Popping the 'bubble' metaphor: separation and integration of expatriate communities

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Introduction

The expatriate bubble is a common metaphor in international human resource management (Fechter, 2007; Lundström, 2021; Shimoda, 2011) and beyond (GOV.UK., 2022; Jaakson, 2004; Taube, Jakobsson, Midlöv and Kristensson, 2016). We ask: why does "bubble" appear to be such a seductive and unquestioned metaphor to refer to some manifestations of the social? What do we mean when using the "bubble" analogy as a way of socialising when living and working abroad? And overall, how useful is the metaphorical uses of the notion of "bubbles" to refer to how some foreigners live and work in local communities? It is a well-used metaphor and one that creates an immediate understanding of a membrane (albeit a flexible and transparent membrane) between expatriates and locals, so we do not suggest abandoning it. Instead we argue that the metaphor conceals as much as it reveals and should in future be used more carefully, in a more nuanced manner: we outline some of the concerns and propose a way forward.

Metaphors like "bubble" have been used extensively to reflect and explain the social, sometimes as if they were self-explanatory scientific rhetorical devices. Explanations of the social are not innocuous reflections of social practices. Lakoff and Johnson argued that the language one speaks affects not only one's conceptual system and behaviour but also affords possibilities of experiencing the social (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003[1980]). Similarly, Deleuze asserted that "modes of thinking create modes of living" (Deleuze, 2001, p. 66). Metaphors are a powerful and common approach. The main rationale behind metaphorising is "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson, [2003]1980, p. 5), displacing the word commonly used in a context to other one. By displacing our vocabulary, we are capable of imagining the social world by an analogy. Discussing Gaggiotti *et al.*'s (2022) research on the question of whether metaphors could be used with in different settings, Örtenblad noted that ¨whilst the meaning of any particular

metaphor by itself is likely not universal (there are few, if any, metaphors whose meaning

and use can be found in every human language), the act of metaphorizing, in fact, is."

(Örtenblad, 2022, p. 41). There are, of course, limits to metaphorising: Weade and Ernst

(1990, p. 133) noted that metaphors usually "represent a part, but not the whole, of the

phenomena they describe". Morgan, referring to the uses of organisational metaphors, argued

that a "metaphor invites us to see the similarities but ignore the differences" (2006, p. 5).

Analysing the uses of metaphors in different cultural settings, Case *et al*. (2017) alert us to

the complexities of translating metaphors and the need to recognise "different ways of

metaphorizing" (p. 240).

These caveats apply when we use the metaphor "bubble". For example, "living in a bubble"

is a taken-for-granted syntagma to refer to different ways of encapsulation, isolation,

reclusiveness, segregation, confinement or solitariness. A recent example of the extended use

of "bubble" as a taken-for-granted metaphor of the social took place during the Covid-19

pandemic where, between September 2020 and July 2021, the Department of Health and

Social Care in the United Kingdom made recommendations on how the population could

safely expand the group of people they had contact with by publishing a set of proceedings

called "making a support bubble with another household" (Gov UK, 2022). This is an

instructive manifestation of not only the complexities of using taken-for-granted metaphors

but also the limitation of using them as a unique and monolithic analogy. From one side, the

proponent assumes a single common public understanding with general, preferably

immediate, comprehension of the meaning of the term; from the other, the multifaceted

complexities of the analogy demand an explanation, a delimitation of the way of using the

metaphor in order to make it understandable, thereby showing its limitations and its potential

impact as a source of misunderstandings and confusion.

In this conceptual article we try to avoid the conventional thinking underlying the use of the bubble metaphor to explain the situation of expatriates, which assumes that the bubble is completely enclosed, and explores whether or not a bubble is formed in a foreign environment. Instead, we provide an alternative approach, (illustrated by Figure 1) to make sense of the bubble concept, emphasising the degrees of adjustment as well as admitting the porous nature of bubbles. To do so, we examine the notion in relation to the evidence in the extant literature, our own experience and understanding, our consultancy work and our current research, drawing examples from each.

The article evolves as follows. First, we expose our intellectual engagement with the literature that addresses different perspectives on bubbles to explain the experiences of foreign working communities. We pay particular attention to the relation between bubbles and other metaphors, like "enclaves". We illustrate our points with reflections and examples based on fieldwork experiences in Africa, Asia, South America and Europe, drawn from the literature or from our own researches. A model to visualise the complexities of the use of bubble is explained, before we conclude with suggestions on how to challenge the conventional thinking that expat-bubbles exemplify isolation, simplistic notions of a correlation between different kinds of expatriation and isolation and suggest using bubble with precise delineation and evaluation.

Using the bubble to explain foreign communities' separation and integration

A predecessor of the use of "bubble" in the international mobility context can be found in the notion of "enclaves", another metaphor used to define a bounded group (Douglas, 1996). Enclave has been used by migration scholars to study communities (Mui *et al*., 2006; Sanders and Nee, 1987; Xie and Gough, 2011; Zaban, 2015). In relation to expatriate communities,

Cohen (1977) implied that an enclave is bonded with a residential location (e.g., a compound) while an "environmental bubble" tends to be an imagined and intangible concept situated in the expatriate community. Nearly four decades later, Zaban (2015) made a clear distinction between the uses of these two concepts in her study of Jewish immigrants from western countries in Jerusalem.

Although enclaves and bubbles both represent isolation, segregation and exclusiveness to some extent, they were used to describe different characteristics. Bubbles have been assumed to include familiar aspects of environment that remind tourists of their home (Jaakson, 2004, p. 44). Similarly, Feldman (2008) refers to enclave spaces such as a bus or a hotel in his study of Israeli youth voyaging to Poland. Enclaves usually suggest the existence of thick boundaries, tight collective pressure, and structural constraints, while the boundaries of bubbles are less obvious. Most importantly, bubbles have connotations of transparency and fragility (Zaban, 2015). That is to say, the suggestion is that the boundaries of bubbles are transparent, are more easily blown away, and that those inside the bubbles are not completely blocked from the outside world. In this sense, the conventional thinking that expat-bubbles are isolated places where expatriates only meet other expatriates (Bergh and Plessis, 2022) should, perhaps, be re-examined.

Using the bubble metaphor and paying attention to its morphology emphasises its complexity. McNulty and her colleagues (McNulty *et al.*, 2019) use bubble as a meso-level domain for adjustment, situated between family (micro-level) and home country (macro-level). They see the bubble as a network that is out of touch with the host environment - the social reality in which it is embedded. Inspired by social identity theory and self-categorisation theory, Lauring and Selmer (2009) imagine expatriates living in compounds as an isolated group, where working life and social (or personal) life are restricted to the bubble. Fechter's understanding of bubbles comes from anthropological imagination, conceiving the

bubble as a multitude of spaces that are constructed and experienced by expatriates (2007). Both physical and social space can be represented by this bubble, as they are mutually "constitutive and expressive" (p. 37). A significant use of the bubble characteristics from Fechter (2007) and Zaban (2015) involves permeability. Both of them analogically emphasise how flows and exchanges permeate the boundaries of the bubble. Fechter makes an example of the osmotic characteristics of the bubble, expanding the metaphorical reasoning and comparing the bubble with a cell. Although it implies a clear division between the inside and outside, the bubble also has a membrane, which can be permeable and allow outside influences to enter (Fechter, 2007).

In expatriate studies, the concept of bubbles has been applied to expatriate clubs and institutions, established in part at least to enable expatriates to meet together and practise exclusiveness from the locals, protecting their privileged status. Cohen (1977) made a distinction between the "natural" community and the "planted" community. The former refers to the ecological aggregates of individuals who come to and live in the host country on their own or are sponsored by a variety of organisations, while the latter are formed under the sponsorship of one major organisation. The notion of bubbles has also been applied to specific national expatriate communities in the same host areas, such as the Anglo and French bubbles in the Baka neighbourhood of Jerusalem (Zaban, 2015).

However, the majority of the research using the concept of expatriate bubbles is associated with the expatriate community as a whole (e.g. Brewster and Pickard, 1994; Lauring and Selmer, 2009; Zaban, 2015). Here, therefore, we believe it is necessary to explore the expatriate community in depth to ensure full understanding of the benefits and limits of using the bubble concept.

What this literature suggests is that bubbles could be used alternatively to refer to the integration or separation of communities or how and why communities could differentiate

and assimilate. The ambivalence in the use of the metaphor is what make it useful, suggestive, and attractive as a device to explain that the experiences of foreigners working and living abroad should not be conceived only as a closed or open communitarian life. It is an uncontrolled and taken for granted use of the metaphor that implies isolation, segregation exclusiveness or integration; a more nuanced, qualified and sensible use of the metaphor is needed to apply it to degrees of separation and integration.

Benefits and drawbacks of bubbles

So there are benefits and drawbacks to using the bubble metaphor to represent expatriate communities. The metaphor helps to explain how expatriates retain their distinctive home customs (McNulty, *et al*., 2019), adjust to their specific not-home-but-not-too-foreign community in the new country (Brewster and Pickard, 1994; Haslberger and Brewster, 2009), providing both physical and psychological security (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001; Zaban, 2015) and have an alternative integration trajectory that allows those who wish to, or have to, to adapt gradually from the expatriate to the local community (Zaban, 2015). Living in a bubble is a good image to suggest how some expatriates may reduce their readiness for change (Cohen, 1977) and their capacity to integrate into the local environment (van Bakel, van Oudenhoven, Gerritsen, 2015), which will lead to less integration with the outside world (Zaban, 2015). Further, long-lived expatriate bubbles, and the associated lack of involvement in the integration processes, can strengthen the surface of the bubble and turn it into a walled enclave (Zaban, 2015).

Applying the metaphor to the lived experience of the individuals involved indicates practical benefits and drawbacks (Lei, Udani and Arches, 2011; Leonard, 2008, 2010). Jackson (2016) pointed out that bubbles as devices for isolation indicate the preference of expatriates to be considered different, to live alone and not to mix (themselves or their families) with anybody who is considered different.

The drawbacks for individuals are also known and well explained in the literature. They include the suggestion that those in bubbles are permanently forced to interact only with the same persons, have to live separately from social networks they may wish to constitute, and experience a "clustering" life (Taube *et al.,* 2016) where everything turns in on itself. In the case of groups of workers living in isolated communities, like the Antarctic, there is an extended literature supporting the way such bubbles can produce adverse social and psychological reactions, like boredom, reduced motivation, intellectual inertia and decline in alertness (Khandelwal *et al.*, 2017; Palinkas, 1989).

Limitations of the bubble metaphor

The examples show the value and the limitations of the bubble metaphor when applying it to the real world. The metaphor is limited by external context, including home and host country and the features of those countries and the size of the expatriate community; by professional culture; by individual characteristics; and by the individual agency. In the following section, we will illustrate each antecedent that limits the use of the metaphor, whilst noting that those antecedents are not completely independent, even if some of them might appear to be dominant in a particular context.

External context

To examine external context, we draw on examples extracted from empirical studies in the literature and our own work when gathering and analysing data from fieldwork experiences. The criteria used to select the examples are based on our intention to make visible the multiple forms of bubble´s adjustment and it´s manifestation in our and others research.

Figure 1 below illustrates our thinking, suggesting that bubbles and the degree of adjustment to the local community are determined by the expatriate context, indicated by the shading

from darker (opaque knowledge and resilient membrane; a comprehensive bubble) to paler (transparent awareness and little or no separation; limited or no involvement in an expatriate bubble). The boxes within the Figure are examples of the kind of expatriates in each place.

Planted communities are where the bubble is likely to be strongest (the metaphor of most relevance) – for example, most State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) will be planted communities. The bubble metaphor will be less relevant in the natural communities – including private sector organisations, which may be more or less in a bubble, and the many charities, religious groups, aid organisations and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in every country and almost invariably involved closely with the local community. Larger communities of expatriates in mono-cultural settings are more likely to form bubbles; small communities may well do so; individuals, couples or very small groups have to be involved with the local community.

The diagonal line indicates that though there will be a few self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) in the strongly separated bubbles, most SIEs will be closer to the other end of the scale; similarly, whilst many companies' assigned expatriates (AEs) will be in the separated bubbles, there will be some AEs negotiating directly with local governments and other businesses who are operating partially outside any potential bubble. In most expatriate contexts, there is a combination of SIEs and AEs (crossing the slanting line), while in other contexts, a certain type of expatriate may dominate (separated by the slanting line).

<<Figure 1 about here>>

Examples of "bubbles"

The case of the Chinese in Tanzania is a good example of the variety of situations that are conflated in the use of the bubble metaphor, because it includes most types of expatriates.

One of the authors conducted a seven-month ethnographic study of Chinese business

expatriates in Tanzania from March to October 2020, observing and interviewing expatriates

and local employees. The author found that two micro-communities have been established

within the Chinese community that could both be represented as bubbles: one for expatriates

from SOEs and one for expatriates from private small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

The former could be represented as a planted bubble where the Chinese expatriates are more

self-sufficient and at the same time more isolated from the local environment. For example,

SOE expatriates from the construction industry are usually based in a camp, where they live

in a walled compound. The companies provide all the necessities of life and try to provide

any convenience that might make expatriates' life easier in this foreign country. Not only do

they have Chinese chefs to prepare Chinese meals, but they grow their own food; food that is

otherwise difficult to find in Tanzania. A planted bubble would be the manifestation of

extreme institutional completeness, a context where the "ethnic community could perform all

the services required by its members. Members would never have to make use of native

institutions for the satisfaction of any of their needs" (Breton, 1964, p. 194). In Zanzibar, an

island dominated by the Muslim culture, Chinese expatriates even raise their own pigs, as it is

difficult to buy pork. In terms of transport, they are provided with a special car or drivers, so

there is no need to use public transportation to get around. The social circle is almost

exclusively within the company which, since there are many Chinese there, provides

sufficient opportunities to socialise. All administrative matters requiring contact with

Tanzanians, such as the processing and renewal of visas, are managed by dedicated

specialists. In addition, for security reasons, there are restrictions on travel outside the

compound, including curfews and the need to get official permission to leave it. The

expatriates' passports are usually held by the company, effectively making it impossible to

cross borders or return home without permission. The expatriates in these planted bubbles

have very limited contact with local communities. Even if Breton (1964) has suggested that this is rare (his work was predominantly on immigrants to North American cities), our analysis suggest that extreme institutional completeness has, in practice, been more or less achieved among Chinese´s SOE expatriates working in Zanzibar. The sporadic contacts that do occur mainly happen in the work domain: among those middle-status expatriates who supervise local workers, or high-status expatriates who communicate with local authorities.

In contrast, expatriates from private SMEs build a natural bubble based on their common interests. These individuals do not have the strong institutional sponsorship that SOE expatriates do, they are less constrained in what they do and where they go, but they need some support and, to a degree, they find support from each other. Their social circles are still restricted to Chinese communities, but they develop friendships and social networks with other Chinese expatriates from other private SMEs. They usually live in a flat or villa in the central areas of the city. Since some of the residential buildings were designed and built by Chinese companies, the unit type and decoration are identical to those at home, which provides Chinese-seeming comfort and familiarity. Unlike the people in the SOE bubbles, these expatriates have frequent daily contact with local Tanzanian drivers, housekeepers and security guards. Deliberately or not, some Chinese expatriates enhance their (English or Swahili) language skills by practicing with drivers and housekeepers in daily communication. They are more likely to dine in local restaurants, shop in local malls and visit local places, as their travel is not greatly restricted.

Commercial based services are more likely to be established in a natural community (Cohen, 1977). This is because the sponsors of expatriates from a natural bubble are not powerful enough to supply their demands, as SOEs do for their employees in their planted bubble. Consequently, businesses are set up by the Chinese to serve the needs of their compatriots, such as Chinese restaurants, Chinese supermarkets and visa application agencies. For

expatriates who can neither communicate in Swahili nor English, they built takeaway services (helping to order and deliver local foods) and designed a telephone top-up service App that can be traded via Chinese yuan through WeChat pay (a Chinese multi-functional social media App). They need to work with local services, to a greater or lesser extent, but remain focused on the Chinese community.

Institutions such as clubs and associations are more likely to be established to serve the natural bubble, as a replacement for strong sponsorship. Within the Chinese SME community, there are various provincial chambers of commerce and trade associations. The Overseas Chinese Service Centre (OCSC) is the most prestigious and influential association in Tanzania, playing an equivalent role to the strong sponsor in SOEs, having direct access to the embassy and to local authorities when their members encounter any problems. One major task the OCSC undertook during the Covid-19 pandemic was helping Chinese expatriates and migrants extend their visas - completing the appropriate forms, submitting applications collectively and negotiating with immigration officers. The benefits and disadvantages of those commercial services and non-governmental organisations are interdependent. On the one hand, they reduce the anxiety and strangeness of the expatriation and make it easier for the Chinese expatriates to adjust to their daily life. On the other hand, they make the boundaries of the bubbles thicker or less porous, since they reduce the contact that many of the Chinese have with locals, making the community more isolated from the local environment.

Note that the two sub-bubbles found amongst the Chinese in Tanzania are exclusive not only to local members, but also to each other. According to Cohen (1977), such lack of solidarity and cohesion within the expatriate community is usually due to the heterogeneity of expatriates (e.g. different affiliations) and continuous changes in the composition of the group (transience of expatriates).

Using the model

Such empirical studies suggest that some bubbles are, almost by the nature of the external context, both opaque and separated by a strong membrane from the local community (and sometimes even from other expatriates). On the far left of our diagram, scientists working in the Antarctic for months at a time (Barbarito *et al.*, 2001; Khandelwal, *et al.*, 2017) or extractive industry workers in the Canadian wilderness (Dorow and Jean, 2021), really have hardly anyone from outside their camp to interact with – very few if any other people live there: their employer provides all their basic necessities for life and otherwise they spend a lot of their time in the camp working, sometimes sleeping, and some hours filling in the time with activities with fellow workers or trying to get messages home.

A little further to the right along the Figure 1 scale, there are only slightly less isolated examples. In discussions with the authors, people who have been expatriates in North Korea explain that the government provides a compound, a set of well-appointed buildings with kitchens, restaurants, swimming pools, gymnasiums, and western-style televisions, furniture, etc. Expatriates can leave the compound only if they have an official escort and interpreters and are discouraged from talking to other North Koreans. Western academics, for example, find it very difficult to interact with North Koreans outside the courses that they are there to run. In Mozambique, newspapers report that a Chinese engineering team responsible for building a 50km road in a local primaeval forest worked with the protection and guardianship of the local army - ordered by the President. The area is known to be frequented by terrorists and the workers had zero interactions with locals.

Further to the right, somewhere in the middle of the scale, are contexts where it is hard for foreigners to interact with locals, but not impossible (here other factors than context come

into play: see below). For example, undertaking consultancy work with expatriates in Hong Kong, one of the authors was told that most western expatriates in Hong Kong consider that trying to learn Cantonese for the three or four years they are there is too much effort and so they restrict their lives to work, where they interact with English-speaking Hong Kongers, and to "British" or "German" or other clubs, or to English-speaking churches or sports societies where few locals go. Their bubble may well include other foreigners but probably only a few English-speaking locals.

In other countries, as Lundström (2021) shown, religion and culture place a significant barrier (an impermeable surface to the bubble); so that non-Muslims can find interaction with locals difficult. "Signe, 70, who lived in Tehran during the 1970s, after having spent a few years in France and Argentina, concludes that 'we foreigners lived in our foreign bubble', with a 'Western lifestyle' in Iran. She recalls that it was difficult to get to know Iranians, or to visit them in their homes." (Lundström, 2021, p. 975). Lundström shows that, for Swedish expatriates, Iran, France or Argentina are very different contexts and Swedish bubbles take a different form, being more or less transparent and porous, in each society.

Near the other end, on the right of this scale, are places like Dubai, where 85% of the population, and 90% of the private sector working population (Ewers and Dicce, 2016), consists of expatriates, or highly multicultural cities like New York or London. A third of Londoners are foreign born, from every country in the world, and a much higher proportion if second and third generation immigrants are considered. It is a world-wide kind of multiculturalism too: according to the London Mayor's Office well over 300 different languages are spoken as first languages by Londoners, more than any in other city in the world. Chinese expatriates in London, working in organisations like the Bank of China, find

it easy to meet other Chinese people or people of Chinese extraction. Since London is so intensely multicultural, many global working communities are intrinsically multinational; any bubbles that exist are transparent and porous. One interviewee told us "Tonight is typical, I am going to dinner with my work colleague Li Chui, who, although she looks and sounds like a Chinese person, is actually a Londoner: she was born and has grown up in London. She has a British passport and is married to a British person. And when we go out for dinner, her British husband comes with us. So obviously I know him too."

The size of the expatriate community is another external context that matters when justifying the limits of using the bubble metaphor. Brewster and Pickard (1994) discussed the function of different sizes of communities as a support mechanism. The bigger and more visible the community is, the less valuable expatriate training will be as the community will provide a good support mechanism within their bubble. Similarly, Cohen (1977) argues that the larger the expatriate community is, the more likely they are to remain self-sufficient. Arguably, this only applies where the external context is a mono-cultural environment: in the international cities we have discussed above, there is less need or opportunity to form bubbles. Empirical research shows that, conversely, those who live in a small community or alone in a rural area are forced to adapt to the local environment. At the smaller end of the scale, are those, usually from the third sector (religious groups, aid workers, emergency care helpers, etc) who operate more or less alone, working directly with local people. Often, they are working "up-country" with only very limited or no access to the internet. For them, there is no bubble: if they are to achieve their objectives (convert people, reduce poverty or disease, or get some element of infrastructure built) they have to be fully engaged with the local population and may go many months without seeing another foreigner (Lazarova *et. al.* 2021; Vullnetari, 2009).

The examples given already indicate the importance of the business sector. Some sectors (scientific work in the Antarctic, deep-sea fishing, prospecting) are almost inevitably separate from the bulk of the lives of most local people, other sectors (religious proselytising, emergency relief, aid work) are intricately bound into them - and most are somewhere in between. The ability of international workers to "burst through" the "skin" of their bubble will be significantly impacted by the sector they are working in.

The case of Chinese businesspeople studied by Clayton (2009) in Kariakoo Market (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania) shows how much a foreign community can integrate into the local environment and would fit neatly into the more open end of Figure 1. Kariakoo is an extensive and busy markets area that spreads across many streets. Clayton began to perceive the influence of Chinese traders in Kariakoo: "next to stalls over-flowing with spices, fresh fruit, such as pawpaws and mangoes, and squeezed juices are new Chinese outlets crammed with cheap goods ranging from plastic flowers to cheap sun-glasses. Veiled Arab women eagerly sift through mounds of Chinese-manufactured underwear under the watchful gaze of Chinese women, many of whom speak the local Swahili language, but no English." (Clayton, 2009, p. 4). Chinese businesspeople from Kiriakoo have a reputation for being "localised Chinese" within the Chinese community. Some of them are traders who import cheap household goods (such as clothes, shoes and plastic tableware) as well as accessories and repairs of machines from the Chinese, while others run their own factories in Tanzania. With a market-seeking strategic motive, these Chinese must have keen insight into the local community, which dictates that they have to reach out, get to know local people and mingle with them if necessary. Their pawnshops are along the streets and their customers are largely locals. Some of them live behind or above their shops in Kiriakou. Unlike the majority of assigned expatriates from big organisations, the foreign language they master is Swahili

rather than English: for them, Swahili is more useful. For business communication and cooperation, the Chinese in Kiriakoo also formed their own association – the Kiriakoo Chamber of Commerce, a branch under the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. Ironically, during the outbreak of Covid-19, Chinese from Kariakoo markets were shunned and discriminated against by some of their compatriots due to their frequent and close contact with local people who were considered to pay insufficient attention to the disease. There are two ways in which Chinese businesspeople in Kariakoo Market could fit into our framework. On the one hand, it illustrates the penetrable boundaries between local people and Chinese from private firms; on the other hand, "Kariakoo community" is also a part of the natural bubble that is formed by private investors or traders based on their common interest, who come to live and work in Tanzania on their own.

There are, however, issues that help to account for the locations of the expatriate in a more, or less, separated bubble, that we could not include in our model: the professional culture; individual characteristics; and individual agency.

Professional culture

Apart from the external influences noted above, there are more professional factors determining whether foreigners remain in a bubble, as suggested by the examples above (Kunda, 2006). Remaining or staying in the bubble according to their professional culture influences AEs and SIEs in their decisions about crossing the lines or locating at one end or the other of Figure 1. Outputs from two year's research in Filton, near Bristol, UK, show how a bubble of aerospace professionals was formed around the cluster of Airbus, Rolls Royce and GKN, all multinational organisations with a permanent flux of expatriate technicians and project mostly from Spain, Germany and France. The town become a bubble itself: pubs, restaurants and shopping malls near the town constituted the everyday spaces where professionals related to this industry interact among themselves and with the locals.

Similarly, the analysis of four years of intermittent participant observation fieldnotes (2007-2011) and 56 interviews conducted in Dalmine (Italy) and Campana (Argentina) shows how both cities became "urban bubbles" for expatriate professionals of the tubular steel industry working for Tenaris (Gaggiotti, 2012). The urban semiology of these cities could be read as a product of the professional culture of the technicians and engineers working in Tenaris. Names of the streets, hotels, restaurants, the design of the buildings and even the natural landscape (trees, squares, architecture) of both cities are the same. The feeling of being in the Tenaris "tubular engineer" bubble is experienced both in the private domain of the factories and offices and in the public and semi-public spaces (gates, perimeter walls, signals, water tanks) that comprise the professional´s visuals. Even in the public cemetery of Campana, where the Italian founder of Tenaris is buried, walls of private tombs are used to allocate plaques and memorials to commemorate him and the tomb of the founder is crowned by a cross made of steel tubes. The Tenaris bubble is constructed with a strong emphasis on the identity of being a professional in this industry. Both visual and oral cues are part of the same rhetoric that helps the Tenaris professionals to live in the same bi-national bubble. Inside the Tenaris bubble, it is possible to be very similar, independently of the nationality. To live, interact and socialise with the locals is naturalised, taken for granted and does not constitute a difficulty. Indeed, most Tenaris expatriates are bilingual (Spanish-Italian). Above all, the Tenaris bubble defines the community in a way that is not unique to this industry or sector: there are many other examples of a professional culture "taking over" a location.

Individual characteristics

The status of expatriates is a key factor that l affect individuals' cross-cultural experience. McNulty and Brewster (2019) categorised three levels of expatriates, namely high-status

expatriates (e.g. top management), middle-status expatriates (e.g. professionals) and low-status expatriates (e.g. construction workers, nannies and drivers). Normally, expatriates with high status are provided with a high quality of life. Their daily requirements are taken care of by the staff and if they cannot speak the local language, an interpreter will do the job. Some high status expatriates, though, will have to represent their organisation to the local government and officials, thus breaking through the membrane of their bubble. In contrast, low-status expatriates are, to some extent, forced to mingle, to live outside any bubble. On the one hand, their financial status would not allow them to buy any conveniences and, on the other, their jobs, as nannies, security guards or carers, mean that they have to interact with locals. Middle-status expatriates, such as medical workers and engineers, usually lie in-between. The intersection of status with external context will explain specific circumstances.

The expatriation literature has identified other individual characteristics relevant to the adjustment issues of expatriates. Although the value of prior experience has been criticised for being an oversimplified explanation due to the complexities of cross-cultural experience (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2005), Kim and Slocum (2008) found that it is positively related to the rather poorly conceptualised notion of interaction adjustment at a significant level. However, they found that the type of prior experience matters, so that an expatriate with prior experience of working in the same host country (or a culturally similar country) might more confidently cross the boundaries of the bubbles.

Language proficiency has a direct and immediate effect on adjustment (Kim and Slocum, 2008). Individuals with a high level of proficiency in local languages have more effective communication and social competencies, which contribute to expatriates' integration into local communities. However, some scholars argue that language proficiency does not necessarily lead to a high level of intercultural competence (Lambert, 1999), finding no correlation between acquiring a language and having global understanding (Barrows, 1981).

Besides, knowing a language does not guarantee appropriate communicative behaviours, such as empathy, expression of respect, role flexibility and willingness to listen to others (Gertsen, 1990). The most common occasions where expatriates interact with local people are at work. This can be perceived as the area where the bubbles are most likely to be permeated. Once this membrane is broken, the communication and interaction between the inside and outside of the bubble becomes easier and more frequent, but it depends on a shared language, and language studies (Peltokorpi and Zhang, 2022) show that in such situations native speakers have a significant power advantage.

The concept of "cultural intelligence" has also been proposed as making a difference (Earley and Mosakowski, 2004; Schlaegel *et al.*, 2021) but since the concept has such limited construct clarity and is, tautologically, measured by ability to adapt to another culture, it is not clear whether the notion has much validity.

In certain circumstances, race, gender and age might also play a pivotal role. Although African immigrants in Guanghzou live in the same buildings as Chinese residents, they just wander at the edge of the bubble rather than penetrate the "membrane" (Zhou *et al.*, 2016). Their daily communication with Chinese neighbours is only limited to simple greetings such as "hi" or "hello". Gender issues might be prominent in certain cultures. For example, since women cannot work together with men in Saudi Arabia, the spouses of expatriates are all women, who live in a compound with their husbands and have an even more isolated life (Lauring and Selmer, 2009). Age is a significant factor in explaining the different behaviours between young Chinese expatriates and their older colleagues in Tanzania. You will see young Chinese dancing in local clubs, drinking in local bars and dining in local restaurants, all rare amongst the older generation. The new generation is growing up in a more open and inclusive environment, connected to the world through the internet and travel. They are more

willing to embrace cultural differences and see new things from a more positive perspective. Consequently, they become the pioneers in breaking through the membranes of the bubbles.

Individual agency

Individual agency, or desire to go "beyond the bubble", is a more general factor. Not every person entering an expatriate bubble is happy to remain there. Even in the Chinese Tanzanian SOE compounds, there was scope for individual agency: One interviewee told us "… the rules say: do not go out at night - but we still do …. Although we live in a rural place, they have local bars. We go on Saturdays and Sundays. We go and drink till very late … the local security guys respect us, they listen to whatever we say. They close the door (of the compound), yes, but if we come back and knock the door at 2:00 am or 2:30 am, they still open it and let you in". Since absolute isolation is usually applied to extreme or special cases, being permeable and porous to the outside world is the norm of bubbles.

Some expatriates take considerable steps to learn about and enjoy the local culture: "I like to make local friends. I met a surveyor in our project, whose current project is in Dar City (Dar es Salaam). Usually, on weekends, I would go to his house and even play with his kids. When I was in the project, the kids were this big, now they are quite mature. They all remember me, I would go to their house and play with them."

Other expatriates are happier in their bubble. This is what happens with Japanese expatriates working in Indonesia (Shimoda, 2011) or amongst foreign communities in places like Hong Kong (Selmer, 2000). Sporadic encounters, tangential contacts, shared use of closed and open spaces, for example, where foreigners have encounters with Indonesians or Hongkongers inconsistently and, sometimes, under unpredictable circumstances. In the case of Hong Kong, most British expatriates live in a defined part of Hong Kong Island, leaving the rest of the island, the other islands and the mainland for the local population. During their time in Hong

Kong many of these western expatriates only meet English-speaking expatriates, the English-speaking Hongkongers they work with and the Hongkongers who serve them in restaurants and shops. Their bubbles are, to a degree, permeable and porous to other nationalities, in particular other cosmopolitans and to locals who enter and leave the bubble as they do. They constitute what Bhabha (1996) and Werbner (1999) have defined as "vernacular cosmopolitans", who can alternate being with both locals and foreigners.

Conclusions: The bubble metaphor in practice

These different uses of the bubble metaphor suggest that the metaphor needs to be adapted if it is to continue to be useful. In particular, our analysis challenges:

A. the conventional thinking that "expat-bubbles" are isolated places where expatriates only meet other expatriates (Bergh and Plessis, 2022);

B. any simplistic notion that different internationally mobile workers will be less or more immersed in the local community (more or less in their bubbles) depending on what kind of expatriate they are: AEs/ SIEs; high status/ low status; company people/aid workers; managerial or technical specialists/control workers; etc

C. the use of the bubble metaphor without careful delineation of how the metaphor is being used and what it implies;

D. the homogeneity of the bubble; even though researchers study the bubble as a homogenous unit, in reality it is individually experienced.

The major contribution of our piece therefore is to challenge the over-ready use of the "expat-bubble" metaphor. Its common use as a taken-for-granted analogy has severe limits: we need to disaggregate the expatriate category. For some expatriates, particularly those at the left hand side of our Figure, it remains a useful terminology. Where the antecedents of specific

expatriates place them in the Figure will be a combination of the specific limitations in their case. In some cases, one or other feature may predominate: for example, even the most dedicated internationalist westerner, committed to using their personal agency as much as possible to integrate with locals, will find that hard to do in North Korea – context will dominate; even the most enthusiastic Chinese integrator working on their own up-country in Africa will find that they inevitably 'stand out' in the local community and are treated differently – physical characteristics will predominate.

The opposite pole from the bubble metaphor is involvement with and integration into the local community. But this is a matter of degree, rather than a simple 'yes' or 'no'. We reject any association of the bubble metaphor with the notion that once you prick it, the bubble bursts. These bubbles are more or less porous.

A direct implication is our recommendation to avoid any assumption, when using the metaphor, of its interpretation, in particular by academics with links to IHRM practice and consultancy. It is important that the metaphor is not used organisationally without a proper understanding of its limits, organisational resonances and collective and individual circumstances. Practitioners referring to expatriates´ bubble need to develop expertise when ¨translating" the metaphor to their particular organisational circumstances and culture. Good metaphor translation demands high translation competence among the translators and, not least, that they have an open attitude towards others' and their own metaphorising (Örtenblad, 2022).

The metaphor itself could be a useful analogy and an important device for organisational diagnosis for managers of expatriation. This suggestion is similar to that of Örtenblad (2017, p. 69) who proposes using metaphors as devices for self-diagnosis, "to help people express their own (more or less unconscious) beliefs and feelings about things in their organization". We also suggest that the practice of "metaphorising", more than the use of crystallised and

taken for granted metaphors in isolation, constitute a way of creative thinking and imagining (Cameron, 2018). Expatriates themselves could self-reflect on the limits of the bubble as a cathartic element to build their own personal narratives about expatriation, avoiding dualistic and simplistic perceptions about their own expatriate living and working experiences.

Our call is to move from a taken-for-granted to a "sensible" use of bubble. By "sensible" we mean assuming a cultural and organisationally relativist and sensitive perspective in using the metaphor. We suggest three ways of practicing a sensible use of the bubble metaphor: first, to always consider the use of qualifiers attached to the word (¨porous bubble", "permeable bubble", "elastic bubble", etc); second, to always be open to the linguistic context, not only in English; third, to incentivise the idea that an expatriate bubble metaphor is indeed better understood when is imagined as a verb ("bubbling") rather than a noun (¨bubble"). Following John Law (1994) advocate for a "sociology of verbs" instead of "things" when metaphorising on organisations, it is when we imagine the expatriates "bubbling" in their everyday life that the rich multifaceted and malleable dimensions of the metaphor emerge.

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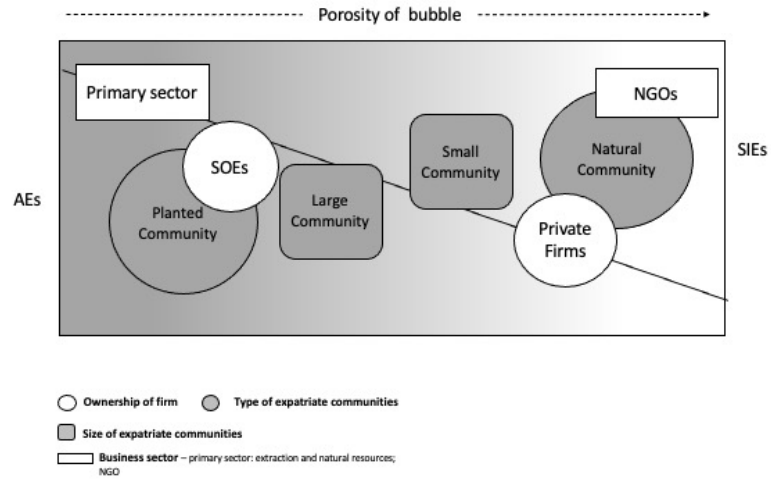
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