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**CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND CAREER
INTERRUPTION IN EXPATRIATE WOMEN
IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC: A CASE STUDY**

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of Master of Arts in Sociology at
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the domestic and social lives of expatriate women in the Cook Islands and New Zealand, using in-depth interviews and a feminist analysis of their social role. The study centres on the career interruption experiences of contemporary expatriate women from a perspective that understands this decision within the context of power, gender, and marriage. In addition, the thesis focuses on gender-specific cross-cultural adaptation and transition concerns. In doing so, the study highlights the role of domestic social networks both as a form of resistance to and a reinforcement of gender-assigned domestic labour. The thesis also includes a historical analysis of colonial expatriate women in the South Pacific. Using a qualitative methodology, the research also investigates key aspects of expatriate women's experience including leisure, work, and the family.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to investigate issues of cross-cultural adaptation and career interruption in expatriate women. It was conducted in Rarotonga,¹ (see *Appendix H* for map), Wellington and Palmerston North during 1998. It studies a group of sixteen women² identified by the researcher in both locations as sojourners or expatriates.³ The women fall into two categories; firstly, those women who accompanied their husband overseas to Rarotonga for the sole purpose of his career advancement, and who do not work themselves,⁴ and others, in Wellington and Palmerston North, who have chosen to settle in New Zealand (see *Appendix G* for profiles of the participants).

The study has the objectives of conducting research in an exciting and unexplored area in sociology (that of expatriate women, gender and work), and of researching with a feminist methodology, using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The research was conducted using this method, as it is one of the most widely chosen by feminist sociologists to investigate women's experiences. It examines aspects of sixteen expatriate women's lives, their careers, cross-cultural adjustments, leisure activities, and their decisions to leave work and home and move overseas. It documents their various attitudes to their new situations and identifies their issues of primary concern. The micro-dimensions of the research are defined by the data collected over thirty-three interviews about how expatriate women perceive and understand their day-to-day reality. This is then set against the backdrop of

a macro level understanding of power relations, gender, and the socio-economic position of expatriate women. The thesis concludes by drawing together the major themes within the research; the specific difficulties women face in cross-cultural adaptation and career interruption. Areas of further study are suggested.

Research about expatriate women, especially the historical analysis, has been less prominent than research on expatriate men. This is because it concentrates on the private sphere, which has traditionally been perceived to be of less value than research about the public sphere. In this way, what expatriate women do is seen as less valid and important than what expatriate men do in the public and political sphere. This bias became obvious when preliminary research on expatriate women was undertaken – only very few historical accounts of expatriate women's lives were found.⁵ In reviewing the literature on expatriate women, it is clear there is limited research *on* expatriate women and even less which is *for* or *about* them. The thesis shows how expatriate women live and make sense of their lives, from a perspective that values their experiences and places them in a wider social and international context. In doing so, the study addresses a gap in sociological research.

Much research has been conducted on migrant women from developing nations and their experiences of poverty, deprivation, hardship, discrimination, and cultural isolation in developed nations. However, less work has been conducted with white⁶ women from developed nations who sojourn for a set period in another culture. Studies relating specifically to expatriate women are few, but Black, Stewart and Stephens (1989), Ward (1990,

1992) and Black and Gregersen (1991a, 1991b) and De Cieri, et al (1991) are most relevant to the objectives of this research.

The aims and objectives of this thesis are fourfold:

- To investigate the social and economic position of contemporary expatriate women in the Cook Islands and New Zealand, to detail and analyse the social and domestic world in which they exist and to disseminate this understanding in a way that accurately reflects the participants and their experience.
- To examine the career interruption choices and cultural adaptation and transition mechanisms of expatriate women in Rarotonga and New Zealand, investigating their domestic and social support networks.
- To examine the historical context and social roles of colonial women in the South Pacific, and to compare this to contemporary expatriate women, investigating the origin of negative stereotypes about expatriate women.
- To conduct research drawing on a feminist methodological perspective and understanding of the whole individual, considering the power relations and biases inherent in any attempt at understanding social interaction, and drawing on in-depth interview techniques.

These objectives endeavour to establish a unique viewpoint, drawing on a feminist epistemological and methodological

perspective, of the social roles of expatriate women in the South Pacific. In order to understand the reality of expatriate women, information gathering in the field is crucial, as little research exists from the expatriate woman's perspective. It is the lack of this kind of research that allows the traditional, negative stereotypes to persist about "gin-drinking, tea-sipping, card-playing, bored white women."⁷

The research concludes that women who choose expatriation, and by association, privilege their husband's careers over their own, make informed decisions about improving their and their families' standard of living. This reasoning is primarily economic. It takes into account the well-being of their families in terms of social status and economic security. The research finds historical evidence to expose the myth of 'idle' expatriate women. This is replaced by a representation of colonial women who are involved in a number of different areas of work, and who exist within a set of social relations that offer little or no recognition of that work. The research finds that women have specific and common concerns relating to cross-cultural adaptation and career interruption that have not yet been explored from a feminist viewpoint or within sociological research.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 –Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of relevant literature on expatriate women and cross-cultural adaptation of expatriate spouses of men on overseas assignments. It includes some understanding of the historical significance of white women in the

Pacific, using the work of Knapman (1986) and Bulbeck (1992, 1998). Torbiorn (1982) specifically examines expatriation and expatriate women. There are three key areas of research. The first area is the research on expatriate women as economic dependents of their husband overseas, and the unique position these women occupy, using Furnham and Bochner (1986) and Ward (1992). The second area is the history of white women in the South Pacific, using Knapman and Bulbeck. The final area involves research on career women, housewives, and women as unpaid workers within the household, using Anderson (1981) and Harrington (1997). Expatriate women as 'incorporated wives' within the organisational infrastructure of their husband's workplace are also examined. The literature review details some of the feminist methodological and theoretical studies that have guided this thesis, including Reinharz (1992) and Cotterill (1992).

Chapter 2 – White Women in the Pacific

This chapter is an historical perspective on white women in the Pacific, using historical works of writers such as Grimshaw (1930) and Stevenson (1915). It utilises both Knapman (1986) and Bulbeck (1992) who detail the lives of expatriate women in Fiji and Papua New Guinea. The historical chapter is unique in that it uses reference material not currently in print. This chapter examines how the absence from history of white, colonial women has shaped perspectives and opinion surrounding them. It details how their participation in political, social and economic events in the public sphere is not recognised. It reveals their lifestyles and experiences from the women's perspective and shows how their daily lives and social relations shaped their views on colonialism and indigenous people.

Chapter 3 – Feminist Methodology, Feminist Research Methods, In-depth Interviewing and the Method of this Study

This chapter provides an overview of feminist methodology and feminist research methods and includes a detailed description of the method used to conduct this study. Drawing on Reinharz (1992), Cotterill (1992) and Finch (1983), this chapter looks at the way feminist methodology and epistemology has influenced feminist perspectives on conventional research methods, and the traditional 'objective' and 'rational' way of conducting social science research. While the feminist research method of in-depth interviewing is considered an effective tool, problems associated with the power relations between the interviewer and interviewed are acknowledged. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the merits and limitations of in-depth interviewing. Finally, this chapter details the method used to conduct the research for this thesis and recognises problems involved.

Chapter 4 - Cross-cultural Adaptation in Expatriate Women

This chapter examines the cross-cultural transition and adaptation experiences of expatriate women. It investigates how non-working expatriate women adapt less easily than their families to overseas settings because of the lack of natural support networks (such as work and school) in their adopted culture. This chapter uses Torbiorn (1982), Harvey (1985), and De Cieri (1991), to analyse the results of this thesis. This chapter focuses on domestic social networks, which are important sources of support for expatriate women, using Harrington (1997). It concludes with an analysis of the way expatriate women cope with cross-cultural transition and adapt to foreign cultures.

Chapter 5 – Work and Career Issues for Expatriate Women

This chapter looks at the intersection between career and gender. It examines the issues surrounding women's paid employment and domestic labour and investigates expatriate women's position as economic dependents of men. Women who have given up a career have many conflicting feelings about this new state of dependency. This chapter details the data collected on expatriate women's career choices and includes the participants' own views on their abandoned or deferred career options. Anderson (1981) and Harrington (1997) are utilised to show similarities between corporate gypsies, housewives, and expatriate women. The significance of domestic social networks for women not in paid employment is highlighted and the contradictory nature of these networks introduced. This chapter serves as a link between feminist thinking on gender and work and the experiences of expatriate women detailed in this study.

Chapter 6 – Gender, Space, Time, and Economic Dependence in Expatriate Women's Leisure

This chapter examines leisure and voluntary work and defines factors such as space, time, economic dependence, and gender in relation to expatriate women's leisure. Leisure and voluntary work are analysed from a feminist viewpoint, drawing on the work of Deem (1986) and Green et al (1990), among others. The ways in which expatriate women's leisure is restricted by these factors is demonstrated. Work on women's leisure in Britain, such as Henderson (1989) and Shelton (1992), inform this chapter, the key purpose of which is to examine expatriate women's leisure pursuits in Rarotonga within a feminist

understanding of leisure and voluntary work.

Conclusion

This chapter draws together the themes of the thesis and outlines the findings of the research. It examines the implications of the findings in relation to the aims and objectives of the study. It also determines where the research is placed in the field and suggests further areas of study. These include interviewing both expatriate men and women, and the possibility of a longitudinal study of expatriate women to study the stages of cross-cultural transition as they occur.