

Volunteer Self-Initiated Expatriation: alternative career development pathways for older women?

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Introduction.

Rapid changes in Information technology and the impact on radio, television and social media provide a 'real time' experience of international news and events. The 2005 Tsunami affecting numerous countries bordering the Indian Ocean and the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes beamed into our lounges on a daily basis creating a heightened awareness of the disasters and the consequent need for disaster relief. As individuals in developed nations become increasingly aware of global disadvantage, oppression and inequality and the widening gap between rich and poor, many are moved to volunteer their services to help at a local, national or international level.

International volunteering, a "period of engagement and contribution by individuals who volunteer across an international border," (Moore, Lough and Sherraden, 2012, p 970), appears to be on the increase on a global scale. Generally the volunteer is from a developed country, moving to a third world country. In the United States, the increased stipend support for international service as a result of the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, has resulted in an increase of international volunteers (Lough, 2010). In New Zealand the rate of increase is not known as New Zealand citizens volunteer through a range of international organisations and agencies. In a recent study of international volunteers recruited by Australian Volunteers International (AVI), a number of New Zealanders were included in the volunteer numbers (Fee and Gray, 2011). However NZ Volunteer Service Abroad celebrated 50 years of international service in 2012 and has supported 3500 volunteers overseas during that time (<http://www.vsa.org.nz/blog/vsa-in-the-news/in-the-news-october-2012>).

Research suggests that international volunteer work may serve as an 'accidental skills factory' (Fee and Gray, 2011) that develops valuable professional knowledge and skills (Hudson and Inkson, 2006; Thomas 2001). However much of the literature on international volunteerism focusses on project evaluation and the individuals who do the actual work remain invisible and silent (Andresen and Gustschin, 2012).

This paper focusses on the career outcomes of five New Zealand international volunteers. The volunteers are older women (50 plus) who have resigned from jobs or wound up businesses to become an international volunteer at a time of life when women (and men) are expected to continue in paid work. They are part of a larger study of 21 older women who undertake Self-Initiated Expatriation (SIE), a period of travel and work in another country. These women appear to simultaneously challenge traditional expectations of older women and the male norm of a continuous career (Myers, 2011).

Preliminary findings suggests that while significant personal and professional development accrue from the international volunteer experience, the post volunteer employment experience is often challenging for these older women. In a time of significant demographic change, there are lessons to be learned for individuals contemplating retirement or a career break and undertaking international volunteer service, and for employers who are recruiting and managing older workers.

Literature

SIE, Careers and Volunteerism

Assigned expatriates (AE), employees of Multi National Enterprises who are sent abroad have long been the focus of researchers in the field of careers and International Human Resource Management. This type of international work experience differs from the SIE experience and the migrant experience and there is a growing body of literature focussing on the differentiation of these terms (Al Ariss, 2010; Briscoe, Schuler & Claus, 2009 and Andresen, Bergdolt & Margenfeld, 2012)

However those who initiate their own international experience, a self-initiated experience, (SIE) are less understood. The nomenclature of SIE covers a range of SIE experiences (Sutaari and Brewster, 2000; Inkson and Myers, 2003; Richardson and McKenna, 2002; Briscoe, Schuler & Claus, 2009 and Selmar & Luring, 2011). Despite the increasing numbers of published articles on self-initiated expatriates, the field is under-researched and under-theorised (Doherty, Richardson & Thorn, 2013; Andresen & Gustschin, 2012).

The term SIE reflects a broad range of self-initiated experiences and recent debate in the field has centred on definitional issues and establishing greater “construct clarity” (Inkson & Richardson, 2010; Doherty, Richardson & Thorn, 2013 p 1). Andresen and Gustschin (2012) argue that international volunteer/development workers are not assigned expatriates as their motivations and experiences are more aligned with the features of a self-initiated experience. Doherty, Richardson & Thorn (2013) depict a range of international experiences on a spectrum of global mobility. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term ‘volunteer SIE’ as I believe the five volunteers in this in-depth study illustrate aspects across the categories of the ‘organisational SIE’, the ‘SIE’ and ‘OE’ (overseas experience) as per Doherty, Richardson and Thorn’s ‘spectrum of global mobility.’

There is very little research on the volunteer SIE (Andresen and Gustschin, 2012) especially from the perspective of the individual older volunteer. Hudson and Inkson (2006) report on a

longitudinal study of 48 New Zealand volunteers exploring motivations, volunteer experiences, and the impact on personal and professional development. This study appears to be the first in the New Zealand context that considers the impact on individual volunteers. While making a significant contribution to volunteer theory, the longer term outcomes for personal and career development remain unknown as the final data was gathered one month after the volunteer assignment finished.

While career motivations may not be the key driver to undertaking SIE, the actual SIE impacts on career at the individual level in terms of career aspirations and outcomes, during and after the SIE (Inkson & Myers, 2003). It is argued that career is integral to the SIE experience, albeit in a more broad and implicit way than the formally assigned expatriate experience. Doherty, Richardson & Thorn (2013), suggest that the intersection of SIE and career theory provides a valuable integrative theoretical framework for understanding and theorising SIE. They further suggest that the concepts of the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau (1996), and subsequent critiques of this concept, (Pringle & Mallon, 2003; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh & Roper, 2012) as well as the concept of the 'intelligent career' (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994) have relevance for the study of SIE.

Andresen and Gustschin (2012) point to Hall's concept of the protean career (1996, 2004) as especially appropriate for examining the international volunteer assignment as the holistic nature of the protean concept encompasses relevant 'volunteer' values, attitudes and motives. Tharenou (2010a) draws on 'SIE', 'careers', 'womens' careers' and 'gender literature' to explore women's SIEs while Myers (2011) draws on these literatures to examines the lives of older women who go on a SIE.

Older workers.

Population ageing, labour market trends and social policy suggest that older workers will be recruited and retained in increasing numbers to meet predicted labour market demands (Alpass & Mortimer, 2007). Older women in particular are facing a markedly different future than their foremothers with increased life expectancy, longer career spans, increasing responsibilities inside and outside the home and greater financial demands (Davey, 2006). While age and employment are growing research areas (Duncan & Loretto, 2004), there is a dearth of research on the individual experiences of older women (O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005).

This research examines the motivations, experiences and outcomes of a volunteer SIE undertaken by five older women. The older women in this study appear to be 'at odds' with traditional and contemporary expectations of women. They are following different paths on

their individual journey with outcomes that not only impact on their own lives and careers but are also relevant to the organisations that they may potentially join on their return.

Research Methods

This research builds on a previous study of younger New Zealanders (average age 24) undertaking SIE (Inkson and Myers, 2003; Myers and Pringle, 2005) drawing on a similar interview structure and recruitment processes. However, the current study examines the life and later career transitions of 21 older women who undertook SIE. This article focusses solely on the five participants who went on a volunteer SIE to work in a range of development roles in the Pacific, Asia and Africa.

In order to qualify for the study participants were required to be aged 50 years or more, to have been overseas for at least 6 months, to have engaged in paid or unpaid work and travel (that was not the result of an international transfer) and returned to New Zealand for a minimum of 3 months, and within the last 5 years.

The semi structured interviews were 'in-depth' drawing on a life story and story telling approach (Cole and Knowles, 2001) to help understand the changing perspectives and identities of the participants. (McAdams and Bowman, 2001; Myers, 2011).

The analysis drew on a narrative inquiry framework and particularly McCormick's concept of 'interpretive stories', (2004) in Bold's chapter 'Analysing Narrative Data', (2012) where stories are created in stages.

Volunteers

The volunteers had assignments in Africa, Laos, Timor, Cambodia and Papua New Guinea. The age at departure of the five 'volunteer SIE' participants ranged from 51 to 55 for their first volunteer assignment. Three volunteers were away for approximately 2 years and two volunteers were away for approximately 4 years.

Findings

Motivations for a volunteer SIE

The desire to undertake a volunteer SIE was driven by a number of factors. The search for a more edgy adventure and the wish to live in another culture were the more dominant drivers while a philosophical commitment to 'volunteering in the third world' was a lesser reason.

“No, I’m not Mother Teresa, I’m not altruistic about the fact that it’s overseas - the overseas bit adds the hint of adventure really... it’s that hint of adventure of learning to be in another culture, of living in a different society.” Leonie

This is consistent with Hudson and Inkson (2006) who argue that there are many motives for undertaking international volunteer work. In contrast Andresen and Gustschin (2012) suggest that altruism is the overriding reason as it is the ‘essence’ of volunteering. Andresen and Gustschin (2012) also suggest six general categories of motivation: values, understanding, enhancement, career, social and protective (i.e the need to address negativity or personal issues). Additional studies suggest religious convictions also are an aspect of the complex motivational factors (Andresen and Gustschin., 2012).

Although the volunteers wanted a challenge, it was an ‘adventure’ in another culture that was the dominant motivator. While SIE outcomes for the volunteers may have impacted on their values, enhancement/development, career, social and protective categories to varying degrees, the need for an adventure and change was paramount. In this respect the motivations for undertaking a volunteer SIE are more consistent with the findings of Inkson and Myers (2003) in their study of younger people undertaking a SIE. The older women were adamant that the volunteer was not solely or explicitly about career enhancement and development.

Interestingly the literature on volunteer SIE motivation focusses on the influence of the ‘pull’ factors and appears to give more limited cognisance to ‘push’ factors. ‘Push’ factors are negative circumstances that drive one out of a particular work situation. In contrast a ‘pull’ factor is a more positive attribute or circumstance that encourages a person to either stay in or leave the workforce (Shultz, Morton & Weckerle, 1998). Four of the older women in this study talked to varying degrees of their disenchantment and dissatisfaction with their careers. These four women were in senior consultant HR and management roles working in large government and private organisations. They were tired of being involved in constant organisational restructuring and downsizing and felt there was little opportunity for development and growth in their current roles and they were not interested in moving into senior management and CEO roles.

“I’d gone into Human Resources thinking it was actually a ‘people-focussed’ industry but in the corporate and government departments I found it was extremely ‘process-focussed’ and the people actually didn’t count very much. And I ended up being in situations that I disliked around restructuring and having empathy with the people but having to be the slaves of the corporate bosses.” Cathy

My working life was starting to tick over I guess...after two years of that I kind of went 'oh, okay, so what's new?' I thought I'd probably leave, although I didn't really want to but I also didn't particularly want to join the senior management... it wasn't something that I was really passionate about... Sally

Thus dissatisfaction with career and the fact that they were relatively free of family ties suggests that 'push' factors and aspects of 'timing' re the life stage are very much part of a broader picture when considering the motivations of older women undertaking a volunteer SIE. Given the predominance of the push factors in this group it is not surprising that the search for excitement and a more edgy adventure were such strong initial motivations for undertaking a volunteer SIE, especially when participants had been raised in an era when girls were not expected or encouraged to push their boundaries.

When I left school I went to my head mistress once I'd got my University place and said, 'Well, I actually don't want to go to University yet because I want to do a year's VSA' and she said 'oh, don't be ridiculous girl, you don't know anything about life and you'll be no use to anybody at your age.' Sally

Two in the family, I'm the eldest. Probably the goodie-two-shoes...to some extent. It was very much a family where my mother had a rule book and she knew what the rules were and she never questioned the rules, 'cause those were the rules. You don't question the rules, you just do as your told'. Leonie

SIE outcomes.

This section considers two main outcomes of the volunteer SIE. Firstly the author reports on volunteer perceptions of the impact of the SIE on career development. Secondly the author explores the volunteer's post SIE career experiences and considers the extent to which their 'post volunteer' SIE careers have been enhanced by the SIE experience.

Until recently there has been limited research on volunteer SIEs in terms of the benefits accrued by individual volunteers. Fee and Gray (2011) undertook a search across the expatriate and volunteer literatures to document eight broad areas of development including personal development; decision-making and problem solving skills; cultural skills and understanding; high level communication skills; strategic understanding; self-awareness; management skills including coaching and mentoring; and task related skills. Another recent study by Moore, Lough and Sherraden (2012) identifies four general outcome categories: international awareness, intercultural relations, international social capital and international career intentions.

While career development was a reported outcome from the five individual SIE volunteers, it was not an explicit motivator. This is consistent with the findings of Rouse and Clawson, (1992) who suggest that older adults are more interested in applying their knowledge and skills in a volunteer SIE than seeking specific career development benefits.

“I wasn’t turning back or sideways...it wasn’t an escape but a step forward in a different way and I didn’t expect it to help my career hugely...” Sally

Volunteer perceptions of the impact of the ‘volunteer SIE’ on career development

Despite the lack of career development expectations before starting the volunteer SIE, the participants reported a range of volunteer SIE career outcomes. Similar to Fee and Gray’s findings (2011), personal development was also significant, but is not the focus of this paper.

The volunteers reported on six main areas of career and professional development. The first is the higher level management/leadership skills. These include aspects of organisational development, change management, risk management, communication, project management and strategic/governance skills.

“At that stage things were becoming very obvious that the parent organisation of the organisation that I was working with...there were issues to do with corruption and it was going to become a stand-alone organisation but the constitution was a disaster and there wasn’t a functioning executive committee and everything. So I actually moved into an organisational development role.” Delia.

The second area of professional development was relationship management. Relevant activities involved negotiating, networking and building relationships with host government representatives, NGOs, other international aid representatives as well as with local authorities and within local communities.

“We got grants and had on-going good relationships with funders, international funders and developed big new premises and... when I went I felt that yeah, you’ve actually facilitated something that can stand on its own and function and maintain itself and keep growing and growing.” Delia

Away from their NZ based senior roles, the volunteers experienced more freedom and greater scope in their work.

“I think there’s enough freedom to kind of run with your instincts. You’ve got a very good framework in your job description but you’ve also got a lot of room to move into other projects.” Janette

The volunteers relished the challenges and felt able to be more proactive, constructive and purposeful in their work. They were able to take risks to establish successful outcomes in a new working environment, far away from New Zealand.

“I guess to some extent the decision to work overseas in whatever form provided a chance to start from scratch almost - in a new environment where no-one knows you... there was a sense of me choosing what I was doing, rather than following a pattern/role set by outside factors and people.” Leonie

“I didn’t get the opportunities to do it before, and that was one of the joys of going abroad, you came without any kind of baggage and you just turned your hand to whatever needed to be done” Sally

A third area of professional development was also a result of the greater autonomy and scope that the volunteers experienced in their roles. The opportunity to further develop problem solving and creative thinking skills, and to use and trust their initiative more readily, facilitated the development of leadership skills that had been largely untapped or under-developed in previous organisational roles.

“I didn’t need to front things. I don’t need to be a famous person, but I did like to see things happening. So, I walked away from the organisation feeling very comfortable. No-one ever mentioned my name, but I had built an organisation”. Cathy.

The fourth area of professional development is also linked to relationship management but from an individual and developmental perspective. The international volunteers acted as trainers, mentors and coaches to local employees.

“Then after six months we got funding for a project which involved funding for vocational skill training for the young women in these villages. The project had to be female-driven, culturally... so I moved into that role...a mentor for a project and I was also the liaison person with the Australian funders.” Cathy

The fifth area of development was working in a cross cultural context. This was a significant aspect of their professional development underscored by the tensions between the expectation to introduce western models of business and the response of local communities to these initiatives. The process of confronting and understanding these differences and then

adjusting, accommodating and reconciling vastly different values and cultural contexts was a major challenge

"But we were just sort of outraged about the way they'd been running the farm...the word that we use in our culture is corrupt, but I didn't ever really use that word there because that's such a loaded word. It's just the way they do things in that country, and it's not really up to us to make a judgment about it being corrupt." Janette

"The corruption that went on was threatening– working in a corrupt environment feels so unsafe. It's only hindsight that I think that I felt – God, that was dodgy. But also, I kept trying to think – I'm not going to change this but I might be able to impact on individuals' lives. I made this decision quite early on that the people around me...people in my neighbourhood – at an individual level was where I could make a difference, but I made the decision that I'm never going to change the system, so I wouldn't try." Cathy

"And I go to X country and I talk about transparency and they are completely thrown by that, because they say the only transparent people are hungry ghosts. It's like 'why would you ever be transparent,' you're not a human being if you're transparent because being a human being is all that complex stuff around the solidness of being human' and so when I try and go on about transparency being a really good thing, they were totally flummoxed by that and then I started to talk about honesty... I think I've become more aware that not everybody thinks that the way I think about honesty is the way everybody thinks about it and there may be other things that take precedence at certain times." Sally

The final area of professional development was in technical areas such as accounting, administration, information technology, publishing, policy analysis and development and so on. Sometimes the volunteers had limited or no experience in these fields before their volunteer posting and in some other cases they took on these technical roles with little warning as the nature of their international volunteer role changed or evolved.

"So, in the end, after a big palaver...it was obvious that things were not going to work and the problem was that there wasn't anything else for me to do. So what I did was I went and talked to the finance directorand I said 'well, what do you need doing?' Well he was looking for someone to set up some financial policies and procedures and that's what I did, I did procedural work and policy work...." Sally

Although the volunteers had little or no expectations of career development before undertaking the 'volunteer SIE', afterwards they were able to identify a broad range of professional development areas similar to those discussed (and outlined earlier in this section) by Fee and Gray (2011). In contrast three of the four general outcome categories

(international awareness, international social capital and international career intentions) were evident implicitly in their interview conversations but were not acknowledged or articulated explicitly by the volunteers.

Experiences post 'volunteer SIE'.

The volunteer SIE for all 5 women was an exceptional experience despite facing many challenging situations. One volunteer experienced a traumatic home invasion, others faced political unrest and related traumas and were evacuated from their volunteer assignment on more than one occasion. Yet the time away was seen as a privilege where the volunteers experienced significant levels of personal and professional development.

"I think this is probably one of the most important things that I'll say... that for me, I felt that when I was on the volunteer SIE I was as true to myself as I've ever been in my life." Janette.

Surprisingly the return home to New Zealand posed significant and unexpected challenges to four of the women, the fifth having decided to relocate with her partner to Asia on completion of the volunteer SIE. The four women repatriating to New Zealand were experienced travellers and had been part of the volunteer agency's 'returning home' training.

At a non professional level all four women found the adjustment challenging, experiencing personal, family and relationship adjustments. One in particular was simply overwhelmed by the experience.

"Huge adjustments yeah...I remember a day or two after I arrived back...and I went into the New World supermarket to get some yoghurt. I faced this chilled cupboard and it had, I counted them, it had 24 I think it was, different varieties of yoghurt and I was completely stumped, I just, I had no idea how to choose, because I'd had two years of either not having yoghurt, or there's a bit of yoghurt and here it is, sort of thing. And then suddenly this vast choice was right in front of me and I couldn't cope with it and I just walked out of the supermarket with nothing in my basket and just had to go home. And that was when I realised that this culture shock coming back is very real and can take the oddest things to trigger it off..." Sally

For Cathy, coming home after nearly four years was devastating, but to stay was even more galling. The gap between rich and poor was worsening and the endless high powered corruption and misuse of aid money devastating to witness.

"We couldn't deal with it anymore, the anger became too huge. So we left and will never return."

Confronting consumerism and capitalism back in Auckland was very difficult for Cathy.

"I knew it was going to hit me in the face and it was really difficult to deal with. Nobody understood at all." Cathy

Leonie had a major relationship break up before returning to New Zealand and was ambivalent about how she would manage.

"The hard bits were coming back to Christchurch...and not coming back to the relationship....and that just has to be worked through... there were plans in place and they're not going to come to fruition now... then I thought, no I actually have to re-establish myself back in NZ. And I think some of that is driven about the relationship not being there. I don't want to feel that I'm being driven out of this place. Christchurch is my town too..." Leonie

Career Experiences post 'volunteer SIE'.

Professionally the challenges were equally as daunting. Just after Cathy's return to New Zealand, the recession started and she couldn't get any work and was constantly told that she was over experienced and under qualified. After being back in NZ for some time Cathy was very dispirited.

"I'm 62, only when I look in the mirror. I don't actually see myself as not working...I don't know. So what do I do from here. I have no idea but society tells me at 62 there is no job for you in NZ... that's my perception..." Cathy

Sally thought that she would be able to find a position relatively easily on her return to New Zealand, but that was not to be.

"Look I've just had this fabulous two years setting up a research institute, I know how to do research and evaluation and boy, we've done some really interesting field work and please give me a job....and people went 'oh, boy that was a very interesting time you had, but it's not really relevant to NZ, is it?'" Sally

At another interview Sally felt it was very clear that she wasn't going to get the job. The interview evolved into a lonely planet's conversation and travel log.

"Now tell me about X, it's a very interesting country isn't it?...and you know we're thinking of going there for our holiday"... Sally

Later Sally was approached to do another volunteer SIE. After everything that had happened on returning to NZ she was keen to go.

"Well it was good for the ego wasn't it, being shoulder tapped, gosh, yes." Sally

It is ironic that that after a highly successful pre SIE career, Sally left New Zealand for a second time in her mid fifties to seek the work challenges and acknowledgement that was not available in New Zealand.

Leonie was more fortunate in finding paid employment in the not for profit sector where she worked before her volunteer SIE. The issue that Leonie faced was her reluctance to settle back into a *“consumerist and capitalist society.”* Someone told Leonie about a possible position.

“And I thought – yes, I could do that job and I need a job so I put in an application and I know the minute I sent the email with my application I was instantly on google going ‘process jobs, development, worldwide, whatever’.... at the interview they said to me ‘Are you going to race off and have another adventure?’ and I said ‘I can’t promise, that’s on the cards but I can promise that I will do a minimum of two years in this role because ethically that’s what I feel I need to commit to it.’” Leonie

Another volunteer returned home to a provincial area of New Zealand where there were limited employment opportunities. Before having a chance to consider whether to restart the business, multiple family roles took priority as she took responsibility for elderly parents and supporting her partner in a new business. It was disappointing, having returned home from an uplifting and challenging experience and having to put personal and professional dreams on hold.

“Because my life at the moment is really quite narrow, because it’s quite draining looking after Dad. He needs that constant care. Then the work is draining too. So it’s just juggling that and balancing that, isn’t it? I don’t want to just finish by saying I’m a bit sad, because I’m not just sad. I’m also fine.” Janette

Ironically the volunteer who relocated to another part of Asia and set up a joint business with her partner, harnessing the knowledge and skills they gained while on their SIE, appeared to be the most satisfied and well adjusted of the volunteers.

“Well, I think we’ve actually pared our lives down to things that are really important to us...and the things that aren’t important to us, we’ve just got rid of, or just ignored. So we’re both doing our things at home. We’re doing the kind of work that we want. ...” Delia

While the ‘volunteer SIE’ was undoubtedly an accidental skills factory (Fee and Gray, 2011), there was little recognition of the experiences and skills developed ‘before’ as well as ‘during’ the volunteer SIE for the four women who returned to New Zealand. Despite the immediate support given to them by the volunteer agency on their return home, the women experienced

significant personal and professional adjustment issues for an extended period of time. Only one of the women has been able to find employment in her preferred career area.

While there were other circumstances at play such as the global recession, the women returned from their 'volunteer SIE' with a more international perspective (Moore, Lough and Sherraden, 2012), and a clear sense of the nature of work they wished to engage in. Before the volunteer SIE four of the women were frustrated by the roles they were expected to undertake in various organisations, the fifth being involved in developing her own consulting business. After the autonomy and challenge that the women experienced in their 'volunteer SIE', they hoped to find a similar level of respect, challenge and autonomy in their post 'volunteer SIE' employment. When this did not eventuate the women applied for lesser positions or investigated other options more in keeping with their changed life perspective.

After 6 months Sally started to get desperate and took the first contract job she was offered, a PA role, organising someone's diary, doing the photocopying and answering emails, a far cry from her previous senior organisational roles. Earning some money was the primary driver. After her second 'volunteer SIE' Sally realised that her career was at a standstill, that she was no longer appreciated within the organisation. She perceived that her career aspirations were changing and that organisations were not able to accommodate and harness her knowledge and experience.

"I had assumed that my career would just grow until I reached retirement and so I'd get jobs, and coming back twice, life is not like that and especially when you've been away for a couple of years and then you've gone away for another couple of years, then you get the kind of suspect looks that maybe you're not as stable a potential employee as they might like. That sort of look." Sally.

While Cathy gained some temporary work she found it unchallenging with no opportunity to use her talents. Thus she turned to university study and volunteer work as a way of acknowledging and building on her knowledge and experience in a meaningful way and more in tune with her personal values. Cathy admits that this pathway also...

"allows me to avoid having to go to the workplace here, because I still find it deeply unsatisfactory..." Cathy

Women's Career Theories

Cognisant of Doherty, Richardson and Thorn's (2013) call for researchers to draw on career theory as a framework for understanding and theorising SIE, I look to women's career theories (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon, 2003; Pringle and Mallon, 2003; Maniero and

Sullivan 2005; O'Neill and Bilimoria 2005) to better understand the post 'volunteer SIE' career experiences of the older women in the study.

The Kaleidoscope career model (Maniero and Sullivan, 2005) places gender at the forefront of the analytical framework. Maniero and Sullivan (2005) argue that three connecting and shifting threads - authenticity, balance and challenge- impact on a woman's professional life. While the model focuses on a woman's professional life, it may also be an appropriate framework to further explore the career issues of older women workers on a 'volunteer SIE'.

In an empirical study, O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) explore the nature of women's careers experiences over the life-span. From a sample of women who vary from their 20s to their 50s, they developed a three phase model: the idealistic achievement phase, the pragmatic endurance phase, and the re-inventive contribution phase. While the study makes a contribution to understanding the work experiences of women throughout their working lives, the practical implications are directed at employers and managers rather than individuals.

Pringle and McCulloch Dixon (2003) suggest that traditional career theory does not have the flexibility to encapsulate the wide ranging experiences and transitions of women's lives and career development. They call for a career model that has the capacity to embody the "emotional, spiritual and psychological as well as the outer achievements of an objective career" (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon 2003, 291). The authors draw on the work of the early career theorists such as Bardwick (1980), Gallos (1989) and career case study research to create a model of women's career development consisting of four facets: explore, focus, rebalance and revive.

Conclusion

For the majority of women in this study, the post 'volunteer SIE' employment experience was disappointing. Recruitment, selection and work situations were difficult, sometimes humiliating and previous networks were not enough to facilitate meaningful and purposeful employment several years after the return home.

Organisations (both private and government) seemed to have limited understanding of the value of the 'volunteer SIE' and the expertise these women had accumulated over a lifetime of paid and unpaid work. There was limited understanding that as people mature and age, their personal and professional priorities often change. The volunteers who returned to New Zealand were profoundly affected by their 'volunteer SIE' and ideally were seeking employment that acknowledged their need for increased congruence between their professional and personal lives. (Schein, 1993). The one volunteer who did not repatriate to

New Zealand was able to achieve this through setting up her own business with her partner and living overseas.

In the past, prospective employees returning home from SIE were often regarded by employers as lacking in career focus, commitment and career capital (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry, 1997; Myers and Inkson, 2003). However there is a nascent careers literature on these experiences that challenges this populist view suggesting that not only is career and personal development a substantial outcome of SIE, it is also an especially developmental experience for younger women (Myers and Pringle, 2005). While this initial research was limited to younger workers, more recent research (Tharenou, 2010a) further suggest the influence of gender on SIE.

The older women in this study found it very difficult to break through the negative perceptions of employers and managers regarding their career breaks and 'volunteer SIE'. Consequently the women became increasingly frustrated with the 'narrowness' of the organisations that could not accommodate or capitalise on their knowledge, skills, and international perspective. Given the need to engage and value 'older workers' (Davey, 2006; EEO Trust, 2006), contemporary calls for productive and positive ageing (Rudman and Molke, 2009), and the expectation that people will have longer careers than previous generations (Myers, 2011), it is a concern that the post 'volunteer SIE' career experiences of these older women has been such a challenge. It seems for the four women who repatriated to New Zealand after their 'volunteer SIE', that being 'older,' 'female' and having a 'later career break' is a triple employment jeopardy (Onyx, 1998).

The emergent women's career literature of the last 20 years affirms that women's careers are more broad than men's careers and provides some understanding of the post 'volunteer SIE' career experiences of the women in this study. More recent research on women's individual career patterns (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon, 2003; O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005, Maniero and Sullivan, 2005) provides additional insights into women's careers. Yet women's careers remains an under-researched area at both individual and organisational levels (Burke and Vinnicombe, 2005; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009).

While this 'women's career' theory addresses the ebbs and flows of 'womens' career paths, formal paid work remains at the core of the research question. The dominant 'male' career model remains one that is defined by continuity where career is framed by participation in paid work, unpaid work or unemployment.

The lives of the older women in this study are complex and evolving. They are not seeking work life balance or even retirement. Rather they are engaged in a search for a more

authentic life in which their values, beliefs and practices align. It is a fundamental 'rewirement' of their way of being (Myers, 2011). In order to understand the richness and diversity of older women's careers, as evident in the volunteer and post 'volunteer SIE' experiences documented in this article, SIE 'volunteer' research may benefit by increasingly drawing on women's career theory, and women's career theory also may benefit by embracing a more 'holistic' theoretical framework.

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