



LET'S TALK EXPAT MEN

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How do men navigate life at a time fraught with great uncertainty and rapid change, working and moving countries on their own or with a family? Is their path easy, because they're men, advantaged with a greater sense of freedom than women? Or do they encounter a different set of challenges, faced with the complexities of what it means to be a man today?

Comparing the stories of 20 expat men with the stories of 20 expat women, all of whom were interviewed for 2 separate books (the first documented the international moves of 20 women from 16 countries to Portugal; the second, 20 men from 11 countries to Portugal) unexpected gender differences were revealed.

20 Expat Men aged 25 to 90

20 Expat Women aged 40 to 75

Relationship

Eighteen of the 20 men were in relationship; only two had moved on their own as single men. Men's tendency to partner has been linked to health. Reasons for this are men are less likely to seek medical help, unless encouraged to do so by their partner. In the absence of spousal support, men's emotional & physical health tends to deteriorate.

Six of the 20 women were single & all six had moved independently. Single &/or divorced women tend to grow their social connections, and this is a key enabler to positive emotional and physical wellbeing.

Parenting

Nine of the 20 men are fathers. They spoke of their children with tenderness, love & affection. Several of the men carried obvious, but contained grief around being separated or estranged from their children due to work, travel for work, divorce, or because their children lived in another country.

Eleven of the 20 women have children. When they spoke of them, they were quite pragmatic, perhaps taking for granted the emotional bond between mother & child. Only one woman had been separated from her children, who were in boarding school, & this she spoke about pragmatically.

Travel for Work vs. Adventure

The men's stories tend to be work focused. Travel for fun & adventure was secondary to getting ahead & building financial security for themselves & their families.

The women were no less focused on work & financial security, but in contrast to the men, their stories tend to be more 'holistic,' addressing a wider range of life experiences.

Trailing Spouse/Accompanying Partner

In what is still an uncommon role for a man, two of the men are trailing spouses/accompanying partners, both of whom gave up their careers to follow their wives & both of whom suffered feelings of disempowerment & depression as a result.

Three of the women followed their spouses because of his work & all three were active in the expat community, volunteering, or working in some capacity. They did not mention feeling disempowered or depressed.

Narrative of Aggression

Several men admitted to having issues with male authority figures and six more had been directly involved in war, or youth gangs, either acting out or on the receiving end of violence associated with bullying and or mugging. The narrative of aggression is striking in the men's stories and it is very much in contrast to the narrative of tenderness used to communicate about their partner / spouse / significant other & children.

The narrative of aggression was absent in the women's stories, despite that eight women either lived through a war, ultimately fleeing their home countries as refugees, or they worked in environments in the aftermath of a recent war, or they grew up with a father who fought in the second world war, and for several of the women, it was a combination of two of the situations I've just mentioned.

In Summary

A search of contemporary literature on the expatriate experience reveals that it's largely authored by women about theirs, and their family's experiences. This raises the question: How does this gender bias influence the way the expatriate experience is portrayed and the support services made available to expatriate men? At a time when there is greater public awareness of mental health issues, the men's stories & experiences made obvious the importance of tailoring emotional and psychological support services to meet their specific needs..