

Older women: employment and wellbeing in later life

*“Age is opportunity no less,
Than youth itself in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away,
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.”*

(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

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Abstract

This article explores the older worker discourse on wellbeing and work by highlighting the labour market re-entry and work experiences of a small group of older women who returned to New Zealand ‘rejuvenated’ after completing self-initiated expatriation (SIE), a period of extended travel and work overseas. The women explored a diverse range of organisational employment options and despite their intention to engage in appropriate and meaningful work pathways, their experiences were marred by discrimination, disadvantage and disappointment. However the participants, buoyed by the freedom, challenges and learnings derived from their recent SIE, were no longer prepared to compromise their personal wellbeing by engaging in unsatisfactory work roles and looked to alternative avenues, outside formal organisational work to preserve their sense of wellbeing. This research contributes to the older worker and wellbeing discourses by encouraging employers and other stakeholders to embrace a broad range of ‘older’ employee pathways, in a spirit of employer–employee reciprocity that support and enhance individual and organisational wellbeing.

Key words: age, diversity, discrimination, gender, older women workers, positive ageing, SIE, wellbeing

Introduction

Older women are confronted on a daily basis with mixed messages around success and wellbeing. Women are exhorted to be sassy at 60 (Street-Porter, 2008) and to age with attitude and elegance (Clifton, 2008). Elsewhere in the media, older women are depicted in more traditional caring roles “The Club Sandwich Generation. In their 60s, they’re winding down at work. At home, they’re taking care of their parents – and their grandchildren” (Hannan, 2011: 12). Allied to this manifold ageing discourse, is the public discussion around older workers from an economic perspective. Older workers, labelled variously as the “grey-haired workforce” and “grey matters at work” (Charman, 2015), are seen as carrying responsibility for future national economic success. The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) (2011) suggested that boomers

need to work longer and spend their full potential for the Government to afford their support payments. It predicts boomers could contribute billions to the economy – we just have to take advantage of its potential (p. 13).

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Although labour market participation rates for older women in New Zealand are increasing (Callister, 2014), there is limited knowledge on their later life employment experiences (Myers, 2011). Do these protracted years of work enable women to develop, consolidate and enhance their individual sense of wellbeing and purpose, or do they reaffirm and extend a gendered life-course of workplace discrimination and social and economic disadvantage? (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015).

This article explores the labour market re-entry and employment experiences of a small group of older women (50 plus) (MSD, 2013; OCG, 2013), who had left their established careers and lives for an extended period of time to undertake self-initiated expatriation (SIE). For a more in-depth discussion of the older worker age threshold please refer to Myers (2016). Firstly, we explore the demographic and labour market trends in the New Zealand workplace. This discussion is followed by a literature review that considers issues relevant to the employment and wellbeing of some older woman who have returned to New Zealand after an SIE. Next, the methodology is outlined, the research questions are clarified and the role of narrative in the process of data gathering, analysis and presentation of findings is discussed. Significant background information is presented and describes how the participants returned from SIE having experienced considerable career and personal development. This gives context to the following section which outlines the participants' unexpected and challenging labour market re-entry and work experiences. The paper concludes firstly with a discussion on how the participants responded to their post-SIE employment experiences and challenges while retaining their sense of purpose and general wellbeing; and secondly outlines implications for four key stakeholder groups: academics and researchers, older workers, employers, and industry and policy makers.

Older Women and Labour Market Participation: the New Zealand Context.

Population ageing has become the global term used to denote significant demographic transition issues (Dunstan & Thomson, 2006; EEO Trust, 2012a). In New Zealand, population ageing is occurring at a slightly slower rate than in Europe. Between 2004 and 2051, New Zealand's population is predicted to increase by one million people, and by 2051, 50 per cent of the population will be 46 years plus (Alpass & Mortimer, 2007) and 1.37 million will be classified as older (MSD, 2013). By 2061, it is predicted that the New Zealand female population will comprise three similarly sized groups: 15 to 39, 40 to 64 and 65 years plus (Callister, 2014).

Labour market participation rates for older women have increased from two per cent in the mid-1990s to 15 per cent in 2014, while older men's have increased from eight per cent to approximately 25 per cent (Callister, 2014). Using a threshold of 50 years for defining an older worker (McGregor, 2007; OCG, 2013), it is expected that older women's participation rates will continue to increase at a greater rate than older men's, partly due to women's longer life expectancy. Of note, though, is that while female participation rates have incrementally risen, especially in the older (50 plus years) age cohort, they still remain lower than older male participation rates, but are at the upper end of the OECD countries (Dunstan & Thomson, 2006; MSD, 2013; OECD, 2011).

There are also some factors unique to New Zealand that impact on these patterns. New Zealand's slower growing but rapidly ageing population raises issues, such as predictions of a labour shortage and a shortage of skilled labour, particularly in some of the industries and

professions where there is a high median age (EEO Trust, 2008a). Additional contextual factors go some way to explaining the higher New Zealand labour market participation rates of older men and women when compared with other OECD nations. Public policy changes in superannuation increasing eligibility to 65 years (and recently 67 years) (Small, 2017), the removal of compulsory retirement and changes to the Human Rights Act 1993 outlawing age-based discrimination have encouraged continued workforce participation.

The decisions of women (and men) to continue to engage in paid work or not may, for some, be a function of financial necessity. Those in low paid work throughout their employment have not necessarily been able to save enough for retirement. Financial disadvantage is a significant aspect of what Loretto and Vickerstaff (2013; 2015) identify as a gendered life-course. The intractable gender pay gap, currently 12 per cent (Ministry for Women, 2016), means that women earn less than men, both on a weekly basis and also as an accumulation over the working life span (Harris, 2017). Child rearing and other caring roles are also significant career interrupters for women. The Kiwisaver scheme, a voluntary work-based retirement savings scheme introduced in 2009, should benefit those entering into the scheme as new entrants to the workforce, but for those aged 50 and over, it is likely the rewards of the Kiwisaver scheme may fall short of the necessary funds needed to secure a comfortable retirement. This is particularly relevant given that women save, on average, 71 per cent of what men save for retirement (ANZ, 2015). For women, retirement has the prospect of being longer than that for men, as they retire younger on average and also live longer.

There are many factors that influence extended labour market participation or withdrawal, including various stereotypes, discriminatory practices and financial circumstances (EEO Trust, 2006; 2008b) that impact on the decisions of older persons to continue to work or leave the workforce (Mountford, 2013). The current dominant discourse on the older worker is that employers will increasingly seek to employ older workers to address labour and skill shortages (CIPD, 2012). Yet in a joint EEO Trust and New Zealand Work Research Institute study on the ageing workforce, it is suggested that government policy makers are driving this discourse to a greater extent than business leaders and employers (McCleod & Bentley, 2015). In fact, employers often perceive the older worker in a negative light, thus reinforcing stereotypes of older workers as less productive and more expensive than younger workers (Taylor & Walker, 2003). In a New Zealand EEO report on older worker myths and realities (2012b), the author calls on employers and government to work together on this issue, pointing to the

false assumptions and stereotypes about their performance...the most pernicious of these is that older workers cost more, are more prone to health problems, can't adapt to workplace changes and new technology, perform more poorly than younger workers, and represent a poor investment in training (p. 6).

Although there are arguments identifying older workers as valuable employees, it seems that, even when stereotypes are challenged (Maurer, Barbeite, Weiss & Lippstreu, 2008), some employers continue to have a negative view of older workers overall. Older workers are often the first to be targeted in organisation downsizing (Dorn & Souza-Posa, 2010), sometimes with the implicit approval of unions. In response to these discriminatory practices, the older worker may prefer to withdraw or retire rather than be made redundant (Loretto & White, 2006).

McGregor and Gray (2001) suggest that the true extent of discriminatory employment practices against older workers remains under-researched and not understood. Others go as far as to say that, when faced with the imperative of drawing on older workers, employers will not consider

them (Henkens, Remery & Schippers, 2008). In New Zealand, it has been suggested that increased labour market participation levels for older workers reflect employer expediency in a strong pre-GFC labour market rather than a fundamental change in employer attitude (Davy & Glasgow, 2006).

Literature

This section begins with an examination of literature on self-initiated expatriation (SIE) and then moves on to a brief review of the positive ageing and wellbeing literatures. This discussion provides a more positive counterpoint to the age and work discourse of the previous section which suggests that women experience considerable economic disadvantage over the life-course.

Self-initiated expatriation (SIE)

Overseas experience (OE) is a term unique to New Zealand. It is a period of self-driven and self-managed work and travel overseas during which younger people autonomously explore other cultures and countries (Inkson & Myers, 2003; Jokinen, Brewster & Suutari, 2008). Individuals who self-manage their expatriation as per OE have become an international field of research, with SIE being adopted as the most appropriate term for this phenomena by researchers (Inkson & Richardson, 2010).

Assigned expatriates (AE), employees of Multi National Enterprises (MNEs) who are sent abroad, have long been the focus of researchers in the field of International Careers and International Human Resource Management. This type of international work experience differs from the SIE experience and there is a growing body of literature focussing on the differentiation of these terms (Dorsch, Suutari & Brewster, 2013). However, expatriates who initiate their own international experience, (SIE) are still less understood (Andresen & Gustschin, 2013).

The extant literature on SIE draws on diverse populations but most research has centred on younger and midlife age groups, focussing on their SIE motivations and career outcomes. While the AE literature suggests that individuals are primarily driven by career motivations and achieve significant career development as an outcome of expatriation, the SIE literature points to significant personal drivers and high levels of personal and career development resulting from self-initiated expatriation.

Despite the increasing numbers of published articles on self-initiated expatriates (Doherty & Thorn, 2014), the field remains under-theorised, especially regarding intersections of age and gender (McNulty, Fisher & Vance, 2017; Myers, Inkson & Pringle, 2017).

Positive and successful ageing

The concept of productive or active ageing, that is, continued activity contributing to positive outcomes (Everard, Lach, Fisher & Baum, 2000), has become a significant discourse within the context of an ageing population. Positive ageing is grounded in social and economic policy literature (ibid), and although individual activity and productivity is part of this discourse, positive ageing denotes a macro policy perspective whereby government social and economic policy delivers successful outcomes at a societal as well as an individual level.

Productive ageing literature argues that social, economic and employment policy must provide a more inclusive framework (Sonnet, Olsen, & Manfredi, 2014) that supports the wellbeing of the older citizen or older worker (Davy & Glasgow, 2006). While the discourse of positive ageing argues that older people may choose the way in which they contribute, the positive ageing strategy has been critiqued in that it overemphasises work, extended careers and economic growth at the expense of other lifestyles in later life. Positive ageing has also been questioned in that much of the emphasis has been on reforming or delaying pension ages, therefore, delaying retirement (Phillipson, 2013). There has been limited policy action in other areas, especially at employer and organisational levels to improve the quality of work (Bentley et al., 2014). These areas were identified as important to encourage older workers to stay or return to the workforce (Sonnet et al., 2014).

Wellbeing

The literature of personal meaning is underpinned by a general acceptance that achieving wellbeing is more than just striving to achieve contentment or happiness. The literature on human potential and wellbeing encompasses two main streams. The hedonic approach considers happiness as an outcome of the pursuit of pleasure while the eudaimonic approach considers wellbeing in terms of the degrees of self-realisation and meaning that one derives from life (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2006). In the latter approach, self-fulfilment is perceived as leading to authentic happiness, which in turn enables one to grow and flourish (Haybron, 2008; Lacerulle & Baars, 2014).

Understanding what people feel is most meaningful in their lives has been conceptualised in a range of wellbeing studies. For example, Mackay, Prendergast, Jarden and Schofield (2015) draw on a scale of 10 items to assess individual levels of wellbeing. In a paper on younger men and their wellbeing, Rasmussen and Hannam (2013) point to young men's inadequate educational experiences and their high levels of suicide, incarceration, workplace accidents and sickness as markers of low levels of wellbeing. Thus defining or identifying the features of wellbeing is a broad church with researchers focussing on a range of concepts including balance (Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012), resilience (McCann et al., 2013) and trust (Baptiste, 2008).

Other models of individual wellbeing consider the relevance of the experiences and challenges associated with life transitions. DeVogler and Ebersole (1980) theorise eight sources of meaning, Fiske and Chiriboga's research (1991) identifies seven life goals and a range of studies suggest that there are several levels of meaning, the highest of which is abstract and transcending self-interest (Brandstätter, Baumann, Borisio, & Fegg, 2012). Studies on wellbeing (Kim & Moen, 2002) explore the values and sources of meaning in life for older people and suggest that older women (and men) have a strong need to search for independence, strength and autonomy.

Further to the interest in wellbeing at the individual level, there is an increasing interest in wellbeing in an organisational setting, where the notion of wellbeing is captured within performance models and often linked to an individual's performance measures, such as productivity, retention and satisfaction (Baptiste, 2008) and organisational factors, such as management support, workload, flexibility and physical environmental factors (Ravenswood, Harris & Wrapson, 2017). Recent research on wellbeing and work (Mackay et al., 2015) suggests that workers over 60 experience greater levels of wellbeing than those under 30 and attribute this to higher income levels, home ownership and job security. However, the increasing prevalence of insecure and precarious work as well as underemployment across all

age groups may well undermine the conditions that foster the wellbeing of employees ultimately leading to employees being less engaged and productive in their organisational roles.

A Gendered Perspective

It is argued that gender has been neglected in wellbeing, employment and retirement studies for older people (Ravenswood et al., 2016; Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2013; Schultz & Wang, 2011), and what research there is, is compromised by benchmarking women's employment and retirement patterns to those of men (Myers, 2016; Wong & Hardy, 2009) and privileging labour market participation over other ways of being in later life. Post, Schneer, Reitman and Ogilvie, (2013) suggest that there are three theoretical frameworks to consider when examining older women's decision to continue or leave paid work "the relational emphasis in women's careers, women's caregiving roles, and structural and economic constraints that diminish women's earnings" (p. 92).

Loretto and Vickerstaff (2013) posit that in later life "retirement may mean very different things for women and for men" (p. 65), and in their most recent article they continue to emphasise that gender and age are "underexplored" and "under-theorized" (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015: 14; Harris, 2017). As increasing numbers of older women delay retirement due to low rates of savings and continue labour market participation as well as working in their domestic roles and other unpaid work, they are likely to experience greater work-life imbalance, disadvantage and diminished levels of wellbeing (Moen, 1996).

Methodology

Narrative

The increase in narrative over the past 30 years is extensively documented in social science literature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a) as well as across many other disciplines (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Narrative researchers have focussed on varied methodological approaches and the terms they attribute to these studies of people's lives are wide ranging. The life story is one of these approaches and the process of gathering life stories in this research was based on the following understanding. The life story empowers the teller. It is not intended to be a precise account of a life and to document historical truth, but to establish the teller's own 'story', and in this sense, the life story is considered 'trustworthy' rather than 'truthful' and 'transferable in some respects' but not 'generalisable' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b). As a research methodology, the life story, sometimes referred to as 'big' stories, is respectful of the viewpoint of the participant and gives visibility to stories and insights often not previously understood.

The concept of 'small' stories is also relevant in this article. Researchers using the small story method believe it captures unprompted instances and happenings as individuals live out their lives (Bamberg, 2006). The small story (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) draws on both spoken and written language and it is argued that small stories enable the everyday social interactions and experiences to be explored, resulting in a closer and better understanding of how individuals make meaning of their lives (Georgakopoulou, 2006).

As a research methodology, the life story creates a link across the continua of narrative methodologies. In the context of this article, we acknowledge the life story as the methodology adopted to gather the data, but also point to the small story as a way of exploring specific issues and experiences within the 'big' life story. Our position on big and small stories in this research

article is that both are relevant and complementary (Freeman, 2006) as they involve varying degrees of reflection to elicit narrative meaning (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). Thus, we draw on big stories as an overarching framework, and focus on small stories as a way to explore specific issues and incidents and also to illustrate these findings.

Sample and research process

The ages of the participants ranged from 50 to 62 at the time of their SIE departure. Time spent away on SIE ranged from three months to 10 years and just over half the participants were domiciled in English-speaking countries.

Before SIE, participants were employed in a range of professional and non-professional occupations (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Participant Occupations Before and During Self-Initiated Expatriation (Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations – ANZSCO)

	Before SIE	During SIE
Managers	4	3
Professionals	8	5
Technicians and trades workers	2	2
Community and personal service workers	2	8½
Clerical and administration workers	3	½
Sales workers	2	–
Machine operators and drivers	–	–
Labourers	–	–
Residual workers	–	–
Other (one unemployed, one student)		2

Eighteen out of 21 participants elected to work in a different role while on SIE. Seven out of the 21 participants found employment during their SIE that was in the same classification as their pre-SIE ANZSCO category. Only three of these seven stayed within their existing occupations of teaching, nursing and legal services.

On their return to New Zealand (post-SIE):

- three participants did not seek work in New Zealand due to illness, age (72 on return) or returning overseas to live on a long term basis
- eighteen participants sought appropriate or meaningful paid organisational employment

Participants in this research related their life stories via a semi-structured in-depth interview with open-ended questions. Data gathering involved a pilot of five interviews and a full study involving 21 participants. To recruit participants for the full study, selection and snowballing processes (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) were used. The interviews were held in New Zealand locations where the participants lived and were generally one to two hours long.

Limitations

Findings and insights gleaned from this exploratory research are the result of an interpretive research process and as such contribute to theory building and are not generalisable across the SIE population or across the older worker population (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b). It is also noteworthy that this interpretive study was on older women, so insights cannot

necessarily be applied to the labour market re-entry experiences of older men and also younger men and women who return to New Zealand after completing SIE.

While the sampling process drew on selection and snowballing, there were some limitations in that a snowball sample is potentially limited to established groups and networks of friends and colleagues, with the likely result of a pool of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences (Inkson & Myers, 2003). The researcher sought to address this by mostly selecting individuals without drawing on their extended networks.

Findings and Discussion

Background and context of the study

This article considers the experiences of a small group of women who sought employment in New Zealand after completing self-initiated expatriation (SIE). While the full study explores the personal and professional motivations, experiences and impact of SIE on 21 older women (50 plus), this article explores some issues within the larger study i.e. the experiences of 18 of the participants who intended to re-engage in work post-SIE and how they navigated and negotiated notions of work and wellbeing. More specifically, the research areas identified for further exploration in this article are:

- What are the experiences of participants who seek organisational employment back in New Zealand?
- How do these participants interpret and enact ‘wellbeing’ in this later stage of life?
- What are the implications for stakeholder groups i.e. employers, the government, older women workers and researchers?

Disenchantment with work before departing for SIE was an issue for most of the participants. They wanted to make some career and life changes, but there was a dearth of challenging, interesting or different work opportunities. One negative aspect of work that several participants mentioned was the continual organisational restructuring that went on in both private and government organisations. This was a significant demotivator, and each time it happened, the participants felt less engaged in the workplace and their work became increasingly meaningless.

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...I had a reputation for being very good at doing it, but it was way outside my value systems (Cassie).

During their SIE, all the participants unexpectedly developed new employment skills and career capital. They also experienced significant personal development and clarified core values and priorities to shape and drive their later life paths. This finding is in line with previous research, see Dickmann and Harris (2005), and Myers and Pringle (2005). Thus, the participants returned to New Zealand rejuvenated with a much greater sense of purpose and wellbeing than when they left New Zealand to undertake SIE. On their return to New Zealand,

some participants wished to work fulltime in a career position; others wanted part-time and less challenging work. All participants were confident that their qualifications, skills and experiences would earn them suitable employment.

Recruitment experiences

Participants spoke of the frustrations they experienced during the recruitment process. In particular, they found pre-SIE employment experiences and skills, as well as the additional career capital they accrued while on SIE were often dismissed or not seen as relevant and transferable. Participants were disturbed by the lack of respect for what they had achieved in their careers and the inability of some employers to take them seriously and retain professional boundaries in the interview process.

I found it very difficult to find a job, very difficult to try and communicate what had happened during that time and I tried very hard, which really was a bit of a waste of time actually and I learnt the next time, don't bother. Employers weren't interested. In fact I went to more than one interview where it was very clear within the first five/ten minutes that I really wasn't going to get the job, and both interviews became, 'well that's not really relevant...now tell me about Cambodia, it's a very interesting country, isn't it?' and 'you know we were thinking of going there for our holiday' as one of them said, and I ended up doing a sort of travelogue (Sharon).

Under-employment

Many participants seeking employment struggled to secure a position and eventually opted to settle for anything in order to bring some money in. Under-employment was a major issue for these participants who were forced to take roles that did not build on their previous experience and were lacking challenge or interest. The lack of choice and autonomy in the pursuit of employment was a major concern to participants who were forced to 'fit in' with whatever was on offer (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2015).

The first six months, I was out of work, and I started to get a bit desperate and I just took the first contract job after that that I could....and I was basically a PA, just making sure that we had paper clips in the right place and, you know, that the diary of the person I was working for was printed out...so that she could write on them.... So, but it brought in some money, at that particular point that was the key thing (Sue).

Another participant found work in a government ministry. She had worked there before her SIE and while she loved the job she found the demands totally unrealistic in terms of high workload and expectations. Ironically this time around the situation was the opposite.

The job has been a complete disaster. I've done nothing even that would – that I could put on my career, on my CV. I've done nothing of value. I've just – there hasn't been enough work and I've found that extremely difficult. I've been totally under-utilised and under-employed (Gill).

Several participants returned to professional teaching, nursing, legal and administration roles where they were well established pre-SIE. Ironically, they were not challenged in these post-SIE roles to the extent that they were while on their SIE. Post-SIE, they also experienced contractual issues, a lack of interesting work when compared to SIE employment experiences,

and considerable frustration with the increased levels of performance measurement and monitoring.

Casual and precarious work

Some participants were able to find employment but only on a short-term basis. This was a new experience for participants who were mostly employed in tenured positions before SIE. The precarious nature of post-SIE employment initially had an adverse impact on individuals' wellbeing. One participant, Connie, had worked in Asia for several years in a responsible and challenging educational role. Coming from Asian society, Connie found that working in New Zealand education as an older woman was very difficult.

My experiences haven't counted for anything. I'm the most qualified and most experienced teacher in my department...there are people who are sitting there for 20 or 30 years...doing the same thing...and if I say...could we do this another way...they say no...we've always done it this way. So I want to punch a hole in the wall, actually (Connie).

It is ironic that Connie was able to achieve her professional goals when in Asia. Now back in New Zealand, she brings her 'outsider's eyes', which give her a wider and different perspective. She believes that her post-SIE teaching life in New Zealand has curtailed her creativity and energy.

Unemployment

Several participants were unable to find work for several months and became very concerned that they were using up their limited financial resources, set aside for their later years. Some continued in their search until they found something or anything, while others decided that the cost of searching and constant rejection was too much and discontinued their job seeking initiatives, preferring the label of 'retired' to 'unemployed' (Loretto & White, 2006).

Because what had happened – my job overseas, I built myself up to being very successful in this situation... and then I come back and present my CV to agents, and they do this rah, rah stuff and I believed them. Wow – you've got so much – wow – you'll be snapped up. And I wasn't snapped up. Well, that's pretty gut-wrenching, actually.

My future, I just don't know what I'm doing... it's really interesting. I've always been a very strong character, I've never been an anxious character –but I am very anxious now and I'm fearful. So, it's good to recognise...I'm fearful of managing financially and...but I haven't been able to get any job, so I'm fearful of all that. I just want a nice little admin role somewhere. I don't want high stress. I'm 62, I certainly don't want a high-powered role (Janine).

Ageism

Ageism was mentioned by many participants as a possible reason for their failure to secure appropriate and meaningful work. Not only were they worried about their financial future but most participants held responsible positions before they went on their SIE, so on their return they felt diminished and rendered invisible by the employment search process. Given the

paucity of research around gender, work and age (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2013; 2015; Schultz & Wang, 2011), the participants' experiences suggest that they are increasingly marginalised in the labour market as they age and while older women (and men) may be retained in the labour market, the participants in this study found the recruitment process a very challenging issue (Conen, Henkens & Schippers, 2012).

Connie felt very angry about how she was treated by interval panels and employers. She believed her extensive international experience was dismissed at the interviews as irrelevant and when she did find some short-term contract work, her suggestions and new ideas were ignored.

Age is respected in China. You are wise when you're old. Here, you're just old and whatever negative connotation that goes with that. My experience out of New Zealand as a teacher, I don't think is validated in New Zealand at all (Connie).

Cassie also felt that her considerable New Zealand and international work experiences counted for nothing during selection processes. The job search experience as an older women left her feeling vulnerable and worthless.

I'm 62, only when I look in the mirror. I don't actually see myself ever as not working – I don't know. So what I do from here, I have no idea but society tells me that at 62 there is no job for you in New Zealand. So that's my perception, anyway (Cassie).

Wellbeing, older women and the life-course

Within the life-course literature it is recognised that individuals follow diverse pathways throughout their lives, although within each generation there are also numerous pathways that are similar. However, when an individual is 'older', the research on individual pathways suggests that individuals and groups within the 'older' cohort have more complex and diverse pathways than their younger counterparts (van der Heijden, Schalk, & van Veldhoven, 2008). The participants in this research undertook an SIE when they were older. They were motivated by a range of factors but the issue of timing was significant. For the first time in over 30 years, the women were mostly freed up from primary domestic duties, thus allowing them to choose to do something else and follow another path. SIE is just one of the many pathways the older women could have chosen to follow (Han & Moen, 1999; Walker, 2006).

All the participants returned from SIE re-energised and rejuvenated, yet most of the 18 participants who are the focus of this study faced significant challenges during the return to work process. The women were in different personal and financial circumstances from each other post-SIE and they also wanted very different things within their organisational employment i.e. part-time, full time, flexible hours, career challenge, meaningful work, low stress work, to be valued, acknowledged, respected and so on. Yet participants were overwhelmingly despondent about their employment experiences and responded in various ways. Some decided to leave their employment and head back overseas for another SIE. For example at the time of the interview Gill was planning to leave her ministry role and embark on another SIE where she believed she would have more choice, challenge and autonomy over the nature and timing of work projects. After three years working on monthly and very short-term contracts, Connie was unable to find a tenured position and felt very under-valued. She was planning to leave her precarious work to become a volunteer overseas in order to regain the sense of empowerment and achievement she felt after her SIE.

Others decided to permanently exit from paid employment and undertake different activities outside the bounds of organisational life. Cassie decided to stop looking for work and enrol in a university course.

Where to from here? It's very difficult. I feel personally, I'm unemployable in New Zealand...so I have decided to enrol in a Development Studies Degree (Cassie).

Meg had very little money but came to the conclusion that organisational work was just unrealistic for her whereas volunteer work gave her a feeling of contributing to society as well as having some control over the hours that she volunteers.

After SIE I went to the hospital as a volunteer...but not paid work, no. I do sell books as well, so that's just a little part-time thing I do. But no, I had given up full paid work. Granted, I am using my savings and it is whittling down, but it is going surprisingly a long way. I do feel very valued at the hospital... (Meg).

The findings from this research are consistent with those of the EEO Trust Report (2006; 2012b) which identified a range of organisational wellbeing factors (Baptiste, 2008) as a significant reason for staying or leaving the workforce. Inflexible work situations and lack of job opportunities were key influencers causing older women to leave the workforce. In contrast, opportunities to work part-time and have flexible hours were important influencers to stay. Extended leave, higher pay, working from home, the opportunity to have interesting and challenging work, job redesign, being needed, respected and valued (Vasconcelos, 2015), and experiencing reduced stress were identified as the significant factors that would encourage older women to continue workforce participation (EEO, 2008b).

Faced with the perceived shortcomings of organisational employment it seems that participants, having restored their individual sense of purpose and wellbeing as an outcome of SIE, were no longer prepared to compromise this in the longer term. When organisations did not meet their expectations, participants would not engage or commit to them any longer than necessary. In fact, they preferred to do other activities like undertaking another SIE, engaging in unpaid voluntary work, or enrolling in university study programmes as these activities “allow me to avoid having to go to the workplace here, because at my age I find it deeply unsatisfactory” (Cassie).

After their later life SIE, these older women returned to New Zealand with a wider perspective and a renewed sense of confidence and future possibilities (Ibarra, 2005). The struggle to find employment was a surprise to the participants and took its toll on their sense of wellbeing. Nevertheless, their resilience and self-worth meant that while some work had to be undertaken in the short term, in the longer term they were intent on following the ‘path with a heart’ (Hall & Mirvis, 1996) outside the bounds of formal labour market participation.

Now I always follow my heart. I only do what I really want to do, what excites me and if it excites me to say no to a job – I do... Oh, the age and stage I'm at is just so satisfying and wonderful. It's full of surprises. Age does not affect me in any way. I can see it in the mirror, I know I am 72 this year. I can't feel it. This is the last stage of your life, you save the last for best. So it doesn't matter how much money you've got...I live entirely within my pension income and I can't think of anything I need (Willa).

In a world where paid employment is privileged within the positive ageing discourse (Sonnet et al., 2014), the reality of the workplace was such that the participants, determined not to compromise their individual values and sense of wellbeing, did not wish to remain in organisational employment for the longer term. The lack of appropriate age diversity practices in the various organisations meant that potentially valuable older workers exited the labour market, ostensibly into forced retirement, but rather to explore other opportunities that enabled them to engage in more appropriate, flexible and meaningful endeavours.

The experiences of these participants raise a number of issues pertinent to the management of older workers and their potential participation in the labour market. The traditional notion of retirement is an outdated concept, especially for women who, through their gendered life course, often have not accumulated enough resources to stop work (Harris, 2017).

Although individuals follow diverse pathways throughout their lives, within each generation there are also similar pathways shaped by a common social and economic context. However, it is also suggested that the 'older' cohort, no longer primarily driven by family responsibilities, are less constrained and more able to follow a wider range of life and career pathways than their younger counterparts (van der heijden et al., 2008). Thus, as individuals age, their pathways are potentially more diverse. As increasing numbers of older women and men consider 'remaining', 're-entering' or 'rejecting' labour market participation, organisational diversity policies and practices need to be cognisant of age, gender and wellbeing to a greater extent.

Implications

Within the labour market literature the central discourse on the older worker is that of managing and retaining older workers in a context of demographic change and extended years of employment. The literature on positive ageing paints a glowing picture of these extended years as a time of freedom and 'golden' opportunity for both employers and individuals to embrace (Everard et al., 2000; Sonnet et al., 2014). The older worker literature offers a less propitious perspective, framing the issue as a problem to be addressed by organisations, employers, managers and the government. The labour market re-entry and return to work experiences of the participants outlined above suggests that, for many of these women, the continuation of a gendered life-course, where social and economic disadvantage prevails, is a reality (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2013; 2015).

This paper contributes to the literature across a range of disciplines and key stakeholder groups, including academics and researchers, older workers, employers and industry and policy makers.

Academics and researchers

For researchers in industrial relations, the experiences of older workers is not an area well understood or explored. Workers are now more commonly remaining in the workforce past the traditional time when retirement is taken. This may be due to economic or job satisfaction motivations. This paper offers a contribution to the literature in the industrial relations discipline on older women workers and the significance of individual and organisational wellbeing considerations for this group. As an exploratory piece, this paper also identifies

areas of future research needed to address current gaps in the work and wellbeing literatures (Mackay et al., 2015).

Older workers

As a group, older workers are not well represented in the work and wellbeing literatures, and this paper provides a glimpse of the labour market reality for a group of older women workers. The paper presents not just role models for other older women contemplating later career breaks and their re-connection with the labour market, but also gives voice to these women's experiences and their search for meaningful and flexible work and the importance they place on notions of wellbeing. As older women re-entering the labour market, they are beset with hurdles and discrimination relating to perceived diminished performance of those in the age group.

Employers

In a highly competitive free market economy, many employers struggle to attract and retain a motivated and engaged workforce. They can ill afford to overlook the potential that older workers can bring to their enterprises. Nevertheless, currently many employers are not taking advantage of the full potential of the labour market. This is in spite of government efforts to encourage firms to utilise the skills and experience older workers bring to the workplace. This paper hopes to offer some insight to employers that a 'one size fits all' approach to the employment of older women workers is not appropriate, not just for older women but also for any age cohort.

The paper identifies wellbeing as a very important priority for this group of women and, while they are willing to re-enter the labour market and offer their enhanced skills and experience, this cannot be at the expense of other equally important considerations that go to the heart of their personal wellbeing. As employers better understand older workers' diverse motivations and attitudes towards paid work, they will be able to offer more beneficial opportunities for older workers and bring into their firms much needed skills and experience in a win-win arrangement.

Industry and Policy Makers

The state has a clear position on the need for workers to remain longer in employment to meet skill shortages (Bentley et al., 2014; McCleod & Bentley, 2015; OECD, 2006). The Ministry of Social Development's Positive Aging Strategy recognises the increasing good health and wellbeing of older workers and the continuing contribution they are potentially able to make to the economy. This research signals to the government that the experiences of older workers in re-entering the labour market have been challenging in many respects. The research is also timely, given recent comments from the Retirement Commissioner (Parker, 2017) that it is the role of employers to employ, retain and retrain workers, and in spite of government aspirations for older workers, as yet employers are not performing well in this area.

Future research

This research study identified a number of challenging factors that these older women confronted when re-entering the labour market after a career break which gave them an opportunity to re-calibrate their priorities in life. Given the findings in this article, we suggest further exploratory research into gender and wellbeing factors that pressure older people out of work or encourage them to stay. We also encourage research that adopts a life-course and cross-disciplinary approach to explore the ebbs and flows of the complex pathways and contexts of individuals and groups as they age (Han & Moen, 1999; Walker, 2006).

The incidence of older people undertaking unpaid work in New Zealand is acknowledged in the literature (Callister, 2014), but there is a more limited understanding of the relationships between participation in paid work vis-à-vis unpaid work (Davy & Glasgow, 2006). Given the unpaid work that participants in this research study engaged in after exiting paid employment, further research into the role, reasons and nature of unpaid work in older age is suggested.

Conclusion

In a world where paid employment is privileged within the positive ageing discourse (Sonnet et al., 2014), the workplace experiences were such that the participants, determined not to compromise their individual values and sense of wellbeing, did not wish to remain in organisational employment for the longer term. The lack of appropriate age diversity practices in the various organisations meant that potentially valuable older workers exited the labour market, ostensibly into forced retirement but, in fact, to explore other opportunities that enabled them to engage in more appropriate, flexible and meaningful endeavours.

The experiences of these participants raise a number of issues pertinent to the management of older workers and their potential participation in the labour market. The traditional notion of retirement is an outdated concept especially for women who, through their gendered life-course, often have not accumulated enough resources to stop work. As individuals age, their pathways are more diverse and organisational diversity policies and practices need to be more cognisant of age.

On their return to New Zealand after completing SIE, these participants explored a diverse range of organisational employment options. The findings suggest that, despite their wish to engage in appropriate and meaningful work pathways in later life, their experiences were often marred by discrimination, disadvantage and disappointment. However, the participants, buoyed by the freedom, challenges and learnings derived from their recent SIE, were no longer prepared to compromise their personal wellbeing by engaging in unsatisfactory work roles and looked to alternative avenues, outside formal organisational work to preserve their sense of personal wellbeing.

The experiences recounted by participants are a timely reminder to employers that beneath the veneer of 'collective, older worker HR and Management practices', all is not well and there appears to be limited cognisance of the fact that, as individuals age, their individual pathways are more diverse and may mean very different things for women and for men (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2013; van der Heijden, et al, 2008).

This research confirms that the participants value their post SIE sense of purpose and general wellbeing and contributes to the older worker discourse by encouraging organisations to embrace a myriad of individual older employee pathways, in a spirit of employer–employee reciprocity that supports and enhances individual and organisational wellbeing.

Participants may be in the twilight of their working lives, but their potential to make a meaningful and significant contribution to the workplace is considerable. These participants wish to be valued and respected in any work context; they seek flexibility and autonomy and have diverse individual work goals. They will not return to the workplace to be merely measured and managed, but they are much more likely to return if they are respected and engaged.

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