted to be cautious.

An Italian expat talks about how she tries to balance this anxiety and her need for social connections: “I feel like I need these activities to socialise a little and stop feeling very lonely before it gets too heavy for me, but at the same time I worry it is not a safe choice.” In the later stages of the pandemic, this was mitigated for some due to the extensive testing in Denmark, which meant that people felt safer to socialise. The Italian expat said: “It’s so easy to get tested that we do it beforehand, so we can meet responsibly. This really improved my perception of social interactions, as I feel less guilty and safer seeing people.” If the need for social connections became too much, expats took initiative despite the lockdown. One Italian expat started actively searching on social media for a solution: “Luckily, I found a group that organised outdoor Corona-safe events.”

In conclusion, many people had their social life ‘on hold’ during the pandemic. The limited opportunities for social interactions meant that many expats were not able to expand their network as they would have liked to, or only managed to establish weak new connections. A British/Dutch expat said: “It would be lovely to meet the locals and practise my Danish, but I keep telling myself that it doesn’t have to be right now.” Some expats made friends that were different from who they normally would make friends with, due to the circumstances. An Italian expat said: “I often feel like this is the social circle that I was able to find at this weird time, and I should stick to that, while I wait for other opportunities to expand my circle.”

While the pandemic certainly made social life more difficult, some expats also saw some bright sides to the situation, for example that online socialising saves time and money. Another expat realised that social contacts take up a lot of energy, and that she could probably do with fewer contacts. A Dutch expat realised the importance of keeping up more distant contacts at home through the occasional video call. A French expat was pushed to be more open and creative in meeting new people, thereby surprising herself. She also made friends she normally wouldn’t have and started to enjoy things she normally wouldn’t do. She said: “If I had to resume how corona has influenced my social life in Denmark, I would say it had ‘surprisingly’ helped me to meet more people that I would have expected to.”

The reopening of society was welcomed by all the expats in this study, as a return to a somewhat normal life. A Dutch expat felt freer after her first vaccination, because it meant she no longer had to be tested before going anywhere. She was also less anxious about the virus; she no longer was scared when someone came to close, and could go out for a night again, and have friends and family visit. A Singaporean expat said in May:

The last four weeks have been better in terms of social life. As the corona restrictions have lifted, this means that I can socialise with people outside or in restaurants. Furthermore, the group size has increased outdoors. This also meant that people are allowed to organise social events where I could meet people.

Many elements influence the process of making friends abroad, as is reflected in Figure 2.1. The process is dynamic and never ends; new people get added to the social network in the host country, people also leave again, and the motivation of the expat to make new friends also goes up and down. The model can guide expats in making friends abroad. While it isn't a topic many expats have really thought about before moving, there are certainly choices they can make that will facilitate them making the friends they would like to have in the host country. For example, decisions with regard to where to live and what school to choose for their children also have an impact on who the expat will meet and make friends with. In that sense, expats can also shape their own social network abroad. This model helps us understand the process of making friends abroad, which can also be supported by the organisation the expat works for (see Chapter 9 and the Recommendations for expats, organisations and societies), so that expats are better equipped to thrive socially in their new host country.

Notes

- 1 You can read more about my study on expat social network building on my website www.intersango.dk.
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- 16 Dunbar (2018).
- 17 On my website www.intersango.dk, I am compiling information about the best ways to socialise in specific countries, and I would love to get your input!
- 18 Oishi, S. (2010). The psychology of residential mobility: Implications for the self, social relationships, and well-being. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(1), 5–21.
- 19 Although, interestingly, this mobility has been decreasing - where three decades ago 20% of the U.S. population moved in one year, by now this is only 10%. (Frost, R. (2020). Are Americans stuck in place? Declining residential mobility in the US. Retrieved from www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/harvard_jchs_are_americans_stuck_in_place_frost_2020.pdf (accessed on 12 August 2023).)
- 20 One country ranking is provided by the EF English Proficiency Index.
- 21 www.thelocal.dk/20160829/expats-name-denmark-worst-in-the-world-for-making-friends/ (accessed 12 August 2023).
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