**Returning to the familiar, or returning to the foreign?**

**Expectations and experiences of self-initiated repatriating New Zealanders**

**Mid-study presentation**

**Extended abstract**

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A significant proportion of New Zealanders are living abroad of their own volition (self-initiated expatriates (SIEs)), and many are now either returning home (Statistics New Zealand, 2012) or intending to return (Kiwi Expatriate Association, 2011). There is a professional talent shortage in New Zealand, and competition for repatriates is fierce (Watson, 2011). In addition, repatriates brought home by employers experience reverse culture shock (Martin, 1984), which has negative effects on organizations. Understanding the expectations and experiences of self-initiated repatriates (SIRs) is therefore critical.

Empirical studies have found gaps between the expectations and experiences of repatriating international assignees (IAs) (Stroh et al., 1998). In particular, negative career-related outcomes after IA repatriation compound reverse culture shock experiences, especially when expectations are unmet. This also impacts employers through retention difficulties (Paik et al., 2002; Stevens et al., 2006). In the related yet distinct ‘overseas experience’ sojourner (OE) domain, recent research has found elements of reverse culture shock in New Zealander repatriates (Pocock and McIntosh, 2011).

However, it is not yet clear how this knowledge relates to SIRs. Initial research in Ireland suggested work readjustment might be more difficult for SIRs than for IAs (Begley et al., 2008), and a subsequent study found differences in how SIRs are received by French, German and Danish employment markets (Andresen and Walther, 2013). There have been legitimate calls for more SIR work (e.g. Begley et al., 2008; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010).

The present exploratory study is therefore addressing three key research questions; first, how do SIR New Zealanders experience repatriation? Second, how do they cope with re-acculturation? Finally, how does the reality of repatriation compare with pre-repatriation expectations?

To address these questions, an inductive, qualitative approach to building theory is being utilized. This approach enables richness and flexible exploration (Alvesson, 1996) not possible using quantitative methods early in the development of a topic area (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). A sample of 32 SIR New Zealanders has been recruited and is being interviewed twice; in the first phase, before repatriation (for expectations), and in the second phase, after repatriation (for experiences). A staged content analysis supported by NVivo software, and incorporating chunking into thought units, categorizing, and classifying (Cappellen and Janssens, 2010), will precede comparisons with prior theoretical and empirical IA and SIE research.

The phase one interviews have been completed along with some initial analysis. This has revealed participants’ motivations for repatriation, as well as their post-repatriation expectations for work and broader life in New Zealand. In general, the decision to repatriate is usually complex and often frail, with expectations of a superior New Zealand lifestyle balancing negative expectations of lower salaries, a higher cost of living, and difficulty finding work that reflects the skills and experience acquired abroad. In this presentation, the research design and process, the tentative contribution of phase one, and plans for the remainder of the study are discussed.

**Biography**

David R. Ellis is a PhD student in the School of Management at Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand.  Now living in Zurich, Switzerland, he has a Bachelor of Communication Studies from Auckland University of Technology, and a Master of Management (HRM) from Massey University.  He has worked in human resources in the financial services and airline industries in Auckland and London.  His current research is supported by a Massey University Doctoral Scholarship.

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