

Self-Initiated Expatriation (SIE) in older women: Exploring a different terrain

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Abstract

Undertaking Self-Initiated Expatriation (SIE) has previously been considered the domain of a younger generation embarking on a period of autonomous travel and work in another country. Further analysis of a study of young travellers (Inkson & Myers, 2003) suggested that young women's propensity to seek safer travel and work environments while on OE/SIE gave them a more integrated career experience when compared to men (Myers & Pringle, 2005). The current generation of older people are experiencing increased life expectancy and career spans. These experiences contrast markedly with previous generations, suggesting that older workers will be employed in increasing numbers. Yet there appears to be a dearth of research on the individual experiences of older workers and in particular older women. In New Zealand, anecdotal evidence reports that some women are withdrawing from employment and embarking on a novel and previously undocumented older person's SIE. These women appear to simultaneously disrupt and challenge the traditional expectations of older women and the male norm of a continuous career. This paper reports findings from a Ph.D. study of the lives of individual older women. What motivates these older women to undertake SIE? What experiences do they have, why and what outcomes, if any, do they expect? Preliminary empirical findings suggest that for older women, SIE is a catalyst for meaningful life transition. It is a time for refocus, renewal and rejuvenation, where 'reirement' is the new 'retirement' indicating a shift in older women's way of being and bringing a new and emerging strand of life development and career theory.

Keywords

Self-initiated expatriation, older women, life transitions, careers

Introduction

The beloved New Zealand 'Overseas Experience' (OE, a period of autonomous travel and work in another country) provides an opportunity for young women and men to experience considerable personal and career development. This local phenomenon is recognised in international research studies as 'Self-Initiated Expatriation' (SIE) (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Vance, 2005). Further analysis of a study of young travellers experiencing OE (Inkson & Myers, 2003) suggested that young women's propensity to seek safer travel and work environments while on OE (referred to as SIE for the remainder of this article) gave them a broader and more integrated career experience when compared to men (Myers & Pringle, 2005). These findings provided the impetus for a more focused study on individual older women and the doctoral research on which this paper draws explores the lives and experiences of women who have travelled and worked overseas in later life.

The current generation of older people is experiencing increased life expectancy (Munro, 2010), career spans, and responsibilities. These experiences contrast markedly with previous generations, suggesting that older workers, and particularly older women, will stay or re-enter paid employment in increasing numbers (Davy, 2006). These women are breaking boundaries and establishing new patterns in a changing social context. Although there is a body of literature on older workers (Mirvis & Hall, 1996), it tends to be framed in gender-neutral terms without consideration of gender-age interaction and differing outcomes for men and women

(Ainsworth, 2002). While age and employment are viewed as increasingly important research areas (Duncan & Loretto, 2004), there is little research on the individual experiences of older women (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Case studies of older women workers faced with expectations to continue employment into their 60s and 70s suggest that they are seeking alternative life paths (Handy & Handy, 2002). In New Zealand, local anecdotal evidence suggests that some women are withdrawing from employment and embarking on an overseas adventure (Shepherd, 2008). These women appear to simultaneously disrupt and challenge the traditional expectations of older women, creating new life patterns and ways of being in contrast to their mothers' lives.

What motivates these older women workers to undertake SIE? What experiences do they have and what outcomes, if any, do they expect? While this PhD study draws on 'older workers', 'older women', 'lifespan perspectives', and 'careers' literatures, the development of a literature on women's careers over the last 20 years provides some additional insights on these questions. This literature argues that women's careers are more holistic and organic than men's careers, encompassing diverse personal experiences and life development, while men's lives are primarily defined by work (whether paid or unemployed). The studies of women's lives have identified the importance of relationships, connections and achievements (Giele, 1980; Marshall, 1989). Further, Gallos (1989) argues that traditional theories of careers mask an understanding of women's more relational way of being. In more recent years there has been a call to develop theory that 'has the capacity to embody the emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological as well as the outer achievements of an "objective" career' (Pringle & McCulloch Dixon, 2003, p. 291). This work-in-progress Ph.D. study uses a gender lens to further explore the terrain of these older women who opt out of established lives and dare to travel a different path where work is no longer the nucleus around which life is constructed and defined (Savickas, 2010).

Research methodology

The assumption that reality is a social construction suggests an epistemological position that recognises the open-endedness of knowledge. Thus, in my world view, which emphasises interpretivism, a subjectivist epistemology facilitates the recognition of shifting and unknown phenomena and supports the incremental development and creation of knowledge and understanding during the research process (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Subjectivism is core to the research process and requires a methodology that is open and facilitates research within the process of social change. A qualitative approach seeks to achieve trust through methods such as in-depth interviews and life stories. This approach is open ended, fostering confidence and integrity in the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The method adopted for my Ph.D. research is partly an extension of an earlier study on younger New Zealanders undertaking SIE (Inkson & Myers, 2003), adapting the original interview structure and recruitment techniques. Although analysis is in progress, the findings that follow generally reflect the total sample. However, specific quotations and life references from some of the women are illustrative rather than representative. The criteria for participant inclusion were:

- aged 50 years or more;
- overseas for 6 months or longer;
- engaged in paid or unpaid work and travel (that was not the result of an international transfer);
- returned to New Zealand for a minimum of 3 months, and within the last 5 years.

All participants were volunteers who responded to an article on the proposed study in both a women's magazine and a newspaper. This initial sample was extended through selected snowballing techniques (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). Participants had travelled and worked in the UK, Europe, the Pacific and Asia.

While there is ambiguity around the term 'older' (Wenger, 2002), the 50 year benchmark was identified as a time when women are likely to be moving on from family responsibilities and approaching personal and professional transitions (Myers & Pringle, 2009). A six-month benchmark for time away was considered an appropriate time period for participants to step out of their previous structures and routines. The return home is driven by many reasons (Inkson & Myers, 2003) and a minimum period of three months was set to give the participant space to adjust and reflect on the time away.

Semi-structured interviews, drawing on a life history and storytelling approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001), were used in this research. The open-ended questions encouraged flexibility across a range of broad topical areas (Gillham, 2000). The life story framework helps make sense of the changing stages, worldviews and identities of the individual participants (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Eliciting participants' ideas in their own words is particularly significant when studying women's stories, ensuring that their experiences are no longer invisible (Simpson & Lewis, 2007; Sandina, 2007). All interviews were carried out by the author (who travelled to various locations throughout New Zealand), recorded on tape and transcribed by a third party.

Content analysis is increasingly recognised as a methodology to identify and understand the critical transitions and processes of human experiences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo & Kyngas, 2007). This research draws primarily on an inductive content analysis approach. The systematic and objective examination of narrative data to develop concepts and categories is particularly appropriate for examining new and emerging phenomena such as older women undertaking SIE (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Elo & Kyngas, 2007).

Findings

Escape and *unfinished business* were key motivations for the SIE. For the majority of the women, their children had left home and parents were being cared for, or had died. For one participant the sense of relief experienced at giving away family and work responsibilities after 30 years was overwhelming:

After 30 years of marriage and several children I left...over 17 months of lawyer meetings and court appearances I devised the reward of a year's working holiday in the UK as a way of keeping sane... (Janet, 55 on departure).

There also appeared to be a sense of escape or closure surrounding employment arrangements. Most participants resigned their positions before leaving for their SIE, having experienced extensive workplace change. Participants generally viewed their careers as being at a plateau. Interestingly, the participants appeared to be careful in managing their voluntary resignations, maintaining personal integrity and keeping options and networks open for the future. On reflection, they saw this as a way to start their SIE unencumbered by ongoing employment responsibilities: 'I had seen it all before...the environment was toxic...and so I left, before I became part of the problem' (Miriam, early 60s on departure).

The desire to travel and work for a period of time was also about following up on unfinished youthful endeavours and dreams. While the participants were looking for adventure, it was also evident that the SIE unfolded within a relatively secure and stable framework. It was important for the participants to live in a location and/or context that gave them a sense of

community and belonging. For example, one participant was based in the same village for the entire SIE and became integrated into the community. Others undertook employment that gave them a home base from which they also took short excursions.

The SIE had been very positive for all participants, although it was not without its challenges. For example, having left friends, family and employment behind, one participant experienced a loss of confidence. For as long as she could remember, her sense of self had been defined by her relationships with others – as a mother, a sister, a daughter. On her SIE it became apparent that many of these relationships were no longer enacted on a daily basis. At that point she began to focus on herself and take responsibility for her own actions, forming different connections central to her newly emerging ‘self.’

In contrast, another participant considered that she had lost her sense of self worth and identity in the years before departure. The children had left home and she lived alone. It was not until she arrived in the United Kingdom and took up her first position caring for an elderly couple that she realised the extent of her previous isolation: ‘I hadn’t realised that my life had become so closed... and lonely’ (Dara, 56 on departure). Living in a new family situation gave the participant the opportunity to rebuild her confidence.

Another key finding was the extent to which the participants described and defined their SIE experiences through the development of new relationships as well as the older relationships they rekindled. Most participants had close family connections overseas, such as children with whom they reconnected in an adult context. Partner relationships were also strengthened. New friends were discovered and nurtured as old friends were rediscovered and connections renewed. While individual SIE highlights included travel and cultural experiences, participants always came back to discussing the people they met and the relationships that were made and were still maintained at a distance several years later: ‘I waited thirty years and I finally found my people... my tribe’ (Greta, 52 on departure).

Expectations relating to post SIE employment or retirement invariably changed on returning home. After a period of resettlement, participants reported they had a more holistic lifestyle. Work is aligned more closely with personal values, priorities and relationships. Thus, the act of ‘working and providing’ as the central core around which life revolved pre-SIE, appears to have been replaced with a core of ‘individual values’ around which personal and professional lives are increasingly fused.

On returning to old friends and family in New Zealand, some participants were unprepared for the consequences of leaving behind new friends, relationships and interests. It is now a matter of ‘new business,’ rather than ‘unfinished business,’ as the women strategise how they can live and work across borders, sustaining new international interests and connections.

Conclusion

Post-SIE, the women have more purposeful lives. Their worlds have opened up and taken new and exciting directions: ‘For me...my river has become so much wider’ (Dawn, 52 on departure).

These preliminary findings suggest that for older women, SIE is a catalyst for a meaningful life transition that stands out as especially significant in the life course (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). This emerging strand of life/career development and theory echoes the societal shifts created by feminists decades ago (Dann, 1985). Second wave feminists in the 20th century opened up pathways for women to move from their private space into a public space and participate in an established economic and social order. SIE has enabled these women to move beyond the private and public domains of their lives, and inhabit an international space to reclaim themselves. For these older women of the twenty-first century, SIE is a search for a

different way of being, outside of the established order. It is a search for a more sustainable and authentic life. It is a time for refocus, renewal and rejuvenation, where 'reirement' becomes the new 'retirement.'

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