A bubble in the making: symbolic boundaries in a Finnish expatriate community

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Abstract

Purpose – While there is anecdotal evidence that internationally mobile workers often form isolated nation-based communities or "expatriate bubbles," previous academic scholarship on the expatriate communities and their subjective boundaries is limited. The primary purpose of this article is to advance the theoretical or conceptual understanding of expatriate communities as bubbles.

Design/methodology/approach – As developed by Lamont and Molnár (2002), the theory of symbolic boundaries is applied and set to scrutinize the production and maintenance of insulated expatriate communities. Empirically, an ethnographic study of a community of Finnish expatriates in a Southeast Asian country is undertaken to describe how symbolic boundaries are constructed.

Findings – The main theoretical implication of the paper is the recognition that expatriates themselves are involved in creating the "bubble." The boundaries separating the national expatriate community are not externally imposed but can be viewed as consequences of the active boundary work of the expatriates. The empirical study demonstrates how the Finnish expatriates negotiated the symbolic boundaries of their community, drawing on cultural, moral and spatial modalities in different levels of boundary work.

Originality/value – There need to be more systematic attempts to develop a theoretically grounded understanding of insulated expatriate communities and their boundaries. This article contributes to the sociological conceptualization of expatriate bubbles by utilizing the symbolic boundary approach, which adds perspective to the embryonic theory of the subjective boundaries of expatriate communities. The multiplicity of different types of symbolic boundaries and their modalities suggests that an expatriate bubble is rarely a finished state or structure.

Keywords Expatriates, Community, Bubble, Symbolic boundaries, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As the call for papers for this special issue of the Journal of Global Mobility asserts, "anecdotal evidence suggests that internationally mobile workers often form isolated nation-based communities that shield them from the otherness of their foreign surroundings" (Gaggiotti *et al.*, 2021). The phenomenon of insulated communities of globally mobile professionals and employees is typically referred to as the existence of so-called expatriate bubbles. The idea of expatriate communities as "environmental bubbles" was initially introduced by Cohen (1977). However, as Fechter (2016, p. 1) and Kunz (2016, p. 89) have noted, the recent surge of critical expatriate studies has primarily ignored his early sociological work. There is a growing widespread awareness of expatriate bubbles (e.g. Mayberry, 2017; Simon, 2013) among research on internationally mobile people.

Most of the early research on international moving concerns company expatriates. Researchers conceptualize them as business and non-business expatriates. Persons participating in international humanitarian aid and development cooperation (International Aid and Development, IAD) (Fee, 2017, p. 368) can be considered non-business expatriates. The goal of development cooperation is sustainable economic and social change addressing poverty and education, while humanitarian aid is short-term emergency aid by nature (Fee, 2017; Selmer, 2019). Aid and development are different. The subjects of this study are development professionals and their spouses. Only some recent empirical studies give concrete examples of bubble experiences. Aid workers intend to have authentic and profound experiences of the host country's culture and people. Nevertheless, they easily retreat into the expatriate bubble (Roth, 2015; Van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015). On the other hand, corporate expatriates can be seen as living simultaneously in several bubbles at the same or different times and spaces (Shimoda, 2017).

Fields such as political sociology with migration and cultural geography studies have witnessed burgeoning literature on the social facets of privileged mobility. An overview of the essential publications can be found at https://primob.ceg.ulisboa.pt/mapping-the-field/. The view of expatriate communities as bounded or insulated "bubbles," as suggested by Cohen (1977), has not been directly explored or developed in the recent social science scholarship, with Fechter's (2016) ethnography being an exception in this regard. Instead, social politics scholarship on privileged mobilities and migration has explored a range of other pertinent issues such as cosmopolitanism (Spiegel and Mense-Petermann, 2017; Amit, 2015), race and ethnicity (Hof, 2021), and post-colonialism (Benson, 2013; Fechter and Walsh, 2013) as well as spatiality (Maslova and Chiodelli, 2018; Kunz, 2018; Nowicka (2006, 2007). Nowicka's studies focus on the structure of spatial relations in expatriate individuals' practices. Kunz's (2016, p. 97) recent review of the field argues that despite the advances in privileged mobilities research, "little is known about how the conceptual boundaries of the expatriate, against, for instance, the "immigrant," are maintained in everyday life."

This article aims to close the research gap by investigating the formation and maintenance of expatriate bubbles as a process of boundary construction. More specifically, the aim is to advance the understanding of the dynamics of expatriate bubbles by examining the subjective aspects of boundary creation within expatriate communities. Previous research has applied boundary and community theories such as Barth's (1969) cultural boundaries approach or Cohen (1977) symbolic theory of community for the study of expatriate bubbles and their boundaries (Fechter, 2016). In this paper, we turn to a perspective not yet used in studying expatriate communities, namely the theory of symbolic boundaries developed by Lamont and her colleagues (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Pachucki et al., 2007).

This article focuses mainly on the processes and practices of symbolic boundary constructions, in contrast to the applications of the work of Lamont and Molnár (2002) that have scrutinized the simultaneous formation of both symbolic and social boundaries (Grodal, 2018; Heracleous, 2004). According to Lamont and Molnár (2002), symbolic boundaries refer to conceptual distinctions actors make in discourse and other forms of cultural signification. These subjective or cultural boundaries are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of subsequent social boundaries as more institutionalized, structural borders between groups of people.

For a descriptive framework, we distinguish three distinct modalities of symbolic boundary processes relevant to the study of delineations constituting expatriate communities as bubbles. Firstly, symbolic boundaries are constructed and negotiated about the dynamics between the self and the other, delineating the difference between them and us in cross-cultural encounters. This delineating is known as the theory's cultural dimension of symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Bail, 2008). The second modality of symbolic

delineations relies on moral judgments, especially in differentiating decent or upright groups from morally suspect actors (Vassenden and Jonvik, 2021). The role of moral judgments in expatriate communities is a novel topic that emerged inductively from our empirical material. The third dimension of boundary work relates to spatial demarcations as differences between the inside and outside groups often enmesh with spatial identifications of different communities (Van Eijk, 2011). Spatiality has been identified as a critical facet in the constitution of expatriate identities and relations (Maslova and Chiodelli, 2018; Kunz, 2018).

The framework of cultural, moral and spatial modalities derived from the theory of symbolic boundaries is further complemented with an analytic scheme distinguishing three distinct levels of expatriate boundaries, as originally suggested by Cohen (1977, p. 83). The first boundary level concerns the differentiation of the whole expatriate sector from various non-expatriates, including locals. Within the expatriate sector, different national expatriate communities engage in boundary work to distinguish themselves from other Western nationalities. These boundaries give rise to national communities of expatriates. Thirdly, national expatriate communities may contain internal boundary struggles concerning the various lines that potentially divide the expatriate community into distinct sub-groups.

Methodologically, studying symbolic boundaries calls for qualitative research approaches sensitive to how expatriates make distinctions in everyday situations (Lamont and Fournier, 1992). Typically, such research designs imply ethnographic and interpretative research strategies that focus on naturally occurring patterns of cultural signification (Sherman, 2005). An ethnographic study of a community of Finnish development expatriates in a Southeast Asian country undertaken for this paper demonstrates how symbolic boundaries can become constructed in the context. We understand that the context arises from the combined effect of the subjects' home country, work tasks and country of placement. Expatriates maintained an insulated national community by drawing on the proposed differences between the Finnish community and the others. They engaged in boundary work through the modalities of cultural, moral and spatial boundary construction. While the ensuing symbolic boundaries largely supported the demarcation of the Finnish community from the others, emerging boundaries also challenged the insulation, most notably the internal division between the younger and older expatriates within the Finnish community.

The main theoretical implication of the paper is the recognition that expatriates themselves are involved in creating the "bubble." The boundaries separating the national expatriate community are not externally imposed but can be viewed as consequences of the voluntary boundary work of the expatriates. The metaphor of a "bubble" captures the dual nature of expatriate communities as insulated and yet fragile enclaves.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section discusses previous research on expatriate communities and bubbles. In the third section, we introduce the theory of symbolic boundaries as an approach to studying the boundary processes related to insulated expatriate communities. Then, we propose to analyze the boundary construction along three modalities (cultural, spatial, moral) at distinct levels of analysis (us and others, national distinct, distinct inside the national community). The fourth section presents the empirical data and the process of analysis. The following section provides the main empirical results of the study of Finnish development expatriates in Southeast Asia. The final section concludes the article by summarizing the paper's contribution, noting some limitations of the study and suggesting avenues for further research.

Previous research on expatriate communities and bubbles

Cohen (1977) suggested over 40 years ago that expatriates tend to form insulated communities that take the form of "environmental bubbles." His general thesis was that expatriates often revert to groupings of fellow compatriots to be sheltered from the strangeness of the host

country's culture and the inherent tensions related to the contradictory role expectations of the expatriate position. Cohen's (1977) aim was to develop a generic sociological theory of expatriate communities, discussing various aspects of expatriate groups, such as their relative disconnection from the local environment, different types of institutional arrangements for expatriate communities and the de-differentiation of the spheres for work and leisure in expatriate life.

Although Cohen (1977, p. 77) argues that "expatriate communities . . . tend to exist in an enclave, or 'environmental bubble' which [. . .] provides the individual expatriate with sufficient familiarity in the strangeness of the host society to think and act in terms of his thinking as usual", he also notes that "more detailed analysis uncovers systematic variations among communities of different types and in different settings" (Cohen, 1977, p. 82). Cohen emphasizes the difference between what he calls planted and natural communities in this context. Planted expatriate communities emerge in contexts where the sponsoring organization provides a complete infrastructure for the overseas period, for instance, compound living. Natural communities, in contrast, are groupings of expatriates that take place organically as self-sustained expatriates start socializing amongst themselves.

Cohen (1977) argues that loosely organized natural communities create more permeable boundaries than planted expatriate communities. However, Cohen (1977, p. 83) also notes that though natural expatriate communities may empower more boundary-crossing behavior, they nevertheless often limit the informal contacts to a few outside actors and tend to prefer interactions with fellow expatriates. For him, thus, planted and natural communities represent two variations of the generic form of an environmental bubble, where the overall image is that of expatriates socializing primarily within their national communities.

Cohen's (1977) pioneering study suggests that there are sufficient structural reasons to assume that expatriates form national communities and that although actual communities may vary in their composition, there are grounds to propose that typical expatriate communities take the form of insulated, nationality-based bubbles. However, for example, Fechter (2016, p. 17) has noted that, to date, Cohen's (1977) treatise has been followed by only a few scholarly contributions that have attempted to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of demarcated expatriate communities. The subsequent two ethnographic studies can be seen as the most important from the perspective of the scientific progress of global mobility studies.

Lauring and Selmer (2009) have investigated the community formation of Danish expatriates living in compounds (cf. Harvey and Kiessling, 2004). Employing social identity theory in an ethnographic study, Lauring and Selmer (2009) demonstrate how the compound milieu gives rise to an exclusionary community of compatriots and how the emerging environmental bubble extends from leisure time to the workplace relations of expatriates. As hypothesized by Cohen (1977), the study demonstrates how planted communities like expatriate compounds facilitate a sharp distinction between the national in-group and the other actors making up the out-group; this further limits interactions across the expatriate bubble.

While Lauring and Selmer (2009) focus mainly on the norms governing the separation of national communities of expatriates from others, Fechter's (2016) study of Western expatriates in Indonesia focuses more explicitly on the subjective boundaries of expatriate communities. Following Cohen (2013) and Barth (1969), she developed a conceptual and methodological framework based on cultural or symbolic boundaries theory. Instead of assuming that expatriates constitute *a priori* an identifiable group that is divided from their environments, her focus on cultural or symbolic boundaries directs the attention to the expatriates' own constructions of difference that precede the emergence of normative social boundaries. Fechter's (2016) book-length study of expatriates in Indonesia explores several delineations and modalities relevant to maintaining expatriate communities, including differences related to race, ethnicity, nationality and age and modalities such as consumption, spatiality and family life.

At the outset, Lauring and Selmer (2009) focus on the planted communities, while Fechter's (2016) approach resonates more with the natural expatriate communities. The former authors conclude that the compound milieux affects the separation of the national in-group from the out-group. Parallelly, Fechter (2016) can be interpreted as arguing that boundaries are more malleable or negotiable in natural or organic communities.

However, there is a more profound difference between the theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted in the two studies. Of the two, Fechter (2016) concentrates more explicitly on the boundaries of the expatriate communities as the key phenomenon or dynamics in the formation of the communities of globally mobile professionals. While Lauring and Selmer (2009) investigate the norms and contexts leading to the disconnection between the national in-group and the others, Fechter (2016) is interested in the more fundamental, prior delineations necessary for the separate identities of divergent groups to emerge in the first place.

The symbolic nature of the boundaries points towards their artificiality or subjectivity: boundaries are invented or manufactured. Furthermore, the construction of boundaries is an ongoing cultural or symbolic process whereby actors make distinctions and negotiate the meaning of the self and the other. The approach Fechter (2016) advocates is thus a processual perspective that endorses a weaker ontology of becoming. Boundaries are considered the constituent elements of community separation, but maintenance requires continuous work. Boundaries are an achievement rather than an objective structure.

Following Fechter's (2016) theoretical approach, cultural or symbolic boundaries of expatriate communities are to be viewed as an object of constant "boundary work," where the members of the core group attempt to maintain a degree of separation from their environment but where, at the same time, the complete insulation is an achievable aim that is rarely achieved. Expatriates vacillate between the functional need to shelter themselves from the strangeness of the foreign location and the constant effort of having to reproduce and maintain the boundaries that set them apart from the others. Fechter (2016, p. 26) notes this tension by arguing that "boundaries are not natural or essential but are products of social practices; not given and static but constructed and contested. I suggest that expatriates are engaged in complex processes of constructing different boundaries, and a major part of their lives revolves around their negotiation and reinforcement".

For Fechter (2016), the variation concerning the relative openness or closure of the expatriate communities locates within the processes of symbolic boundary creation. The location differentiates her approach from the structural sociology of Cohen (1977). Symbolic boundaries of communities are, to some extent, always permeable due to their inherently artificial or invented nature. Still, at the same time, if consistently maintained, they can lead to social demarcations that manifest themselves as concrete behavioral barriers between the groups (cf. Cohen, 2013).

The metaphor of a "bubble" captures the dual nature of expatriate communities as insulated and yet fragile enclaves. Bubbles are isolated from their environment, but the liquid boundaries of bubbles remain nonetheless very delicate. The bubble metaphor combines the focus on boundaries with the elusive character of expatriate communities. As Fechter (2016, p. 151) suggests, "a 'bubble' creates a bounded Inside that is sheltered from an Outside. The image also suggests that the membrane which separates Inside and Outside is also artificial, fragile and permeable". Nonetheless, a substantiated study of expatriate bubbles calls for a robust theory of symbolic boundaries.

The theory of symbolic boundaries
In recent years, the theory of symbolic boundaries developed by Lamont and her colleagues (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Pachucki *et al.*, 2007) has become a leading approach to

understanding the cultural processes of boundary formation. According to Lamont and Molnár (2002), there are two ontologically distinct forms of boundaries: symbolic and social. Symbolic boundaries represent the "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space" (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168). In contrast, social boundaries "are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168).

Symbolic boundaries are constructions of difference featured in everyday practices and cultural performances, while social boundaries refer to institutionalized demarcations reflected in the objectified separations between groups. Furthermore, the solidification of social boundaries depends on situated symbolic boundaries becoming more widely agreed upon. In other words, symbolic boundaries can be considered a precondition for the emergence of social boundaries or more stable patterns of connections and disconnections; or as a "necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries" (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 169). Previous research on community borders has variably emphasized either symbolic or social boundaries or their dynamic interconnections (Grodal, 2018; Heracleous, 2004). In this article, the focus is mainly on the role of symbolic boundaries.

In our interpretation, the theory of symbolic boundaries reverses the relationship between objective indicators of boundaries and their subjective meaning. Seemingly objective boundaries or barriers between groups are not thought of as automatically leading to corresponding symbolic boundaries in the cultural webs of meaning. Instead, subjective interpretations and significations constitute an autonomous sphere of boundary construction that is not directly determined or affected by objective features such as nationality, ethnicity, or physical space.

For analytic purposes, we next introduce two relevant conceptual distinctions for the subsequent empirical description of symbolic boundaries. Firstly, symbolic delineations occur within several dimensions or modalities. Here we focus on three spheres. Regarding communal identity, boundaries produce and maintain the division into the self and the other. Symbolic processes in this category involve delineating the difference between them and us, often associating the self with the positive aspects and attributing the negative characteristics of being to the others. In cross-cultural discourses, Western life is often presented as usual or desirable. In contrast, non-Western values and customs are portrayed as deviant or inferior (cf. Prasad, 1997). This general aspect of boundary construction has been recognized as the cultural dimension of symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Bail, 2008).

The second sphere of symbolic delineations relies on moral judgments. Outside groups are considered in this dimension morally suspect, whereas inside groups are judged more honorable. Consequently, the inside group is pictured in symbolic practices as likable, upright, or decent. At the same time, a boundary is drawn to the outside group, which is presented as venal or decadent (Vassenden and Jonvik, 2021).

The third dimension of boundary work relates to spatial demarcations. Spatial boundary processes are involved in recognizing how symbolic differences are related to the assumed fragmentations of social space. Differences between the inside and outside groups often enmesh with a spatial identification of different communities. Typically, these delineations appear in discourses that separate "us here" from "them over there," thus employing spatial distance or separation as a further confirmation of the proposed demarcation between the inside group and its outside (Van Eijk, 2011; Fechter, 2016). As the theory of symbolic boundaries emphasizes, these and other modalities of symbolic boundary work can often interact in the situated processes of distinction-making (Pachucki et al., 2007). However, these three dimensions are understood here as independent categories for analytic purposes.

A second analytic distinction is acute for our specific interest in the communities of expatriates and concerns the different levels of boundaries. Symbolic boundary theory suggests that boundaries are produced and maintained at varying levels of analysis

(Lamont and Molnár, 2002). For expatriate communities, at least three levels of boundaries are relevant (Cohen, 1977; Fechter, 2016). The boundary between the locals and expatriates demarcates the expatriates from the local society and culture. Especially in non-Western locations, the boundary between expatriates and the locals sustains the separateness of the whole community of Western expatriates from the local environment. As an outcome, a social boundary is often produced between the host society and what Cohen (1977, p. 83) calls the expatriate sector. Within the expatriate sector, different national expatriate communities engage in boundary work to distinguish themselves from other Western nationalities. This boundary is often associated with expatriate bubbles, where expatriates socialize primarily with fellow citizens. A further boundary process, however, can be located inside national communities, as both Cohen (1977 p. 83) and Fechter (2016, p. 26) have noted. National expatriate communities can have internal boundary struggles concerning the various lines that potentially divide the national community into distinct sub-groups.

In summary, boundary work can involve cultural, moral, or spatial dimensions of symbolic delineations. Furthermore, the various aspects or modalities of symbolic boundaries can be identified in different levels of expatriate communities: between expatriates and locals, between national communities and other Western expatriates and within national expatriate communities. The two conceptual distinctions offer a heuristic matrix for interpreting symbolic boundary processes in expatriate communities. This theoretical framework was utilized in an empirical study of a Finnish expatriate community.

An empirical study of a Finnish expatriate community
The subject of this qualitative research is a community of Finnish expatriates residing in the capital of a Southeast Asian country ("City"). The expatriates work in development-related activities funded by the Finnish government or a transnational NGO such as the UN or the World Bank. They periodically move from one international assignment to another under the auspices of transnational institutions or international development programs; thus, we define the expatriates of this study as self-initiated expatriates (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Andresen *et al.*, 2020) of the non-corporate sector. At the time of the research, the community comprised about 30 Finnish employees and their family members. Professionally, they represented various backgrounds ranging from forestry and engineering to law.

The research design employed the method of ethnographic fieldwork, particularly the tradition of the thematically concentrated, short-term ethnographies referred to as focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005). In line with typical ethnographic research, the study utilized several interrelated forms of data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015, p. 155). Observational material was gathered through a week-long visit to the City. A Finnish expatriate and his wife hosted the researcher and facilitated access to the community together. In practice, the researcher adopted the role of an "interested visitor" by spending time with the expatriate couple and the rest of the community in their daily routines. The researcher participated mainly in the expatriate community's private or free-time occasions but also visited the workplace of the husband of the Finnish couple. We were joining the everyday expatriate life in cafes and restaurants. We could also visit the workplace as an opportunity to combine observation and formal interviews of the other Finnish expatriates willing to participate in the study. We organized eight interviews. Interview protocol encompassed the following broad questions: (1) brief biographical background of the informant, (2) who belong to the Finnish expatriate community and what are the main social activities of the community?, (3) are other Western expatriates involved in the community and do you have social contacts with the other expatriates?, (4) how do you relate with the locals and what are your views of the local culture?, (5) personal reflections regarding the meaning of being an expatriate in City. The diary-type

Internet blog of a person belonging to the expatriate community was introduced to the researcher and provided supplementary documentary data for the study. Fieldwork notes, transcribed interviews, and excerpts from the Internet diary comprised a text corpus of about 200 pages.

The process of analysis advanced in three stages. The initial focus of interest was to inductively examine the experiences related to the communal life of Finnish expatriates. During the one-week fieldwork, the theoretical focus evolved toward the maintenance of the boundaries of the community (cf. Silverman, 2011, p. 146). Expatriates made distinctions that implied a demarcation between the expatriate community and the others. Observations and interviews were consequently designed so that the issues regarding the boundaries of the community were more explicitly addressed or attended to in the later parts of the fieldwork. In the third stage, the analysis of the boundaries was developed further with the help of conceptual frameworks. Firstly, the theory of symbolic boundaries was employed to interpret the observed demarcations and distinctions as ongoing, local constructions of difference and delineation. Secondly, different instances of the symbolic boundary were categorized based on their modality and level of boundary.

Methodologically, qualitative data gathered were initially approached from an emic perspective, focusing on the actors' local distinctions and meanings (Pike, 1954). The purpose was to understand the identities and boundaries of the expatriate community from the actors' perspective. The approach involved a close reading of the interview discourse and informant accounts regarding the distinctions between expatriates and the others. In the later stages of the research process, an etic perspective was employed to interpret the distinctions made by the expatriates along the categories of different modalities and levels of boundary work. Researchers arranged the instances of symbolic boundary processes according to the three levels of analysis: the overall expatriate sector, the national community and the sub-communities within a national community. Within each level, the three modalities of symbolic boundary processes - cultural, moral and spatial boundaries-were used as categories to organize the data. The following section presents the key findings from the empirical analysis.

Symbolic boundaries in the Finnish expatriate community
Expatriates and non-expatriates
The Finnish expatriates described their views of the locals through a multitude of stories of difference. Part of the difficulty was related to linguistic barriers, but the expatriates also noted the cultural boundaries. Generally, the expatriates characterized the host country's culture as relatively strange compared to their Nordic values and beliefs. One of the main discrepancies between the Western and local mindsets raised concerns the conception of time. An experienced expatriate, for instance, talked about the difficulties he has faced when making plans at work:

> I tried to organize an important meeting at work. I asked the local colleagues a week before whether can they make it. They answered that they could not tell. Then I asked five days before the meeting whether they could come. Again, they said they could not tell yet. Finally, I asked the day before whether they could come, noting that this was an important project-related gathering. Furthermore, again, they said they cannot commit to this, as something may arise along the way.

Overall, the differences between the expatriates and the locals were portrayed as divisions demarcating the Western culture from the local beliefs. Apart from the strangeness of their conception of time, expatriates characterized locals as spontaneous and carefree people who seemed to prioritize the enjoyment of social life over work. These delineations suggest a cultural difference between the essentially rational principles of the Western mindset and Protestant Ethic and the spontaneous, reactive

attitudes of the host country's citizens. A cultural boundary between the Western self and the Asian other was being produced in expatriates' discourse.

Another critical dimension in producing symbolic boundaries between the expatriates and the locals involved the emergence of spatial distinctions. The bodily practices of the community were connected to the interactions between the expatriates in distinct places and spaces. As part of the fieldwork, the researcher participated in the life of the Finnish expatriates by joining the hosts and their expatriate colleagues in restaurants, bars and cafes. On the first evening in the City, the researcher visited a popular expatriate bar with the hosts. The place was full of Western expatriates, who seemed to be acquainted with each other across the national or professional divides. Friday night is the unofficial day for the whole expatriate society to visit the specific locale. During the fieldwork visit, the researcher also witnessed several unplanned meetings between the Finnish expatriates in other restaurants. When the researcher noted this phenomenon to an experienced Finnish expatriate, he confirmed how space supported the spontaneous meetings within the Finnish community:

R: I have noticed during my stay here that when we [the researcher and his hosts] have been strolling in the city, we often meet other Finns quite spontaneously.

E: Well, you see them [other Finnish expatriates] all the time like that. Whenever you just walk around downtown, you usually meet other Finns.

The material condition for these quasi-spontaneous rendezvous is the concentration of Western style places of leisure and dining in a downtown area in the City. These places are marked off as consumption-centered locales that cater to expatriate tastes. The experienced Finnish expatriate noted that it is evident that the restaurants are targeted at the Western clientele and that the supply is surprisingly abundant, given the relatively small size of the City.

On the other hand, there were also restaurants and bars for the locals, but the expatriates did not frequent these. The researcher, for instance, pointed out a nightclub building that is off-limits to expatriates due to a different style of bar behavior. There appeared to be an imagined spatial boundary between the places appropriate for the expatriates and those exclusive to the locals. This symbolic boundary was also corroborated in the interviews.

The function of the Western-friendly locales offered the expatriates a comfortable mixture of familiarity and strangeness. For instance, the popular expatriate bar described above reminded the researcher of a typical high-end bar with comfortable interiors and an assortment of classy cocktails. Nevertheless, it also offers a flavor of local culture in the form of native musicians performing regional tunes. The experience of the local culture seemed to be "packaged" in these venues so that the foreigner-friendly sites could accommodate the expectations of the Western expatriate community.

Apart from the locals, the Western tourists were another group that featured in some of the symbolic demarcations between expatriates and others. The Southeast Asian host country is an emerging tourist destination, especially among backpacker journeyers. The Finns shared a few stories in which the backpackers appear culturally ignorant and unprepared for the local circumstances. For instance, an entry in an expatriate wife's blog represented the tourists as being misinformed about the everyday infrastructure of the City:

Almost daily, I am asked for advice in the downtown area; I am like a walking information point. 'Where is the museum? Where can I exchange currency? Where can I find an inexpensive hotel? Where are we right now?'. Yesterday I calmed down a German lady with her daughter as they could not get cash from an ATM, and they had stopped in the street. 'This ATM does not work. Isn't there any place where one can get cash?' 'Thank you, thank you, they said and bowed to me as I told them

that there are plenty of cash machines here, and yes, they work - my husband used one of them today to withdraw some money.

Anecdotes like this presented the occasional travelers as immature voyagers whose ignorance of the local habits and circumstances was contrasted with the cross-cultural competencies of the experienced expatriates. Expatriates are presented in the stories as mature adults, while the tourists display seemingly childish behavior. The behaviors and attitudes were shameful in the eyes of the seasoned expatriates. However, there was not only a distinction between the expatriates and the seasonal tourists in terms of their cross-cultural competence but also an implicit moral division. To survive in a foreign location such as the City, one should properly prepare oneself to gain practical knowledge and cultural awareness before embarking on a journey to the country. It was implied that a trip without good background work on a destination like the City could be considered improper or unethical.

The boundary between the Finnish expatriates and other nationalities
The Finnish community met frequently. There was, for example, a monthly meeting in a bar. Some of the get-togethers, however, had a more robust national flavor. The Finnish community, for instance, convened yearly in the house of the local honorary counsel to celebrate Independence Day and Midsummer, two traditionally important festivals in the Finnish calendar. The honorary counsel is a former expatriate who resides permanently in the host country, and expatriates used his residence as a safe venue for the celebratory meetings. It looked as if the Finnish expatriates wanted to replicate the established ceremonies associated with these festivals as far as possible, to simulate an authentic home-country experience.

Another peculiar ritual enacted by the Finnish community was organizing an election night meeting. Whenever there was a general election in Finland, the expatriates voted on the premises of the honorary counsel. Afterward, they arranged an unofficial party that imitated the election night proceedings. The expatriates set up a mock "exit poll" amongst themselves to signal the probable results within the community. The exit poll results were then announced at an election night party in a local restaurant.

The election night get-together could be seen as a ritualistic performance of Finnish unity as a civic community. The participating occasion requires an understanding of Finnish politics and a sense of the atmosphere of the election night proceedings in the home country. Similarly, the celebration of Independence Day followed the particularistic script of the festival in Finland, with a more somber beginning, followed by a more festive after-party. By mimicking the practices or ceremonies performed in their home country, the Finnish expatriates generated an inclusive, imagined community for the Finnish citizens. At the same time, this togetherness unavoidably excluded the Western expatriates, who lacked an understanding of the Finnish rituals and their cultural background.

Although several Finnish expatriates noted that they were also in contact with other Western expatriates, the communal bonds were looser compared to the coherence of the Finnish group. Interaction with the other Westerners was based on work or hobbies but did not seem to extend to the intensive socializing within the Finnish community. Some of the Finnish contemplated that the cohesion of the Finnish group might be a natural result of the shared language. However, they also pointed to the relatively small size of the Finnish community. An expatriate noted that the grouping of Western expatriates tends to follow the linguistic proximity of the expatriates:

French-speaking countries have found each other, and similarly those who speak English, particularly the expatriates from the former Commonwealth countries. For example, the Brits, the New Zealanders, and the South Africans often move together. These groups arrange periodic meetings, just like we [the Finns] do.

The meetings of the Finnish expatriate community emphasized the importance of insider knowledge of Finnish society and civic life. The boundary between the national self and the others was produced with a refined understanding of the specific meaning of rituals and practices such as Independence Day or the election night proceedings. The symbolic boundary was inherent in these ceremonies as it was difficult to participate in them without knowing the cultural assumptions and scripts associated with the practices. In addition, the ceremonies were arranged in nationally bounded spaces, like the house of the local honorary council for Finland, which appeared to stand for the missing Finnish embassy in the City.

Divisions within the Finnish expatriate community
At the outset, the Finnish community appeared internally unified. Although the expatriates worked on different development-related projects, they spoke about instances of practical cooperation across the organizational lines. In addition, different occupational identities inherent in the development work did not seem to emerge as a dividing factor in the community. Overall, the expatriates indicated that the differences that might have been prevalent in the home country did not affect the creation of togetherness in the foreign location. One such identity factor was age. An expatriate close to retiring age, for instance, noted:

> In our group, there has been this feature that I feel excellent about: we have not had any sign of so-called age racism. I represent the oldest end of the group, but I have discovered good people among the younger ones and middle-aged Finns. We get along very well.

During the fieldwork visit, the researcher witnessed spontaneous socializing among the Finnish group that did not recognize occupational, regional, or age-related boundaries. The unity of the Finnish community seemed to transcend the conventional divisions and tensions that often characterize domestic life in the home country. A sense of old-fashioned communal solidarity and belonging was often mentioned as a feature that separates expatriate life from the modern forms of sociality at home. Expatriates were sharing, for instance, practical advice and tips for everyday issues. As an expatriate spouse notes in her diary blog:

> The biggest difference to life in Finland is this sociality. People have their work and hobbies here, but for some reason, all kinds of extempore gatherings are easy to arrange. People are not as programmed as at home. There is no need to compete with who is in the greatest hurry, works the longest hours, or is the most notable high achiever. Of course, there is talk of work since we share the same mission: we are all here to help the locals and the local society. However, most of the time, we talk about everything else and share experiences and stories from the world.

One of the internal issues observed during the fieldwork concerned the status differences within the Finnish community. Although the status differences did not seem to hamper day-to-day socializing, it was possible to discern implicit hierarchical strata in the group. The leaders of the significant development projects appeared to hold more prestige than the other professionals. A local United Nations attaché and the honorary consul occupied the highest stratum. This hierarchy was explained by an expatriate as follows:

> The UN country coordinator is a Finn. She oversees all United Nations operations in the country. She is a high-ranking Finn, and the highest-ranking is M.M., our honorary counsel in the City, himself a former business expatriate.

Even though expatriates are temporary occupants of jobs, the implied status hierarchy appeared relatively stable. Whoever held a higher-ranking position in the institutional structure of development programs and international diplomacy was considered superior to the other expatriates. However, these status differences were not directly analogous to organizational hierarchies, as the expatriates were typically employed in independent

projects or were associated with different non-governmental organizations. "Bosses" and "subordinates" appeared to socialize freely despite status divides.

Instead, a sharper difference emerged in connection with the positioning of the younger subgroup of the community (cf. Fechter, 2016, p. 129). The younger expatriates tended to mingle with other nationalities in ways that differed from the nationality-based socializing of the more established sojourners. Moreover, the junior cohort seemed to eschew the idea of expatriates blending exclusively within their Western circles. That is, there was a more profound reservation against the lifestyle adapted by the veteran expatriates among the younger sojourners.

Interestingly, one of the junior professionals explicitly raised the concept of "bubble" during the interviews. He pointed to the tendency of the Western expatriates to gravitate towards places and events exclusive to sojourners from the First World. The junior expatriate commented that there are some 2000 Western experts in the City and that, according to him, almost everybody knows everybody. The younger expatriate demonstrated the experience of being in the bubble as follows:

> It is possible that there is every weekend a home party, to which 300 people are invited. Furthermore, you can know everyone, and no local person exists.

In his view, the more experienced and older expatriates are deeper immersed in the bubble than the younger group he represents. The established expatriates also acknowledged the fissure between the older and younger expatriates in the Finnish community. They noted that the younger Finns socialized in different circles and were less active in the gatherings and events than the veterans. From the perspective of the experienced expatriates, the refusal to adopt a "bubble lifestyle" was manifested, for example, in the junior expatriates' hesitation to accept domestic help. The veterans suggested in an interview that the younger expatriates were still learning how to be proper Western expatriates in a developing country.

Interestingly, the concept of "bubble" had a different symbolic meaning in the boundary work of seasoned and junior expatriates. For the younger expatriates, "bubble" referred to the harmful "in-breeding" among the expatriates, while for the experienced expatriates, the concept did not have a similar connotation. For the juniors, "bubble" signaled the boundary between authentic cosmopolitan attitudes and the artificial enclave lifestyle. This implicit boundary had a moral dimension in that the "bubble" community was evaluated negatively by the juniors as being a degraded or compromised version of the ideal cosmopolitanism or globalism they were pursuing as part of their expatriate life.

The division into the "bubble" community of the veteran expatriates and the groups of the junior expatriates was also related to a spatial differentiation between acceptable and avoidable spheres of social activity. As noted in the above comment, the "bubble" phenomenon was closely associated among the younger expatriates with the gatherings of the Western expatriate sector. In the symbolic boundary work of the junior expatriates, these places were conceived of as undesirable sites for free-time activities. The younger expatriate noted that there are certain restaurants and bars that he actively avoids because he does not want to meet the other expatriates in what he described as "bubble events." Instead, he said he is actively trying to distance himself from these situations by avoiding the meetings.

Summarizing the empirical findings

Symbolic boundary construction of the Finnish expatriate community took place through various modalities at different levels of analysis. Regarding the boundary between expatriates in general and the environment, delineations occurred in line with the cultural distinctions between the expatriates and the locals. Expatriates distinguished their Western selves from the seemingly irrational or illogical mindset of the local people in a fashion reminiscent of the

classifications inherent in the colonialist discourse (Prasad, 1997). Additionally, expatriates were separated from the locals according to the spatial distinctions of places desirable or suitable for the Western expatriates and sites not appropriate for the expatriates. Thirdly, some expatriates draw a line between themselves and the tourists, emphasizing the tourists' immature or morally shameful behaviors in cross-cultural situations.

The symbolic boundaries between the Finnish national community and the other expatriates were produced primarily in nationalist ceremonies or rituals that required considerable inside knowledge of the Finnish culture and society. Participation in these practices presumed an understanding of national rituals' meaning and background, such as the Independence Day ceremonies. The references to the idiosyncrasy of the Finnish language and the relatively small size of the Finnish expatriate community also supported the view that the boundary between the Finnish community and other Western expatriates was based more on the rules for inclusion in the group than on the unfavorable comparisons between the Finns and the others.

Boundaries within the Finnish national community, in turn, consisted mainly of the distinctions between seasoned and junior expatriates. The junior expatriates highlighted the differences between their cosmopolitan attitudes and the "bubble" lifestyle of the veteran expatriates. For the junior expatriates, the "inbred" characteristics of the insulated community of more experienced or older expatriates were interpreted as objectionable, given their own perceived openness and multicultural curiosity. They connected the "bubble" phenomenon primarily to the life of the more seasoned expatriates and cast it in morally negative terms as a thing to be avoided. The veteran expatriates did not highlight the idea of a possible "expatriate bubble" or its adverse aspects in the same way, instead acknowledging it as synonymous with the intimacy of communal togetherness.

Overall, the empirical study demonstrated how the Finnish expatriates negotiated the symbolic boundaries of their community by drawing in various occurrences on cultural, spatial and moral modalities and engaging with symbolic delineations at different levels of boundary work (see Table 1).

Boundaries between the Western expatriates and the others demonstrated all three elements: cultural, spatial and moral dimensions. The use of the Finnish language in foreign contexts is almost exclusively limited to citizens of one's own country. However, it does not appear as strongly in the results as a cultural issue. In contrast, the distinctions between the Finnish community and the other Western nationalities were tangled with ceremonies requiring inside cultural knowledge. The home of Finland's local honorary

Bubble levels 1–3	Cultural dimension		Spatial dimension		Moral dimension	
1. Western expatriates	o	Distinguishing locals	o	Sites suitable for Western people	o	Morally shamed behavior of tourists, judged by expatriates
2. The national community of Finnish expatriates	o o	Finnish national ceremonies require inside knowledge of culture and society The peculiarity of Finnish language	o	The home of honorary counsel as a place for ceremonies		
3. Separate bubbles within Finnish national community – seasoned and junior expatriates			o	Junior expatriates avoid places of encountering Western expatriates	o	Younger expatriates avoid "bubble life" as morally harmful

Table 1.
Results of symbolic boundary constructions of Finnish expatriates

counsel appeared as a gathering place for specific events. This space represented the Finnish embassy in the city. Delineations within the Finnish community, in turn, reflected mainly the moral aspects in the differences of relating to the idea of a "bubble," with junior expatriates stressing the questionable character of the insulated lifestyle of Western expatriates. The line between the "bubble" and the more normal expatriate life was also manifested in the spatial practices of the juniors as they reported that they tried to avoid going to places where groups of Western expatriates meet, something that the older expatriates partly corroborated.

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of expatriate communities as bubbles. Theoretically, focusing on symbolic boundaries provides a fruitful way to advance the current study of expatriate communities. For this purpose, we applied the theory of symbolic boundaries as developed by Lamont and Molnár (2002) to scrutinize the production and maintenance of insulated communities of expatriates. Symbolic boundaries were conceptualized as conceptual distinctions actors make to draw lines between the inside and the outside of their communities. Furthermore, we distinguished three relevant modalities of symbolic boundaries in expatriate communities, which were cultural, moral and spatial boundary processes.

An ethnographic study of self-initiated Finnish expatriates in a Southeast Asian country illustrated the variety of ways the expatriates were engaging with boundary work in their everyday life. Expatriates were producing and maintaining boundaries between the expatriate community and the others in three levels of analysis: between the Western expatriate sector and the non-expatriate groups, between the Finnish national community and the other nationalities, and within the Finnish national community. As the study illustrated, the Finnish expatriates generally distinguished themselves from their environment in a manner that created an exclusionary symbolic line around them.

The main theoretical implication of the symbolic boundary approach is the recognition that expatriates themselves are involved in creating the "bubble." The boundaries insulating the national expatriate community are not externally imposed but can be viewed as consequences of the voluntary boundary work of the expatriates. Expatriates produce their insulation by making recurrent demarcations based on cultural, moral and spatial differences. At the same time, the distinctions thus performed are inherently fragile and require constant reproduction to uphold the community's more objectified sense of social boundaries (Fechter, 2016).

The distinctive nature of symbolic boundaries suggests that the insulation of the expatriate bubble can often be contested in situations where different boundaries enmesh or contradict each other. In the study of the Finnish expatriates, the internal division into more established and junior expatriates demonstrated a case where micro-level boundaries challenged the unity and closeness of the national expatriate community. More generally, the multiplicity of different types of symbolic boundaries and their modalities suggests that an expatriate bubble is rarely a finished state or structure. Expatriate bubbles are always in the making.

As far as practical implications are concerned, the problem regarding the insulation of expatriates is that they may not be fully conscious of their participation in creating symbolic boundaries. In this regard, to better appreciate how community boundaries are symbolically produced and maintained, expatriates should reflexively examine their everyday habits, language use and other signifying practices. These contribute to reproducing the distinctions and demarcations that can separate the expatriate community from its environment (Holland, 1999).

One of the limitations of this study is the particularity of the Finnish expatriate community. The Finnish community in the host country was relatively small and consisted mainly of development professionals employed in governmental projects and UN-related organizations. Further research is needed on the symbolic boundary processes of expatriate communities among other nationalities. The consequences of expatriates' language usage appear only a bit in our research. The effect of language and lingua franca on emerging boundaries and maintaining them is an exciting theme for future research. Another notable limitation is the relatively short duration of the ethnographic study, which was implemented as a one-week visit to the City. A more prolonged exposure to the everyday life of an expatriate community, together with a more systematic interview program, could provide a fuller empirical description of the complex processes involved in constructing symbolic boundaries in expatriate communities.

Studies of the subjective boundaries of expatriate communities and privileged mobilities have received attention from a political sociology approach (Fechter, 2016; Kunz, 2016). However, the sociological symbolic boundary approach could shed light on various community formation processes in expatriate contexts. Overall, we hope that the theoretical framework developed in this paper could serve as a conceptual or analytical guideline for further empirical studies of boundaries on expatriate community bubbles.

Finally, we would like to highlight again the usefulness of the metaphor of "bubble" when envisioning the nature of isolated expatriate communities. Life in a bubble refers to an existence that hovers above the ground somewhat artificially. The expatriate community can be seen similarly as a sheltered and privileged way of life that is often separated from the realities of the local society. At the same time, bubbles are inherently fragile constructions that continually balance promoting and expanding their boundaries and risk bursting when overextended. Self-standing bubbles can also be become divided into several smaller bubbles. Likewise, expatriate bubbles must continuously guard their boundaries against external leaks and internal ruptures. Thus, "bubble" continues to be an apt simile to make sense of the nature of expatriate communities and their symbolic boundaries.

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