**Serial Mobility: Self-Initiated Expatriation and Identity**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose**

This study explores highly mobile self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), focusing on the characteristics, motivations, international orientation and national affiliations of those who choose to relocate across national boundaries. It uses identity theory to explore the connection between self-identity and mobility across international borders.

**Design/Methodology/Approach**

A self-report survey administered via the internet was used as a cost effective method of reaching New Zealanders spread throughout the world. A total of 2,430 responses from SIEs were received, of which 346 were serial movers who had relocated internationally 4 or more times. Descriptive statistics provide a snapshot of these serial movers.

**Findings**

Serial movers are relatively young (average age 35.4 years) suggesting that they do not spend long in each country. They are highly educated, with a strong international orientation. Their motivation for mobility is centred on 3 key drivers – career development, economic gain and cultural and travel opportunities. Although the group is male biased, around 40% are women. The majority of these serial movers were partnered, but only 36% had dependents with them in the host country. Nearly 30% of respondents have not finished their international travels, and intend to be living in another country in 5 years’ time.

**Research Limitations/Implications**

There are three key implications for organisations seeking to harness this talent. They must enable the transfer of knowledge so that maximum benefit can be derived from them before they move on. The culture of the organisation must be attractive to these internationally-oriented people and proactive, innovative and responsive HR practices are required to attract and retain this talent. The sample comes from just one country and further research is required to determine if these findings are similar for other serial self-initiated expatriates.

**Originality/Value of the Paper**

The self-initiated movement of highly educated people across international boundaries is becoming increasingly common, and these individuals are the ones with the skills and experience to contribute most to the growing and globalised economy. Serial mobility, is however, a under-researched population, and this paper offers an initial portrayal of this important talent.

**INTRODUCTION**

Globalisation has changed the way the world operates ([Furnham, 2010](#_ENREF_36)). Information technology has exposed people to more of the world, and cheaper travel has meant that they can get there. Today, the self-initiated movement of highly educated people across national boundaries has become common. A developing global labour market and openness to opportunities beyond geographical boundaries has resulted in an increasing number of people changing their social space, and living and working in other countries. New forms of mobility are emerging, including short-term transfers ([Fenwick, 2004](#_ENREF_31)), very long-distance commuting, and frequent excursions ([Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006](#_ENREF_33)).

The importance of this mobility to the global economy stems from its contribution to the creation and diffusion of knowledge ([OECD, 2008](#_ENREF_58)). Individuals take with them their skills and experience, and, when combined with the skills and experiences of others in the host country, new and different approaches can be realised. For the mobile person, there are benefits too, including development of individual competencies ([Dickmann and Harris, 2005](#_ENREF_24), [Myers and Pringle, 2005a](#_ENREF_55), [Doherty and Dickmann, 2009](#_ENREF_26)), the broadening of work and social networks ([Jokinen et al., 2008](#_ENREF_48)) and the opportunity of exploring another culture ([Hippler, 2009](#_ENREF_39), [Inkson and Myers, 2003](#_ENREF_45)).

Self-initiated expatriation (SIE) has been the focus of considerable research recently. A special issue in Career Development International is to be published early in 2013, and three books in the last year have examined different perspectives of SIEs ([Hasleberger and Vaiman, in press](#_ENREF_38), [Reis and Baruch, in press](#_ENREF_62), [Andresen et al., 2012](#_ENREF_4)). There is much discussion in this literature on the precise definition of SIE, but to date, little agreement. Following Doherty et al. ([2013](#_ENREF_28)), the definition of SIE used in this paper consists of three key attributes – that there must be a relocation across a national border (expatriation), the motivation for the move must be driven by the individual (self-initiated), and the intention at the time of the move must be that the move is temporary.

Often, this SIE is viewed as an opportunity to experience living and working in a different country ([Shaffer et al., 2012](#_ENREF_71)), but always with the overall perspective that there will be a return to the home country. Others may find they enjoy the career challenges and lifestyle of the host country and stay there, resulting in what might be an unintentional migration. For others, however, the constant changes and challenges associated with cross-national movements are a key motivating factor, and they move countries frequently.

Researchers have examined SIEs from a number of different angles, including characteristics ([Myers and Pringle, 2005b](#_ENREF_56)), motivation ([Doherty et al., 2011](#_ENREF_27), [Thorn, 2009](#_ENREF_87)), career capital ([Doherty and Dickmann, 2009](#_ENREF_26), [Jokinen et al., 2008](#_ENREF_48)), and gender ([Myers and Pringle, 2005b](#_ENREF_56)). SIEs have been studied from and in specific geographic locations ([Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010](#_ENREF_3), [Crowley-Henry, 2012](#_ENREF_20)), and by occupations ([Richardson, 2012](#_ENREF_64), [Selmer and Lauring, 2010](#_ENREF_70)). The focus of this paper though, is the people who move across borders often. The literature refers to these variously as the chronically mobile ([Nowicka, 2006](#_ENREF_57)), hyper-mobile ([Beaverstock, 2005](#_ENREF_9)), serial expatriates ([Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011](#_ENREF_11)) or the highly mobile ([Forster, 2000](#_ENREF_35)). The extant literature on serial mobility is limited and tends to focus on local mobility ([changing houses, for example Wulff et al., 2010](#_ENREF_90)), intra-country mobility ([moving within a country, Florida, 2008](#_ENREF_34)), frequent business travellers ([Demel and Mayrhofer, 2010](#_ENREF_23)), or the serial mobility of corporate expatriates ([Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011](#_ENREF_11), [Forster, 2000](#_ENREF_35)).

In a world where the primary engine of economic growth is knowledge, it is these individuals with the skills and experience who can contribute most ([Inkson and King, 2011](#_ENREF_44)) . The global labour market means organisations face competition in harnessing this human capital, not only from local organisations, but from organisations throughout the world. But who are these serial movers, and what drives their relocations? The link between mobility and identity is not new, but the literature centres on the experience of mobility and the impact on identity ([Reicher et al., 2006](#_ENREF_61)). Of more significance here, however, in the context of serial mobility, is the much less investigated area of how identity affects whether people will be mobile and why they continue to be mobile. Identity theory provides a framework through which we can examine the highly mobile in more detail.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore highly mobile SIEs, focusing on the characteristics, motivations, international orientation and national affiliations of those who choose to relocate to numerous different countries. We adopt the terms serial movers and serial mobility, and, following Beaverstock ([2005](#_ENREF_9)), we define these as four or more moves across national boundaries. It can include return relocations, provided they are separated by a period of living and working in another country. Our analysis begins at the individual level, but extends to the meso level - the interface between individuals and organisations where the implications of the findings will be so important.

**IDENTITY THEORY**

Identity theory explains social behaviour in terms of the reciprocal relations between self and society ([Burke and Stets, 2009](#_ENREF_12)) and therefore expounds the connection between self-identity and behavioural intention (in this paper, relocation across international boundaries). Identity theory views the self as a multifaceted construct ([Hogg et al., 1995](#_ENREF_40)) consisting of personal, societal, and collective perspectives ([Sussman, 2000](#_ENREF_76)). Personal identity includes traits, states or behaviours of the person (for example, I am capable, I am confident) ([Triandis, 1989](#_ENREF_89)). People also apply role identities to themselves, reflecting their relationships or the positions they occupy in society (I am a professional, a partner, a parent). Collective identity reflects how the individual construes themselves in term of their connection to social groups (I am a member of a tennis club, a professional organisation). Some aspects of the self-concept may have more importance than others, and the salience of each may alter through time and in a cross-cultural context ([Triandis, 1989](#_ENREF_89)).

Research on identity has been a considerable focus in sociology, psychology and organisational studies, examining how “individuals define and locate themselves” ([Sluss and Ashforth, 2007, p. 9](#_ENREF_72)). Its application is limited in the management field, although there is recen and growing research on organisational identity ([Sartore-Baldwin and Walker, 2011](#_ENREF_67), [Tanis and Beukeboom, 2011](#_ENREF_80)). Identity theory has been discussed briefly in the expatriation literature, from both a corporate ([De Cieri et al., 2009](#_ENREF_21)) and a mobility perspective ([Tharenou, 2010](#_ENREF_84)). Identity and SIE has only been mentioned. Here, therefore, we briefly consider some factors that contribute to the three aspects of self that can help us to understand why self-initiated expatriates are mobile, and particularly, why they are serial movers. The personal identity consists of the personal goals of the individual and their belief in their ability to transfer across countries effectively. It incorporates the motivation driving their mobility and their openness to boundary-crossing mobility (international orientation). Role identity incorporates the demographic characteristics (occupation, age, gender, partnerships and dependents) that tend to be the basis for the roles people have and their subsequent mobility. The collective component for the SIE relates to their sense of belonging and their affiliation with the home or host country. In the next section, we examine literature on SIEs on these factors, and the potential implications for serial mobility. We begin with the factor we think might be most salient in a study on frequent international talent flow – the collective self.

**The Collective Self**

Citizenship is a significant dimension of the collective self ([Hussain and Bagguley, 2005](#_ENREF_42)). A person will categorize themselves as a citizen of a national group, thereby distinguishing themselves from other national groups ([Tharenou, 2010](#_ENREF_84)). Citizenship is therefore about inclusion and exclusion – being part of the “in-group” or not ([Cameron, 2004](#_ENREF_13)). Many countries enable citizens to have secondary citizenship from another country. The adoption of such a status suggests a strong connection with that country; a connection that may indicate an end to mobility. In the case of serial mobility, it is even more likely that applying for citizenship signals the intention to remain in that country.

**Roles**

The roles people hold as part of their identity also influence mobility and serial mobility. A person who identifies strongly as a careerist may be constantly seeking employment prospects abroad. Promotion opportunities, a broader range of opportunities and professional development are frequently advanced as drivers for mobility ([Moran et al., 2005](#_ENREF_52), [Stahl et al., 2002](#_ENREF_74)). Conradson and Latham ([2005](#_ENREF_17)), for example, in their studies on New Zealand professionals in London, found that mobility is an intentional and deliberate element of a career strategy.

Obtaining other career skills can positively motivate people to be mobile. German managers view their international experience as an opportunity to improve their managerial and intercultural skills ([Stahl et al., 2002](#_ENREF_74)). Tharenou and colleague’s research ([2003](#_ENREF_82), [Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010](#_ENREF_85)) on the propensity of Australians to be mobile across national boundaries also identifies the opportunity to improve generic and transferable skills as a desirable outcome of mobility.

The impact of dual careers on mobility is an important issue. Dual careers, where both people in the relationship are in employment, are a major obstacle to mobility ([Ackers, 2003](#_ENREF_1)) and continued mobility. Complicating factors including work permit restrictions, lost promotion opportunities, the difficulty of obtaining career positions for two specialised professionals, and the financial implications of reducing to one income ([Harvey et al., 2009](#_ENREF_37)). Ackers ([2005](#_ENREF_2)) suggests that simple formulaic approaches are not appropriate for explaining the moves in dual career households. Further, although there is increasing equality between women and men in professional careers, this has yet to translate into the woman taking the lead role in mobility ([Raghuram, 2004](#_ENREF_60)), with women more likely to give way to the careers of their male partners ([Ackers, 2003](#_ENREF_1)).

Family and friends, and a person’s connectedness to them, can limit mobility. Inkson et al. ([2004](#_ENREF_43)) suggest that it is the single most important motive determining global mobility. This finding is reinforced by Cappellen and Janssens’ ([2005](#_ENREF_14)) and Crowley-Henry’s ([2007](#_ENREF_19)) calls for more research on the impact of relationships in the theorisation of mobility. SIEs, by definition, have already made the decision to relocate, and have enacted it. Perhaps those with the strongest ties are those who have not moved and are still in the home country. SIEs, and particularly the serial movers, are perhaps demonstrating weaker ties to the homeland ([Richardson and McKenna, 2006](#_ENREF_65)) than those who have not left.

Being in a relationship is another role which impacts mobility. The limited literature available on SIE suggests that there are proportionately more singles among this group than for expatriates ([Suutari and Brewster, 2000](#_ENREF_78)), partly as a response to the additional risks of moving without the guarantee of a job and associated benefits or possibly as a result of freedom from familial ties. Serial movers are also likely to fit this pattern, especially given the multitude of moves undertaken.

Relationships reduce the probability of remaining permanently in the host nation and increase the likelihood of returning to the home country ([Dustmann, 2003](#_ENREF_30)), unless the marriage is to a host national ([Scott, 2004](#_ENREF_68), [Banai and Harry, 2005](#_ENREF_6)). In the context of the serial mover, a move to the partner’s home country may indicate a cessation of mobility or a decision to become established in that country.

Children have also been shown to hinder mobility ([Morano-Foadi, 2005](#_ENREF_53)). Linehan’s ([2002, p. 809](#_ENREF_50)) interviews with women managers reveals that 62% of respondents have experienced more difficulties moving internationally with children than as a single person. The age of the children is an important determinant in both the choice to be mobile, and the destination ([Banai and Harry, 2005](#_ENREF_6)). Suutari ([2003](#_ENREF_77)), for example, details the difficulties experienced by professionals taking their teenagers abroad, away from their friends and social networks, and integrating them into new schools and education systems. Moving children multiple times would exacerbate these difficulties, and hence children are likely to be a major obstacle to serial mobility.

Other demographic variables impact on the various roles we have across the life cycle. Numerous studies have identified gender as a variable which has an impact on whether or not a person will be globally mobile (see, for example, [Stahl et al., 2002](#_ENREF_74), [Tharenou, 2008](#_ENREF_83)), but few of these have produced empirical data. Suutari and Brewster ([2000](#_ENREF_78)) were the first to suggest that the ratio of men to women self-initiating their mobility is likely to be more even than the male dominated realm of corporate expatriation, and this has recently been reaffirmed by the OECD ([2008](#_ENREF_58)). Single women without children are more likely to self-initiate their mobility ([Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2009](#_ENREF_32), [Thang et al., 2002](#_ENREF_81)). Those with dependents may be more likely to identify with stability and focus on the non-work related roles of their identities ([Pringle and Mallon, 2003](#_ENREF_59)) which may also be the scenario for serial movers.

**The Personal Self**

*Motivation*

Linking identity theory with mobility suggests that people move in response to underlying personal needs and goals. Hence, the drivers for mobility reflect the aspirations of the individual (for example, I am career focused, I like challenges). The literature on motives for SIE identifies clusters of key factors, termed here economics, career, cultural and travel opportunities, relationships, quality of life, and the political environment ([Doherty, 2010](#_ENREF_25), [Jackson et al., 2005](#_ENREF_47)). While corporate expatriates relocate primarily in response to economic and career motives, SIEs move for a broad range of reasons including the experience of living in another country, the opportunity for personal development and the appeal of a particular location ([Doherty et al., 2011](#_ENREF_27), [Thorn, 2009](#_ENREF_87)). The key drivers for serial movers are likely to be career, economic and culture and travel opportunities. If the primary driver is relationships, this might encourage repatriation to the home country to re-establish social networks. Repatriation or further moves may be limited however, if either quality of life or political reasons are primary drivers to a particular location.

*International Orientation*

SIEs are likely to be drawn to international experiences ([Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010](#_ENREF_15)), having an international orientation - a desire to work with different cultures, a focus on the location of the work rather than the specific nature of the work, and a desire to work in an international environment ([Suutari and Taka, 2004](#_ENREF_79)). For some, this international focus may have existed since youth ([Selmer and Lam, 2004](#_ENREF_69)), resulting in a desire to develop their careers in an international context ([Stahl and Cerdin, 2004](#_ENREF_73)). Serial movers are likely to relate to this construct more strongly, having an openness to the global environment.

**New Zealand as a Case Study of Serial Mobility**

New Zealand presents a particularly good case study for the examination of the serial mobility ([Inkson and Thorn, 2010](#_ENREF_46)) for four reasons. First, the flow of New Zealanders to other countries has long been a concern to the Government. Over the last 10 years, more New Zealanders have left the country than returned, with a total deficit over this period of 270,000 people ([Statistics New Zealand, 2010](#_ENREF_75)). Second, New Zealanders have a reputation as being a nation of travellers ([Bedford, 2001](#_ENREF_10)). Geographical isolation is perhaps one of the main drivers for this mobility, although colonial legacies to the United Kingdom, a high percentage of first generation New Zealanders ([Liebig and Widmaier, 2009](#_ENREF_49)) and the limitations of a small economy ([McCarter, 2001](#_ENREF_51)) are also motivating factors.

Third, and perhaps as a result of the above, New Zealand has an established culture of the “Big OE” (Overseas Experience) where young people leave the country for two or three years, primarily to travel and explore different cultures ([Conradson and Latham, 2007](#_ENREF_18)). Most intend to return ([Myers and Inkson, 2003](#_ENREF_54)), although career opportunities or romantic involvements sometimes intervene.

Finally, it is recognized that the empirical literature on self-initiated mobility is limited ([Dorsch et al., 2012](#_ENREF_29)). The most recent evaluation of the extant literature, however, reveals that 14 of the 27 academic articles on self-initiated expatriation published between 1996 and 2008 originated from researchers in New Zealand ([Doherty, 2010](#_ENREF_25)). Hence, much of the theory currently developed has stemmed from this population. The focus can now turn to a sub-group of this population, the serial movers.

**METHOD**

Self-initiated expatriates who display serial mobility are an economically important subset, but one which has yet to be researched. A quantitative approach was therefore appropriate to harness as much information as possible about this population. A self-report survey administered via the internet was used as a cost effective method of reaching a population spread throughout the world. Initial contacts were made to professional organisations and alumni, asking them to promote the online survey through their databases. A similar appeal was made through the New Zealand media, asking New Zealanders to promote the survey to family and friends living and working abroad. Of the total 3,404 responses received, 2,430 were deemed to be self-initiated expatriates, and 346 fitted the definition of serial movers, having relocated four or more times. ([Beaverstock, 2005](#_ENREF_9)) .

*Measures*

Citizenship

Citizenship was measured using a single item measure, in which respondents were asked what citizenship/s they currently held. The opportunity to provide multiple responses was incorporated into the survey format. After being asked about their marital status, respondents were also requested to identify the citizenship/s of their partners.

Demographic Characteristics

We collected information about a wide range of demographic variables. Wherever possible, the data was collected at the base level (eg in what year were you born?, how many dependents do you have?) to provide maximum power to the analysis. Where there was a finite number of responses, drop down boxes were used to speed the response time for the participants. The demographic variables of relevance to this paper include age, gender, marital status, number of dependents, and education level.

Motivational Factors

Respondents were asked to identify the broad motivational factors that influenced their last decision to relocate internationally. An iterative scale was used, with respondents allocating 100 points between the six motivational categories, allowing respondents to prioritize the relative importance of these motives in their decision-making.

International Orientation

The five components of an international orientation were included with a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree (1) to Strongly Disagree (7). For the analysis, scores have been reverse coded to provide more intuitive information, with the higher scores representing the most agreement with each statement.

Future Mobility Intentions

Respondents were asked where they thought they would be living in five years time. The original question provided three possible answers – in the current country, in New Zealand or in another country. This was later transformed into a binomial response, so that someone who thought they would be in the current country would register a ‘yes’ (a value of 1) for that response, and a ‘no’ (a value of 0) for the other responses.

*Analysis*

In an exploratory study where there is no previous research, the focus must be one of gaining a baseline of information which can subsequently be expanded. Here, we have provided descriptive statistics to create a snapshot of these serial movers. Some demographic characteristics of the serial movers in this study are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Demographic Characteristics of respondents**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Gender (n=139) | Male | 190 (57.7%) |
| Female | 139 (42.3%) |
| Average age | | 35.4 years (s.d. = 9.7) |
| Marital Status (n=336) | Partnered | 230 (68.5%) |
| Single | 106 (31.5%) |
| Education Level (n=342) | Trade Certificate | 17 (5.0%) |
| Advanced Trade Certificate | 20 (5.8%) |
| Certificate or Diploma | 40 (11.7%) |
| Bachelor’s degree | 137 (40.1%) |
| Post graduate qualification | 94 (27.5%) |
| PhD | 34 (9.9%) |

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**The Collective Self**

By far the majority of serial movers were current New Zealand citizens (96.5%), although only 88.2% were actually born in the country (Table 2). This suggests that around 12% of these serial movers had moved to New Zealand with family at a young age, and perhaps their interest in other countries was piqued by their early mobility experiences ([Banai and Harry, 2005](#_ENREF_6)). Around a third of respondents had a second citizenship alongside their New Zealand one.

**Table 2 – Citizenship of Respondents**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Citizenship (n=310) | | Number | % |
|  | New Zealand | 299 | 96.5 |
|  | Other | 11 | 3.5 |
| Country of Birth (n=346) | |  |  |
|  | New Zealand | 305 | 88.2 |
|  | Other | 41 | 11.8 |
| Second citizenship n=346) | | | |
|  | Yes | 119 | 34.4 |
|  | No | 227 | 65.6 |

Table 3 shows a further breakdown of this information, showing the relationship between citizenship and intention for continued mobility. Half of the people who had obtained citizenship of the country in which they were residing were intending to stay in that country for at least five years. The remainder were fairly evenly split between a return to New Zealand and moving on to yet another country. Those who did not have citizenship of the host country demonstrated a greater propensity to keep moving. Hence, if these serially mobile people had identified with a host country to the extent that they felt they were part of the ‘in-group’ ([Cameron, 2004](#_ENREF_13)), and had gone through the political procedures to obtain citizenship, they appeared less likely to engage in future mobility.

**Table 3 – Relationship between Citizenship and Intention to be Mobile**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Respondent* | Citizen of country  of residence (n=62) | Not a citizen of country  of residence (n=250) |
| Current country | 31 (50.0%) | 99 (39.5%) |
| New Zealand | 17 (27.4%) | 75 (30.0%) |
| Other country | 14 (22.6%) | 74 (29.6%) |
| *Partner* | Partner a citizen of country  of residence (n=104) | Partner not a citizen of country  of residence (n=124) |
| Current country | 60 (57.7%) | 48 (38.7%) |
| New Zealand | 29 (27.9)% | 37 (29.8%) |
| Other country | 15 (14.4)% | 39 (31.5%) |

**Roles**

While the collective self involves belonging to a particular group, the roles people enact and the relationships people have as part of their identity can also impact mobility. Age and gender influence these roles. Previous research has indicated that SIEs tend to be a heterogenous group, with a range of ages and a fairly even mix between women and men ([Thorn and Inkson, 2012](#_ENREF_88)). This is reflected here amongst the serial movers. Interestingly, given the correlation between age and mobility, the average age of 35 seems young for people who have relocated so many times. Although not a component of this research, an analysis of the age at which they first left the home country could be informative on this point.

It is important to realise that any research on SIEs automatically excludes those who have not left the country and who perhaps have the greatest affiliation to people in the home country. The people we are examining here, therefore, have already disassociated from their wider families and friends in the homeland. However, most SIEs, and indeed most serial movers in this research, relocate with their partners (Table 1). Nearly 70% of the respondents were with their partners in the current country while the remainder were single. This finding is surprising, given two factors. First, frequent relocations are difficult ([Forster, 2000](#_ENREF_35)), and relocating with a partner, particularly where there are dual careers ([Ackers, 2005](#_ENREF_2)), adds another complexity. Second, these serial movers are SIEs, relocating without the assistance of an organisation and without the networks expected in corporate expatriations ([Collings et al., 2011](#_ENREF_16)). Hence, it might have been expected that multiple mobility was the domain of the single person, but this is not the case.

Being in a relationship with a host country national, however, clearly hinders mobility for the serially mobile, with 57.7% of respondents intending to remain in the current country (Table 3). The comparable statistic for those with a partner but without citizenship is 38.7%. This finding lends empirical support to the supposition of Banai and Harry ([2005](#_ENREF_6)) and Scott ([2004](#_ENREF_68)).

Similarly, the role of being a parent with dependents was anticipated to limit mobility. Certainly, only 36.5% of serial movers had dependents (Table 4), but this percentage differs little from broader studies of SIEs ([Thorn, 2008](#_ENREF_86)), implying that children do not limit serial mobility. What is interesting, however, is that 45% of men have dependents living with them, while only 25% of women do. Further, for those serial movers who have children, the mode is two children for men, while for women the mode is one. This finding shows support for Barker and Monk’s ([1998](#_ENREF_7)) much earlier study suggesting that children restrict a woman’s mobility more than a man’s.

**Table 4 – Dependents of Respondents**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dependents | | Number | % |
|  | Yes | 113 | 36.5 |
|  | No | 197 | 63.5 |
| Gender | |  |  |
|  | Male (n=177) | 80 | 45.2 |
|  | Female (n=132) | 33 | 25.0 |
| Average Number of dependents | | | |
|  | Male | 1.86 (s.d.=0.81) | |
|  | Female | 1.48 (s.d.=0.71) | |

Children also impact on intention to be mobile. Respondents without dependents were equally divided on where they thought they would be living in five years (Table 5), but for those with dependents, nearly twice the number of respondents expected to be in the current country, ruling out plans for further mobility in the next period. Children not only impact on mobility, but they would also seem to have an impact on parent’s identity, as indicated by citizenship. Of those who have children, 26.4% are citizens of the resident country, while only 16.9% of those who do not have children have obtained citizenship. This extends Banai and Harry’s ([2005](#_ENREF_6)) finding on the impact of children on the SIE into the realm of serial movers.

**Table 5 – Relationship between Dependents, Intention to be Mobile and Citizenship**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Dependents (n=111) | No dependents (n=197) |
| Current country | 69 (62.2%) | 62 (31.5%) |
| New Zealand | 24 (21.6%) | 69 (35.0%) |
| Other country | 18 (16.2%) | 66 (33.5%) |
|  |  |  |
| *Citizenship of:* | Dependents (n=110) | No dependents (n=183) |
| Country of Residence | 60 (57.7%) | 48 (38.7%) |
| Other | 29 (27.9)% | 37 (29.8%) |

**The Personal Self**

Mobility may be one way a person meets their objectives or goals. The motivation for the last relocation is shown in Figure 1. Clearly, career development, economic gains and cultural and travel opportunities dominate the motivation list as they did for SIEs in Thorn’s ([2009](#_ENREF_87)) research. In fact, the motivation for serial movers is not significantly different from other SIEs. In terms of identity, however, it is interesting to delve further into the data and examine the effect of identify on mobility. Hence, for example, if an individual considered they were a careerist, and their key driver for mobility was career development and opportunities, how does this impact on their propensity to be mobile? Table 6 shows this analysis, and there are a number of interesting factors.

**Figure 1 – Motivation for Mobility**

**Table 6 – Intention to be Mobile by Greatest Motivating Factor**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Economics | | Career | | Culture | | Relationships | | Quality of  Life | | Political Environment | |
|  | n | *%* | n | *%* | n | *%* | n | *%* | n | *%* | n | *%* |
| Current country | 38 | *34.9* | 54 | *52.4* | 24 | *30.0* | 36 | *48.6* | 19 | *70.4* | 4 | *36.4* |
| New Zealand | 44 | *40.4* | 23 | *22.3* | 28 | *35.0* | 26 | *35.1* | 3 | *11.1* | 2 | *18.2* |
| Other country | 27 | *24.8* | 26 | *25.2* | 28 | *35.0* | 12 | *16.2* | 5 | *18.5* | 5 | *45.5* |

Respondents who were motivated by economic factors are the most likely to return to New Zealand within five years. Their mobility, therefore, would seem to be driven by opportunities for increased earnings from lucrative international postings, but always with the intention of returning to the home country. Those motivated by career, relationships and quality of life are most likely to remain in their current countries. One interpretation of this is that a move for a particular job, or to be nearer family (or with a partner in their home country) implies some stability, and a reluctance to move away from that. Similarly, if the motivation for a move was to obtain a better quality of life, then the move was probably carefully planned to ensure that these needs were maximised.

Respondents who were motivated by cultural and travel opportunities had mixed intentions for the future. Some had obviously not finished exploring and were anticipating other countries to live in, some were preparing for a return to New Zealand, while the final third were establishing within the current country. An identity as an explorer or adventurist, which might be expected to result in the greatest mobility, may be influenced by a number of other factors such as work permits ([Richardson and Zikic, 2007](#_ENREF_66)), family responsibilities ([Baruch et al., 2007](#_ENREF_8)) or a satiation of the desire to be adventurous ([Richards and Wilson, 2004](#_ENREF_63)). Very few respondents identified the political environment as a driving factor, so it is difficult to generalise about these findings. However, what is interesting is that nearly half anticipated moving to yet another country, perhaps implying that the political environment they had moved to was less than desired.

The final component of the serial mover’s identity relates to their international orientation and the average scores for each factor are shown in Table 7. Data from a previous study on SIEs who have moved between one and three times ([Thorn, 2008](#_ENREF_86)) is also shown as a comparison. The scores for all five factors are higher (showing more agreement), with significant differences noted for three of these. Recognising that SIEs would be expected to have a greater international orientation than people who had never lived and worked abroad, these serial movers show a further level of affiliation with the global world. In terms of identity, this suggests that these respondents may feel a “sense of ease” ([Reicher et al., 2006, p. 269](#_ENREF_61)) in whichever country they are in, and do not experience the sense of exclusion of being in a host country ([Cameron, 2004](#_ENREF_13)).

**Table 7 – International Orientation**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Factor* | *Mean* | |  |
|  | Serial Movers | 1-3 moves | *p* |
| From a young child, my dream was to work abroad | 4.41 | 4.10 |  |
| I am most fulfilled working with people from a range of cultures in an international environment | 5.16 | 4.83 | *\*p*<.05 |
| I seek out work opportunities by the country they are in rather than the specific nature of the job | 3.6 | 3.33 |  |
| I feel successful in my career only if I continue to develop new professional skills that can be utilised in an international context | 4.48 | 4.42 | *\*p*<.05 |
| Having a career that permits me to experience different cultures is important to me | 50.8 | 4.77 | *\*p*<.05 |

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS**

There are three key implications for organisations seeking to harness this highly mobile global talent – enabling transfer of knowledge, organisational culture and proactive human resource practices. The serial mover epitomises the boundaryless career, enacting their own careers across international borders ([Arthur and Rousseau, 1996](#_ENREF_5)). As mobile individuals, they acquire career capital ([Defillippi and Arthur, 1994](#_ENREF_22)) which is available to organisations, offering accumulated and creative ideas for ways of doing and thinking. However, the reality with these serial movers is that they may relocate to yet another job and country. The organisation must therefore derive maximum benefit from these people during their employment, and where possible, institutionalise the knowledge as insurance against departure ([Thorn and Inkson, 2012](#_ENREF_88)).

The culture of the organisation is also important for attracting and retaining talent ([Inkson and King, 2011](#_ENREF_44)), particularly for serial movers. These people identify as part of a global phenomenon, with a strong international orientation, and the culture of the organisation must reflect this. A partisan or parochial approach may result in a feeling of exclusion, and a lack of identification with the organisation.

This analysis of the impact of identity on serial mobility also provides some insight for ways in which an innovative and responsive HR team might encourage retention ([Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010](#_ENREF_41)). These people are probably highly adaptive, having managed many international changes, but HR could ease the transition, providing guidance on housing and schooling and enabling work permits where required for spouses. Citizenship of the country of residence appears to limit future mobility, so organisations could think about sponsoring employees or encouraging them to become citizens. Propensity to be mobile is influenced by personal motivation, so understanding what drives the employee could be an important component for developing packages aimed to retain the person. Innovative technological approaches, such as enabling the worker to live in another country while still working for the organisation, might provide a compromise between a desire to relocate and continuing employment.

**CONCLUSION**

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it provides information on the characteristics of a previously under researched group – those who display self-initiated serial mobility. Demographically, they are a young group, fairly evenly split by gender, partnered, but often without children. Although this study focused on highly educated SIEs, this group was particularly well educated with a disproportionately large number having university qualifications. The absence of their combined talent from a small economy like New Zealand is significant.

Second, this paper draws on identity theory to examine how identity and mobility are inter-related. Factors hindering further mobility include citizenship of the current country, a partner with citizenship of the current country, and the presence of children in the household. These respondents demonstrated a particularly strong international orientation which may have driven their serial mobility. Motivation also impacted mobility and the propensity for future mobility.

Finally, while the research is drawn from data at the individual level, the implications for the meso organisational level are identified. Innovative and creative strategies are required to attract and harness this talent, and to transfer their knowledge to the organisation efficiently, before they move on to their next location.

SIE is undoubtedly increasing, as individuals enact their own careers across international boundaries, and, for serial SIEs, across multiple international boundaries. This paper presents preliminary findings on serial mobility, and raises the need for further investigation. Interviews with serial movers could reveal in-depth information about the process of identification and the reasons for their mobility. Further examination of intention to be mobile and actual mobility is needed ([Doherty et al., 2011](#_ENREF_27)). Also from a temporal perspective, more information could be obtained on changing motivations over time – do serial movers become exhausted by the continual change, and settle down? Who or what facilitates that outcome? Finally, this generation has been about globalisation, about breaking down the international boundaries that have existed for so long. What will happen in the next generation? Will continual relocation as a child create an adult in search of a different form of identity? These aspects have yet to be investigated.

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