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RETURNING TO THE FAMILIAR, OR THE FOREIGN?
EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF
SELF-INITIATING REPATRIATE NEW ZEALANDERS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
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David Robert Ellis
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Abstract

This study explores the expectations and experiences of self-initiating repatriate (SIR) New Zealanders. It builds theory based on empirical data from distinct ‘before’ and ‘after’ repatriation phases. This research has particular relevance to the contemporary context due to the pace and scale of international mobility, the competition for skilled labour, and the high volume of New Zealanders returning home to live and work.

The SIR field remains not only under-researched, but also insufficiently scoped, demanding further exploratory work. This study responds to this, utilising a qualitative, interpretivist approach. This is characterised by semi-structured interviews with 32 participants and analysis of their narrative fragments, to explore their pre-move motives and expectations, their post-move experiences, and the level of congruence between them.

In relation to repatriation motivation, the study identified a difficult and frail decision to repatriate, incorporating frustration, relationship conflict, and reconciliation of positive and negative expectations. Participants formed expectations through an unbroken connection with New Zealand during expatriation, including maintaining social ties and remaining current in events. This continuous connection was enabled by visits to New Zealand, social media, and news feeds. Additionally, participants took proactive steps to further inform themselves about work and life in New Zealand before repatriating, resulting in a relatively high level of congruence between participants’ expectations and their experiences, in both work and personal domains. Where misalignment did occur, some represented positive surprises, such as the ease of securing employment, while others represented negative surprises, such as the exceptionally high cost of living relative to incomes. In addition, participants contributed perceived reasons for the relative ease of their repatriation experiences, including attributing it to luck.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is that traditional reentry theory is not applicable to the contemporary SIR New Zealand context. The social information age now enables expatriates to remain better connected with their home countries. The effect of this is that many of the theory-posted ‘unexpected’ elements of home country life are no longer unexpected. The study therefore provides a necessary revision to reentry theory, which takes account of this technological age, and identifies that surprises and shocks occur much earlier in the repatriation process, often before the move home itself. This suggests a consequent reduction in repatriation adjustment difficulties. Further, it is likely that the continued rise of the information age is such a significant development that it necessitates a revision of international mobility theory.
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