



## Self-Initiated Expatriates: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Professional Female Expatriates

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### Abstract

This study is an original piece of work that offers the opportunity to ascertain and comprehend the experiences of professional female self-initiated expatriates in the Cayman Islands, and presents a valuable insight into what is now an important dimension of international careers and the contexts within which they evolve. Analysis and interpretation of data was achieved through use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) a distinctive approach to conducting qualitative research that is concerned with understanding lived experiences. Findings suggest that several contributory factors exist in influencing the female expatriates' decision to expatriate and that they maintained positive perceptions of the effects their overseas experience would bring to their career prospects. Findings also suggest that while gender discrimination was not commonly experienced, discrimination because of their expatriate identity was.

**Keywords:** Female Expatriate, International Human Resources, Global Mobility, Career Development, Self-initiated expatriate

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this present research project is to contribute to current knowledge about self-initiated female manager expatriates' motivators and experiences (Vance, 2005; Carr, Inkson & Thorn, 2005; Myers & Pringle, 2005; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Tharenou, 2003; Richardson, 2006; Tzeng, 2006; Linehan, 2001) and of international career perceptions of women (Bolino, 2007; Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007; Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The objective of this research project is to discover the lived experiences of professional female self-initiated expatriates in the Cayman Islands. It aims not to generalise the findings but rather to, gain an insight into career issues of women who have chosen to work in another country (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007). For the purposes of this study an expatriate is taken to mean "someone who left (their) homeland to live or work in another country, usually for a long period of time" (Vance, 2005, p. 375) this definition is more appropriate as it is more inclusive of what will be referred to as self-initiated expatriates (SIE) (Lee, 2005).

Over the years there has been an increase in scholarly research in the International Human Resources arena on international employees and expatriation. However, not only has the literature focus been dominated by expatriates who have been sent overseas by their employer, and is concerned for the most part, with matters from the organisational perspective (Caligiuri, 1997; Caligiuri & Stroh, 1995; Sims & Schraeder, 2005; Tan & Mahoney, 2006; Tarique, Schuler & Gong, 2007; Tharenou & Harvey, 2006; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005), it is also predominately based on male expatriates with women appearing in the literature mostly in the capacity of wife of an expatriate (Selmer & Leung, 2003a; Linehan & Scullion 2001; Fischlmayr, 2002). This is due to the fact that as Smith and Still (1996) cited in Linehan and Scullion (2001) point out "foreign assignments have long remained a male preserve". Nevertheless, in recent years an increasing amount of research is being focused on the progress of females in the labour market (Scott and Brown, 2006) and along with this present study is valuable for organizations that aim to achieve competitive advantage on the global front by focusing on development of global leaders (Caligiuri, 2006) in order to understand the complexities, variations and diversity of their source pool. Kollinger (2005) also makes the point that companies should be interested in taking measures to increase the number of female managers and expatriates and noticing female potential if they want to compete in the global competition for talent (p. 1257).

This study characterised by its primary research concern is exploratory in nature, and neither generated nor put forward any hypothesis (Metz & Tharenou, 2001; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black & Ferzandi, 2006). Alternatively, a number of research questions were generated to guide and focus the research process (Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002; Fenwick, 2004). The research questions were developed based on an extensive review of the literature and cover areas of self-initiated expatriation (Inkson, Pringle, Arthur & Barry, 1997; Sutari & Brewster, 2000; Tharenou, 2003; Vance, 2005), women expatriates (Adler, 1994; Linehan, Scullion & Walsh, 2001; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Paik & Vance, 2002; Fischlmayr, 2002; Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007), global careers and career development (Thomas, Lazarova & Inkson, 2005; Bolino, 2007; Tarique, Schuler & Gong, 2007; Vance, 2005) as well as literature on issues of discrimination (Richardson, 2006; Tzeng, 2006).

*Primary Research Concern: To explore the lived experiences of professional female self-initiated expatriates*

*RQ1: What influences female professionals to choose a self-initiated international work experience?*

*RQ2: How do the overseas work experiences of professional female self-initiated expatriates effect their perceptions of their future career and employability.*

*RQ3: Do self-initiated professional female expatriates experience discrimination while overseas?*

## **2. Literature Review**

It is a widely commented that the rapid pace of globalisation has led to increased global activity and global competition (Schuler & Tarique, 2007). This global phenomenon has ultimately emphasized the critical importance of international human resource management (IHRM) and its aim to enable the Multinational company (MNC) to be successful on a global front (Schuler & Tarique, 2007; Caligiuri, & Stroh, 1995) as well as the ever-rising importance of global assignments (Sparrow, 2007). The literature reveals that within the globalizing nature of our times, the very notion of an international assignment and international employee is changing and expanding, to one that looks beyond the concept of a traditional expatriate sent on assignment by their organisation, to a more diverse set of international employees (Capellen & Janssens, 2005). Collings, Scullion and Morely, (2007) call for a more strategic approach to be taken when it comes to staffing in the international context and they outline the new and old challenges of using traditional expatriates and highlight the many alternatives to using them. The more contemporary difficulties with using traditional expatriates can be seen with the emerging markets; requirements for expatriates such as visas and permits; Career issues (dual-career) as well as the impact that 9/11 has had on the international labour force (p 200).

Other areas of concern according to Collings et al (2007) are the limited participation of women in international management, repatriation issues and weak international talent management systems (p.200-202). The paradoxical nature of this is twofold; even though there is a shortage of international managers there is still a shortage of women in international management and these shortages exist despite the evidence in recent research that indicates that female managers are successful in their global assignments (Tung, 2004). Given that the success of women on global assignments has been highlighted, Janssens, Cappellen and Zanoni (2006) point out that there continues to be a lack of research in this area and argue that there should be more academic research conducted illustrating female success on a global front.

### *2.1 Women expatriates in the Literature*

Interest in women expatriates was initiated just over 20 years ago by Izraeli, Banai and Zeira, (1980). This was soon followed with two studies by Adler (1984a, 1984b) who sought to discredit myths about women and expatriation by assessing and illustrating the desires of women to have international careers. Since these academic contributions, barring research on the female spouse of an expatriate (Bikos, Ciftci, Guneri, Demir, Sumer, Danielson, De Vries & Bilgen, 2007), there has been a number of works done on women expatriates. These studies have included research on why there are so few women expatriates as international managers as well as barriers to their participation (Adler, 1994; Linehan, Scullion & Walsh, 2001; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Paik & Vance, 2002; Fischlmayr, 2002), gender and personality differences between women and men (Guthrie, Ash & Stevens, 2003; Sinangil & Ones, 2003) as well as research considering the cross-cultural adjustment of female expatriates ( Selmer & Leung, 2003a; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002) and the success of female expatriates (Tung, 2004).

The literature revealed that addressing the issue of female expatriates and the disparity in numbers between male and female expatriates is due to Multinational Companies (MNCs) ignoring the need for flexibility in their Human Resources. Stroh and Caligiuri (1998) point out that managers of MNCs' have recognised the need to be adaptable with their products, finances, marketing and so on in order to compete effectively. However, it appears that, too often they overlook the most critical aspect of business that needs to be adaptable and that is their human resources. Linehan and Scullion (2001) draw attention to a number of studies that have found that very few women are given the opportunity to progress in their careers through international assignment. Research conducted by Linehan and Scullion (2001) on senior female expatriate managers across Europe, suggested that a main barrier for women in international assignment is actually getting to senior management position in their home country first. In slight contrast to Linehan and Scullion

(2001), Moore (2002) maintains that women are for the most part equally represented across the middle management pool from which expatriates are selected from. However, Kollinger (2005) convincingly argues that the reduced participation of women on the international front is a gender-related problem not an assignment related one and that in order to fill this gap, efforts need to be made to increase the numbers of female managers and employees in general (p. 1256-1257). Hartl (2004, p. 40) asserts that the lack of women expatriates is a reflection of a 'domestic glass ceiling' and not an indication of their ineffectiveness on international assignments or their willingness to relocate. These arguments bring to light the concept of the glass-ceiling and the struggles of women in breaking through it (Linehan & Scullion, 2001) However, there is a sense of hope in the optimistic assertion of Crowley-Henry & Weir (2007) that women and especially international women are in fact breaking through the glass ceiling at a gradual and evolving pace (p. 255).

Although the majority of those sent on international assignment are male there are a rising number of women entering the global management arena according to Selmer and Leung (2003a). The figure is placed at 13 per cent by Moore (2002) with contemporary statistics showing discrepancies in the percentage of women on expatriate assignment. The 2005 GMAC global relocation survey report places the figure at 23% and the 2005 PricewaterhouseCoopers key trends report the figure to be at around 10% and to be stable with little changes in the number of female expatriates over the last 10 years. It is useful to point out that the figure Moore (2002) puts forward is more in line with the statistics indicated by PWC (2005).

Other research illustrates a number of other reasons for the lack of female expatriate managers, such as closed and informal selection systems that may be male-biased (Selmer & Leung, 2003a) or limited networking opportunities of women in management (Linehan & Scullion, 2001), compared with men who have more co-workers in their networks giving them a professional advantage (Myers & Pringle, 2005), others such as Moore (2002) has focused on the perceptions that prevail in the corporate world about the capability and willingness of women to relocate for international assignment and the author challenges the perception that womens' inability to relocate is in most part due to issues associated with dual-career couples. The literature on female expatriation highlights that women are still a minority in international management and are still under-represented in the mostly white male, North American dominated research literature on expatriation (Napier & Taylor, 2002; Hartl, 2004; Linehan & Scullion, 2001).

#### 2.1.1 Global Careers

In the Boundaryless Career (1996) Arthur and Rousseau fused together past research on careers and career settings, their work was a call to academics and researchers to be more attuned to the realities of the labour market (Feldman & Ng, 2007). The rise in academic research on expatriation and repatriation (Paik, Segaud & Malinowski, 2002; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007) issues are indicative of the changes in the realities of the labour market today and point towards the realization of international organisations of the necessity to formulate global strategies, in order to maximise their use of talented human resources (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Selmer & Leung, 2003 a). The concept of global careers is a relatively recent concept to gain academic interest (Thomas et al, 2005) and scholars will agree that international organisations today, as they compete in a more globally connected market place (Tarique et al, 2006;), place significant importance on the global competencies of job candidates (Vance, 2005; Yan, Zhu & Hall, 2002). However, research also suggests that despite the perceived importance organisations do an insufficient job in developing these competencies in their employees (Black, Morrison & Gregersen cited in Vance, 2005, p.374) and that corporate expatriation practices are still far from successful, with failures brought about by various elements such as culture shock, adjustment problems, and the high financial costs involved (Yan et al, 2002). Moreover, the expatriate assignment literature highlights the career de-stabilising tendencies of the international assignment because of the high turnover rates on repatriation (Paik et al, 2002; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2006; Carr et al, 2005; GMAC, 2005; Yan et al, 2002). Research investigating ways to develop global leaders has been an area of uncurtailed interest amongst academics in recent times (Caligiuri, 2006). It is suggested by Caligiuri (2006) that there are certain knowledge, skills, abilities and other personality characteristics (KSAOs) necessary for competent global leaders. These KSAOs are listed in table 1. Caligiuri (2006) suggests that depending on the KSAOs of an individual, combined with the right developmental opportunities will produce leaders that can effectively and competently engage in global leadership.

#### 2.1.2 The Self-Initiated Foreign Work Experience

Alternative forms of the traditional expatriate assignment have been discussed in the literature and the term 'self-initiated foreign work experience' (SFE) has been coined (Suutari & Brewster, 2000) in contrast to 'overseas experience' (OE) (Inkson, Pringle, Arthur & Barry, 1997) and the difference between the two outlined in Suutari and Brewster, (2000). The OE is described as a phenomenon of adventurous, youths seeking geographical mobility teamed with self-learning and facilitated through self-support (Inkson et al, 1997), described by Inkson and Myers, (2003) as a "backpacker culture" (p.170) that is evident amongst young people today, and is particularly persistent in countries such as Australia and New Zealand where it is seen as a 'social norm' (Inkson & Myers, 2003, p.171). This social norm or backpacker culture reflects the wider cultural preferences to self-initiated work experiences that may be more

predominant in some cultures over others. For example, Tharenou (2003, p.490) indicates that more and more young Australian managers or professionals are also choosing to seek employment overseas. While this group may not fall into what is described as OE it does however, share characteristics of persons undergoing an SFE, which refers to individuals who travel abroad to find their own work and which is, according to Suutari and Brewster (2000) a widespread phenomenon. Unlike traditional expatriates, SFEs initiative and motivation to leave comes from themselves, and their individual goals are not organizationally defined such as is the case with traditional expatriates. SFEs are self funding and according to Suutari and Brewster (2000) are likely to represent different career stages and structures than traditional expatriates, with SFE representing early career and less professional career stages than traditional expatriates who are in more developed careers and are more likely to be in higher –level positions (p. 419).

Recent focus on the SFE in the literature, includes consideration of experiences and career development perceptions of academics (Richardson & Mallon, 2005); individual agency and motivations for working abroad (Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Vance, 2005); underemployment amongst SFEs (Lee, 2005); receptivity to working abroad (Tharenou, 2003); and the influences of gender (Myers & Pringle, 2005; Richardson, 2006). Despite this recent academic interest in studying and understanding SFEs', and the increasing trend towards career self-management (Vance, 2005), it remains evident that not much is really known about self-initiated expatriates (Richardson, 2006, p.469; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

Another important reflection for any facet of expatriation is the issue of adjustment. Selmer & Lam (2004, p. 431) discuss the importance of cultural-adjustment as a precursor for success on an international assignment and the need for cross-cultural training of expatriate assignees. Although Waxin & Panaccio (2005) found that cross-cultural training facilitates expatriate adjustment, Selmer & Lam (2004) indicate that much of this training may be insufficient and suggests that organisations could focus on candidates who already have a global mindset. One alternative available to MNCs are third-culture kids (TCKs) (Selmer & Lam, 2004, p.431). These TCKs are children of expatriates who are already of a global mindset more culturally aware and adaptable, and the implication is they would incur less cost to the organisation for pre-assignment training. While cultural dissimilarity will increase adjustment difficulties of expatriates (Selmer, Chiu & Shenkar, 2007) it is the adaptability of this group of people that Selmer & Lam (2004) draw attention to. This idea of adaptability is also advocated by Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth (2004) who highlight the need for workers today to be "highly adaptable" (p.15) because of the nature of the dynamic environment in which we live (Fugate et al, 2004). What Selmer & Lam (2004) refer to as "ready made" expatriate candidates (p. 431) could also be extended to anyone who has prior experience living in a different cultural context than ones own, such as those who have chosen to self-expatriate and who have experienced working abroad. Instead of using traditional training schemes (Caligiuri, 2006) the literature indicates that the kinds of knowledge and competencies that MNCs require of their global leaders could be developed in other ways, instead of training or through company sponsored overseas assignments (Thomas et al, 2005). It is suggested that that this is why there has been greater attention paid to understanding the outcomes for and the characteristics of those who undertake SFE (Thomas et al, 2005). Given that according to recent survey reports, reducing the cost of expatriate assignments is still a major issue for MNCs, (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005; GMAC, 2005) The assumption here is that, there is a valuable source of international labour within SFEs that MNCs should discover and utilize more effectively, as part of their internationalization strategies as well as in reducing costs (Suutari & Brewster, pp. 434-435). Lee (2005) echoes this concern, and points out that bringing in self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) who are highly qualified and skilled are crucial to business success, and international organisations should do more to develop appropriate strategies (p.173).

In relation to self-initiated female expatriates, the present literature revealed one academic article dealing specifically with the phenomenon and the influences of gender on it (Myers & Pringle, 2005). The study uses the term self-initiated foreign experiences (SFE) and provides a comparison between female and male experiences before, during and post SFE. It concluded that although relationships did not cause more constraints on them, women were more likely to see their SFE as a number of "experiences intertwined with relationships" (p.430), and that the desire for stability meant that women stayed overseas for longer accumulating more work experience.

### 2.1.3 Protean and Boundaryless Careers

Vance (2005,p.374) implies that individuals should not depend on organisations "but should be active agents in their own career development and assert themselves in developing and utilizing their global competencies" (p.374), this assertion denotes the very concept of the SIE, and in turn directs attention to the concept of the 'protean career', which is a concept that refers to the shift from organisation-based careers to one that is managed more by the individual (Yan et al, 2002; Hall & Moss, 1998) and is concerned with 'morphing' and 'adapting' professional roles over time (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007). Protean career theory focuses on the individual person and the role she plays in transforming her own career, leading to internal (psychological) success (Hall & Moss, 1998). This concept of the protean career positions the idea of SFE in a more contextual grounding and is therefore significant and necessary for discussion.

A number of academic articles refer to both the protean career (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007) as well as the boundaryless career (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Stahl et al, 2002) and those that consider the interplay and comparison of the concepts together (Briscoe, Hall & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Inkson, 2006; Briscoe & Hall, 2006) to illustrate the evolution of global careers and the changing nature of career development. Inkson (2006) looks at the two metaphors and the meanings that they elicit and argues that there is too much room for inaccuracy and variation in interpreting the two terms. The protean career according to Inkson (2006) is indicative of a personal trait that characterises a psychological orientation to ones career and will inevitably give rise to certain behaviours. Inkson (2006) then describes the boundaryless career as the observable behaviour of an internal lens from which to view the world. These definitions emphasize, as Inkson (2006) suggests, the close parallels between the two concepts (p. 57-58). The terms “self directed career” as opposed to protean career and “boundary-crossing career” instead of boundaryless career are put forward by Inkson (2006) as alternatives. The argument that the two terms need to be re-conceptualised is reiterated by Briscoe and Hall, (2006) who also point out the possibility of overlap with the concepts. Briscoe and Hall (2006) consider the boundaryless career in broad terms along “dimensions of physical and/or psychological mobility” (p.8). It is argued that it is not enough to consider the boundaryless career as physical mobility and the protean career as psychological but rather there needs to be an applicable concept that incorporates both and that sufficiently addresses both aspects of an individuals career (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Sullivan and Arthur, (2006, p. 22) acknowledge the confusion and difficulties of capturing the various types of boundaryless mobility and devised a model (See figure 1) representing the dual dimensions of the concept, to aid clarification. The model is based on the fundamental premise that a boundaryless career involves both physical and or psychological mobility. The authors provide a detailed analysis of the four “pure types” of careers represented by each of the 4 quadrants (p.23-24). From the illustrated quadrants it could be argued that those opting for an SFE are represented by the characteristics found in Quadrant four (High physical and psychological mobility). Arguably, the physical mobility evidenced from their international relocation would not only be accompanied by, but also initiated by, their changing internal focus on transforming their own careers (psychological).

#### 2.1.4 Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs)

International work experience appears to be crucial for developing the necessary competencies for success in our global environment (Vance, 2005; Hartl, 2004; Richardson & Mallon, 2005) and the diverse group of people choosing to travel abroad to find work is increasing and represents an alternative model of International careers to the one dominated by corporate expatriation (Myers & Pringle, 2005). This group of individuals travelling abroad to find their own work are identified as SIEs if they have been hired “as an individual on a contractual basis and not transferred overseas by a parent organisation” (Lee, 2005, p. 173). Suutari and Brewster (2000) identified different types of SIEs other than the flood of youths heading abroad for work and travel. Six sub-groups are defined by Suutari and Brewster (2000) in their study of graduate engineers from Finland; young opportunists, localised professionals, job seekers, international professionals, officials and dual-career couples.

On one hand it is argued that this group of SIEs’ form a larger and stronger segment of the global labour market (Inkson & Myers, 2003; Myers & Pringle, 2005), yet on the other hand there is little known about them and so an important gap remains to be filled (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Carr et al, (2005) look at the flow of migrants who expatriate themselves independent of an employer, and maintain that this group of people are a more influential group on global careers than their organisation assigned expatriate counterparts. Similarly Baruch, Budhwar and Khatri (2007), also provide academic work on the tendency for migrant students to remain abroad after their studies are complete. However, the ‘talent flow’ that Carr et al, (2005) refer to and the phenomenon of the ‘brain drain’ (Baruch et al, 2007) are more indicative of groups with immigrant status rather than those with expatriate status who intend to return to their home country sometime in the future (Richardson & Mallon, 2005).

While the decision to choose expatriation is commonly influenced by the unexpected or arising opportunity, Richardson and Mallon, (2005) found that the most influential of all decisions for individuals to choose expatriation is the search for adventure and travel. Their findings indicate that both males and females, with or without children, older or younger, were all equally likely to draw on adventure as the dominant influence on their decision to expatriate. However, Tharenou (2003, p.510) asserts that family interest and having partners, for both male and females act as a barrier to the development of interest in overseas work for young and older Australian managers. Other popular reasons found by Richardson and Mallon (2005), were life change, family reasons and to enhance career opportunities, with financial explanations and career mobility as subsidiary reasons (Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Myers and Pringle, (2005) found that social attraction; escape and exploration were the main reasons for choosing to expatriate with women going mostly for the first two: social attraction and escape. Further research by Richardson (2006) examines and seeks to explain the role of family involvement in the decision to choose self-directed expatriation and in doing so, illustrates the “centrality of personal relationships in this particular form of career decision” (p.479). Interestingly, research from a study of a small sub-group of four women following international careers indicates that family and personal life and not their careers are at the top of their priority list (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007, p. 255).

In addition to the above studies, an attempt was made by Carr et al, (2005), in their study on the psychology of migration, to find answers to why people choose to internationalise their career (p.389). They suggest that there are economic, cultural, family, career and a mixture of these that operate as 'push' and 'pull' factors in the decision to go abroad and or to return home (Carr et al, 2005). Tharenou (2003) discusses the receptivity of young Australians to relocate and work abroad, and maintains that receptivity to foreign work experiences are due to a combination of personal agency, perceived barriers as well as available opportunities (p.509). Sullivan and Arthur, (2006) suggest that women may have less freedom because of family responsibilities to take on physical mobility while Myers and Pringle (2005) report that women did not face any specific constraints because of relationships and that the relationships played a similar role in decision-making for both men and women (p.425).

In a similar vein, Vance (2005) who takes an in-depth look at 'pre-international' career path strategies for gaining international business experience focuses on the internal drivers of expatriate career development. Vance (2005) suggests that there may be different approaches that women follow for gaining international career experience and that more women than men appear to take the self-expatriation track. The indication that there are a higher number of self-expatriated women is corroborated by Suutari and Brewster (2000) who found that there are a much higher percentage of women who seek work abroad on their own initiative (p. 422). This is a point which is worth considering and one that begs the question whether there is a relationship between the low percentages of female traditional expatriates on assignment with the high number of women choosing SFEs? These ponderings as well as the dearth of information on self-initiated expatriates in general (Richardson, 2006; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) have led to the first research question:

*RQ1: What influences female managers to choose a self-initiated international work experience?*

#### 2.1.4.1 Career Development and SIEs

The rise in expatriate literature while beneficial has been traditionally attuned to issues of selection (Mol, Born, Willemsen & Van Der Molen, 2005; Tarique et al, 2006; Tharenou & Harvey, 2006; Caligiuri, 2000) and especially on the adjustment issues of expatriates, as well as on areas of cross-cultural training and other training requirements needed (Selmer, et al, 2007; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005; Pires, Stanton & Ostefeld, 2006). While there seems to be a dearth of information on the relationship between career development and the foreign assignment (Riusala & Suutari, 2000), it is suggested in the literature that it is probable that men and women will act out their careers in different ways due to gender differences perceived socially and psychologically (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Fischlmyr, 2002; Myers & Pringle, 2005). It is argued by Yan et al, (2002), that in the long term the most important concern for those on an expatriate assignment regardless of gender is career development and their expectations on repatriation for building their career shapes their psychological contract with their MNC (p.377). In the case of SFEs Myers and Pringle (2005) support the view that SFE provides the possibilities for accelerated development and individual career enhancement (p.430). They speculate that the desire for security and stability that drives women to stay overseas longer actually affords them greater expatriate experience and "a gateway into global careers" (p.430), however, their research found that SFEs provided more personal development than it did career development (p.427). In addition it has been identified that, family life was found to have great influence on women's expatriate careers in terms of delaying, terminating or interrupting it (Tzeng, 2006, p. 390). Richardson and Mallon, (2005) conducted a study based on self-directed expatriate academics and found that a large number of participants were conscious of the fact that the marketability and positive recognition of their work experience on return home, would depend on the country they were in and the work that they did. The same study also showed that competencies and knowledge acquired must be appropriate to the required competencies for their job back home.

The concept of employability put forward by Fugate et al (2004) is considered here. The concept of employability is viewed as a psycho-social construct that requires certain individual characteristics to exist in order to adapt and acquire the required KSAOs to "enhance the individual-work interface" (p.15). To be employable requires pro-activeness to ensure improvement and ability to adapt to changing times and work environments (Fugate et al, 2004). Rothwell and Arnold (2007) maintain that the notion of employability is significant because in times where long-term employment in the same company is not guaranteed, it is critical to remain attractive in the labour market (p.24). In their study on self-perceived employability of Human Resources professionals, Rothwell and Arnold (2007), distinguish between two distinct yet correlated terms; self-perceived employability and subjective career success. Self-perceived employability refers to an individual's capacity to move to the top of the labour market in the future, whereas subjective career success refers to a current reflection and evaluation of past experiences (p. 26). A quick scan through the literature on expatriate career success revealed that most expatriates hold the view that an international work experience will enhance their career on return leading to greater career success (Bolino, 2007, Stahl et al, 2002), therefore enhancing their employability (future state) (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Although, this literature refers to the traditional expatriate it is interesting to consider the perceived career implications that SIE hold, in order to better understand the possible implications and outcomes of an SFE. This leads to the second research question:

*RQ2: How do the overseas work experiences of self-initiated professional female expatriates effect their perceptions of their career development and employability.*

#### 2.1.5 Discrimination

Scott and Brown, (2006) indicate that recent research suggests that a considerable amount of bias prevails against women, quite commonly due to the 'communal and expressive' stereotype of the female as opposed to the 'aggressive and dominant' stereotype of males which is normally associated with the leader prototype. The authors conclude that because of this, bias forms against women because they are not perceived to be a strong fit for leadership positions (p.232). Kollinger (2005) substantiates the argument suggesting that gender inequality and discrimination in the workforce against women exists and is reflected in the reasons why there are so few female expatriate managers. It is accepted that although there has been improvements in the status of women at work there is still a lot of gender discrimination that prevails (Tzeng, 2006). In the study of how female expatriates in MNCs confront the issues of gender and discrimination, Tzeng (2006) concluded that gender discrimination towards women living abroad exists particularly from males of the same ethnic background and the women reported that discrimination was still an issue with their male superiors. The research also found that men are less willing to support their wives foreign assignments than women have traditionally been in the past in supporting their husbands (pp.389-390). The unwillingness of husbands to support their wives could be linked to the lack of support that companies actually give to support male expatriate spouses (Selmer & Leung, 2003b). Again, this study reflects the reality of traditional expatriates, which in consequence led to the third and final research question:

*RQ3: Do self-initiated professional female expatriates experience discrimination while overseas?*

## 2. Methodology

The aim of this study is to learn about the professional women who live and work abroad as opposed to building or testing theory (Napier & Taylor, 2002). In attempting to better understand what influences self-initiated female expatriates to take on international work experiences, how their experiences effects the nature of their career concept and the extent to any issues of discrimination they may face, the researcher interviewed 10 self-initiated expatriate female managers currently living and working in the Cayman Islands. Due to a shortage of literature in this area an exploratory approach was considered most appropriate (Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

### 2.1 The Location

The Cayman Islands is an overseas territory of the United Kingdom and is comprised of three islands, a total of 102sq miles combined. As one of the top five financial centres in the world, the primary industries in Cayman are financial services, tourism, and real estate sales and development (About Cayman, n.d). The 2005 Population and Vital Statistics document shows the population of Cayman to be at 52,465 in 2005 a 44.4 estimated rate of increase from the previous year. 31,787 of the total are Caymanian and 20,679 non-Caymanian (expatriates) which represents 39% of the total population. The 2006 Labour Force Survey shows that 43.5% of the total employed expatriate population are female with the figure for their employed male counterparts at 55%. These statistics illustrate a unique picture where a large number of expatriates live at almost equal numbers to locals on a very small mass of land. The number of female expatriates in particular, that are resident and employed on the island, gave the research a potentially large population from which to obtain a sample.

The location was chosen out of convenience and the researchers' personal knowledge of the island and its high self-initiated expatriate population. While the Cayman Islands is a micro-state and represents a relatively unexplored area of research, (Mehmet & Tahiroglu, 2002), the islands smallness, in both area and population, does not reflect a constraint on its economic status (Mehmet & Tahiroglu, 2002) nor on its popularity as a location for SIEs.

### 2.2 Research Design

In adherence to the research philosophy and theoretical framework, the design of this research project will be qualitative (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Richardson, 2006) rather than quantitative in nature (Kollinger, 2007; Briscoe, Hall, Frautschy & DeMuth, 2006). Studies of this sort may have been enriched if conducted as a longitudinal inquiry (Bikos et al, 2007), however, neither time, circumstance nor financial resources allowed for a longitudinal approach.

The preferred way to obtain suitable data for in a phenomenological study that will make use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p.127), with the aim of producing rich and meaningful data about a small number of people (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2006; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Vance, 2005; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Myers & Pringle, 2005; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Fischlmayr, 2002).

#### 2.2.1 The sample

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) define a sample design as "representing the framework within which the sampling occurs, comprising the number and types of sampling schemes as well as the sample size (p. 239). This study reflects a

qualitative exploration of self-initiated female manager expatriates who represent a sub-group of all self-initiated expatriate managers in the Cayman Islands. The sample design used for this research project involves the selection of a small sample through a combination of purposeful sampling strategies and is explained in detail below which conforms to a phenomenological approach.

It is maintained by Smith and Osborn (2008, p.55) that small samples sizes are commonly used when taking an IPA approach, where depth rather than breadth is achieved and where conducting a meticulous case-by case analysis is quite time consuming. With this in mind, it is important to point out that for the purposes of this study and the resources available to the researcher; the sample size included a total of 10 women. Once on the island and the process of face to face interviewing was underway, four women from the initial sample backed out of taking part due to changes in their circumstances. This type of occurrence in a research project is not uncommon given the lapse of time between initial contact and timing of the interviews as was also noted by (Tzeng, 2006, p. 381). In the end a sample size with verbatim interview transcripts of six women were obtained and used for the IPA. The final sample consisted of six female professional expatriates representing six industry sectors; retail, public sector, telecommunications, recruitment, utilities and legal services. They represent four countries, the UK, New Zealand, and the Philippines. All women had been on the island as expatriates for one or more years at the time of the interviews and occupied positions across a range of job titles; HR manager, Government Director, Manager, Vice President of finance, Vice President, Internal Audit Manager. Three of the six women had attained undergraduate education; one had attained undergraduate as well as professional qualifications, and two attained post-graduate level. Two of the participants fell into the 40-49 age-group, three into the 30-39 age-group, and one into the 20-29 age-group. Two of the sample were married at the time of interviewing and the others were unmarried with one having a partner who remained in the UK. None of the participants had children and only two had been on previous international work experiences in the past. A listing and demographic profile of the female expatriate sample used in this study is presented in table 2 (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007; Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005; Stahl et al, 2002; Lee, 2005; Tzeng, 2006; Vance, 2005; Richardson & Mallon, 2005).

#### 2.2.1.1 Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy adopted in this study aimed to gain an insight into a particular population within a specific location. It was also important, given the resources available to the researcher, that there be a degree of assurance that the data gathered will be of direct relevance to the study being carried out (Anderson, 2004, p.162). Consequently, the sampling strategy selected was carried out through purposeful selection of individuals for participation.

The sample was gathered through a combination of sampling techniques that represent a non-probability, purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002, pp.230-243) and does not claim to be representative of the total population of female manager expatriates (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 200; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007, p.230). While, snowball sampling has proven successful in past research projects of a similar nature (Myers & Pringle, 2005; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Janssens, et al, 2006), it was deemed too time consuming and rife with the potential for bias as a method on its own. Therefore, a combined approach was adopted, using criterion and emergent sampling. A combination of the two techniques was used because of the assumption that locating and accessing professional female self-initiated expatriates would prove difficult, and having a number of techniques available would improve chances of finding a quality sample.

To qualify for inclusion the participants had to meet certain criteria. All participants had to be female and had to have chosen to expatriate to the Cayman Islands themselves as opposed to being sent on assignment by an international organisation. They had to be working professionals at the time of interview, must have been on island for 1 or more years and must have intentions to return to their home country or elsewhere sometime in the future. The latter criterion emphasises the participants' status as an expatriate rather than an immigrant (Richardson & Mallon, 2005, p. 412) or Caymanian permanent resident or status holder.

Request letters were sent directly to a number of human resource directors in various multinational companies on the island, for listings of potential participants. Silverman (2006, p.81) describes this type of research setting as 'private' characterised by the need to go through a 'gatekeeper' to gain access to the research sample. This method did not lead to any responses and so an alternative approach was taken. As asserted by various scholars, there can be a number of difficulties in trying to gain access to participants in international research and suggestions to overcome some of these difficulties include utilizing personal contacts (Hutchings, 2003; Richardson & Mallon 2005; Vance 2005) and the use of email for gaining initial direct access to potential participants as well as for potential post-interview follow up questions (Richardson, 2006). The use of personal contacts was extremely helpful and convenient in locating and gaining access to participants in the Cayman Islands. The Cayman Islands Society of Human Resource Professionals (CISHRP) were also contacted and voted in favour of assisting in the search for participants for this study. An initial response of 10 women who met the criteria and who were willing to take part initiated contact. Once contact was made, communication was facilitated through the use of email, through which preliminary telephone interviews and face to face interviews were arranged.



### 2.3 Data Collection

With the research objectives and design in mind; in -depth interviews were considered the most appropriate method for data collection, because it was regarded as an opportunity to build a positive relationship between researcher and interviewee in order to gather information that genuinely illustrated the unique stories of the individuals involved (Anderson, 2004, p 149-151). Interviews were conducted initially via telephone from Ireland, from which preliminary demographic data was collected and a follow up face to face interview arranged in Cayman. The face to face interviews provided a more in-depth, information rich discussion and were conducted at the interviewees' place of work or at a neutral location in order to create a relaxed comfortable environment (Fischlmayer, 2002). The interviews were between 40 and 50 minutes in length and were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed enough flexibility to allow participants to give their stories in their own way while ensuring a basic line of inquiry was followed throughout (Patton, 2002, p. 343-344; Richardson, 2006; Vance, 2005; Myers and Pringle, 2005; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Janssens et al, 2006; Hartl, 2004; Linehan, 2001). Interviews were recorded via digital recorder which allowed for the researcher to concentrate on asking questions and listening in order to build a relationship defined by a good rapport and trust with the interviewee (Anderson, 2004, p.151-152). The interviews were then downloaded to PC, to ensure answers and discussions were accurately collected and could be listened to a number of times after the event. Each interview transcript was read over and summarised in order to identify any gaps that may have occurred during initial data collection and to include the personal thoughts, reflections and ideas of the researcher, by way of a summary sheet (Anderson, 2004, p.178). This process of summarising the interview also aided subsequent analysis of the data.

### 2.4 Analysis

IPA was used which included the development of a thematic network where a number of common themes were drawn out from the interview transcripts. The choice of IPA as the analytic method for this study was determined by the phenomenological focus and approach of the research and was deemed the most appropriate means of deepening understanding of the experiences and career perceptions within a specific sup-group of professional women. It is frequently pointed out throughout academic texts on Qualitative analysis that there is no 'one' right way to analyse or interpret data and there is no single approach in qualitative analysis that is widely accepted (Neuman, 2006, p.457). In agreement with this, Smith and Osborn (2008, p.67) reiterate that qualitative analysis is a 'personal process' and as such the methods used here reflect the personal style of the researcher while following general guidelines advocated by Smith & Osborn (2008).

#### 2.4.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

An IPA analysis was specifically created for investigating how people make sense of their lived experiences (Millward, 2005, p.319; Chapman & Smith, 2002, p.126). This approach was very much dependent on the participants' abilities to express their thoughts and experiences sufficiently so that an interpretation could then be made. In addition to this an IPA approach depends heavily on the ability of the researcher to 'reflect and analyse' (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.88). Thus, IPA involves what Smith & Osborn (2008, p.53) refer to as a 'two -stage interpretation process' where participants make sense of their world and the researchers role is to make sense of their participants sense making process. Inevitably then, this method is connected with hermeneutics and interpretation theory in addition to its phenomenological origins (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.53). This approach involves a detailed case by case analysis of each individual transcript and begins with a thematic network but goes beyond this to produce a 'detailed interpretative analysis of themes' portrayed through a narrative account, illustrating a movement from description to interpretation (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.89). IPA was used in order to produce an interpretation of the phenomenon of study that is rooted in the data (Mann & Abraham, 2006, p.159).

IPA was conducted on verbatim transcripts in accordance with Smith and Osborn (2008) guidelines. Discerning meaning through a close and interpretative relationship with the data was the central purpose of the analysis. Each interview was looked at separately and the analysis began with an intensive and detailed reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and notes so the researcher was familiarized with the contents. Any significant and potential meanings were noted down to the left of the transcripts. Once complete the transcripts were re-read this time to note any emerging themes, from the initial notes that capture the essence and importance of the text. Some transcripts were found to produce more themes than others reflecting the richness of those particular interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.70). A preliminary list of initial themes was created from which a second list connecting the themes was created, illustrating the clustering of these themes into a smaller number of higher-order ones that were checked against participants' phrases to ensure they supported the connections made. A table of themes was then developed by giving a name to the clusters of themes to form superordinate themes. The themes from the first transcript were used to help direct subsequent analysis of transcripts while ensuring that similarities and differences were highlighted between the accounts until a table of master themes was arrived at for the entire sample. Because the researchers interests lay in the subjective experiences of the participants, this method of data analysis and presentation was chosen in order to give voice to the women whose lives reflect this reality and whose concerns must remain at the fore (Grbich, 2007, p. 9; Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 32).

### 3. Findings

The findings presented below include verbatim examples from participant transcripts. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the women who took part. Four main themes were generated from the analysis of the participants' interviews. The first relates to choosing expatriation and the factors and processes involved, the second refers to the various challenges experienced by the women, the third theme deals with factors of discrimination that are experienced and managed by the participants and the final theme relates to the value of international experience as perceived by the six women taking part.

#### 3.1 Choosing Expatriation

What was most evident about the decision making process to take on an international experience, was that there were a number of combined factors culminating in a final decision to leave. The combination of reasons varied across the sample with a focus on career as a highly influential factor and one that was mentioned by all women. It was also evident that the location was of importance in terms of desiring a certain lifestyle, as well as the perceived effect the location could have on their careers. This is evident in the following excerpt from Chloe who illustrated this theme.

*Chloe: I was working in investment banking but in the legal department so this would have been my first opportunity to work for a law firm, that was good and working with hedge funds, structured finance. I wouldn't have just come for any job, the job was good as well and it (would) look good on my CV, so it was probably half and half actually (because) I wouldn't have come to any island. When I resigned my boss said if you just want to leave London, we've got a position in our Hong Kong office and I said no I don't want to go to Hong Kong, I want to go to Cayman, Cayman is the reason and its cause it is a big centre for hedge funds and its going to be great to get that experience and get that on the CV, yes Hong Kong is offshore but I thought (about) the lifestyle, it was the sun, sea the scuba diving it was all that combined with a good job and a good name, (names Law firm of employment) is a great name.*

Similarly Patricia acknowledges the dual influences on her decision to expatriate to the Cayman Islands.

*Patricia: I was looking for somewhere else where I could practice being an accountant and earn the same if not more than I was making in UK at the time, and Cayman, well the choices were Cayman, Bermuda um I preferred to go offshore cause I wanted somewhere warm as well... Basically just find a job that I'd enjoy really, I wasn't enjoying the commute in London, it was taking me an hour and half to get to London each day; my job in Sovereignty was interesting, I got to do a lot of client facing work, like on a first base client facing work, but I just thought like, I'm an accountant and there's got to be a better place to be an accountant in this world (laughs) and I've got to find it, and so I came here, so it was also for my career.*

For one of the participants the decision to opt for SFE stemmed from a desire for a new start where familiarity with the location also played an influential role in terms of choice of location. One woman expressed an innate desire to work abroad, another woman strongly indicated that timing was everything and it was the right time to do it. There were a number of contributing factors involved in all the cases with the most common cited as having no ties, a discontent with their current lifestyle and a desire for independence as well as taking on the challenge. For two of the respondents having past experience of working abroad and a history and love of travelling made the decision much easier to make. There were a number of other factors evolving from certain pro-active behaviours displayed by these women that also influenced their decisions to leave. The most common behaviours included networking, seeking job opportunities, and visiting the location prior to moving. Three of the participants visited the island, to follow up on leads from their own research, or through networking at home as well as to see whether they liked the island and the culture. Presented here is an excerpt from Brenda's transcript that illustrates the process she undertook with her husband before moving to the Cayman Islands.

*Brenda: ...what I did was, literally go onto a web site called careers in the sun or something along those lines, and I found a position with sports supply we basically conversed through emails and had spoken to them on the phone. Wasn't 100% sure that it was going to be the right position for me, but what we decided to do is to come across and meet the gentleman in question to see if it was going to be the right career move for us. So we came across on an unofficial working holiday to span it out. I met with the gentleman and it really wasn't something that I wanted to be involved with. It was a sales position, and, it really wasn't something that I'd had a lot of back ground in; but it appealed to my husband and so they offered him the position. And they saw my resume and saw that I was actually in HR, so he faxed my resume across to (a contact), so I had an interview with him the next day and was offered the position in HR, which is really bizarre.*

This process is highlighted once more by Chloe, who came to visit the island on holiday as well as to meet potential employers that had been arranged through a contact in the UK. During this visit, Chloe similarly describes how events unravelled quickly, leading to job offers.

*Chloe: I love to do scuba diving and I've never been here so I thought right I always wanted to come, so I'm going to do it. Go on holiday and whilst I'm there, I'd like to see the buildings and see what they do, and Nancy was the first*

person I met and got on really well with. I found it quite formal walking into this building with all the boardrooms, it wasn't quite what I was expecting in a Caribbean law firm and it was the most formal and the most structured, three person interview panel. I thought I was just coming in for a chat you know I wasn't really prepared for it but perhaps I was quite relaxed so it was quite nice. The day after I met Nancy, somebody resigned and she thought it was just fate, she called me in my hotel and said come back meet the directors cause we've got a job. And it was a bit scary really and (names another law firm) offered me a job as well and I thought well ...wow...how did that happen.

### 3.2 Facing Challenges

It was clear that whether one had visited the island, had prior international experience or was new to life as an expatriate, all had encountered and experienced a number of challenges that relate specifically to the location as well as their personal lives. The most pre-dominant and number one reported theme here was the experience of the working environment as a stressor in their lives. Four of the six women reported that work was a source of major frustration for them and more specifically the 'work ethic' that appears to dominate. Having lived and worked overseas for all of her working life, Courtney explains how difficult it has been to adapt to the prevailing work ethic at her company.

*Courtney: there have been frustrations work wise; the work environment is very different to big international organisations like what's based in London and such.. and so, I come from an environment and have had a lot of jobs before that have been delivery focused. I've had a lot of roles managing projects, where you have a schedule where you have to meet deadlines and I don't feel it moves so quickly here and to be someone who is very focused on delivering at this stage, deliver deliver deliver, and a company here where I don't feel the general pace is the same, its been really frustrating for me. I feel a little like to make one step forward I have to bang my head against the wall a lot, professionally.*

Two of the participants are from the Philippines and elaborated on the differences in the work ethic that exists in their countries compared to what they are faced with now. Both women commented that co-worker behaviours and attitudes to work were so different to their home countries that adapting to this new work environment posed a challenge to them. Outside of the work ethic of co-workers other factors contributing to the challenges faced at work included being landed with unexpected and difficult job descriptions, and working with a multitude of nationalities.

While work-life seemed to be central to many of their accounts it was also evident that the participants experienced further challenges outside the world of work. These were seen with adjusting to the culture, financial difficulties due to the high cost of living, facing local/expatriate divide, and difficulties with building deep relationships. Sarah's description best describes the experience of culture shock:

*Sarah: the first day I came over, I was so shocked because back home Sundays are like, its like, times square all over, there are crowds and crowds all over, and , I arrive on a Saturday and the next say is Sunday and I don't see any people outside my Hotel, it seems like a ghost town, so the feeling of being in such a small country with too few people compared to where I 'm coming from it was, jarring, and it sets you up for homesickness, and loneliness.*

In dealing with these feelings of displacement the majority of the participants displayed, what is referred to here, as a pro-active attitude by seeking activities and clubs to join. Daniella referred to this as "making my life as normal as possible". Some of the participants chose to take part in local activities or took up a hobby such as scuba diving or opting for volunteer work. One of the participants mentioned turning to church as a refuge and as a way to find and make new friends, to help in her adjustment. Two of the participants discussed with fondness, the 'expat society' that they are a part of and described it as a "support network" where there's "always some one there to have a chat with". For most of the participants positive and open minded attitudes were paramount to being able to succeed on an international experience. Adjectives such as "outgoing" "keen" "positive" and "open-minded" were used by the women to describe the attributes they believed were essential in order to succeed in their situation. Most of the participants reported that most of their friends were expatriates and they felt that this was quite normal but were aware of various 'sub-cultures' in existence on the island that makes it difficult to adjust to a 'Caymanian' culture per se and causes a divide between expatriates and locals. Courtney describes her difficulties in identifying a uniquely caymanian culture amongst all the sub-cultures and explains that it is more common for those who are alike to stick together.

*Courtney: there are so many people from so many different parts of the world, that to adapt to the culture you could be adapting to the ex-pat culture...or you could be adapting to the Caymanian culture, or to the Jamaican culture, there's lots of sub cultures. Generally I have found it good, we haven't integrated an awful lot with the Caymanian society in terms of friends and family, we have some close friends that are Caymanian but most of our friends are expats, and I think that's just a natural move, Jamaicans tend to socialise with Jamaicans cause they're similar you know they have the same backgrounds same values and I think that's one of the reasons why we've just naturally made more friends with expats.*

While one participant deliberately sought to not integrate completely in the expatriate society and chose along with her husband to actively take part in the community and maintain a balance of friends, it was more common for participants

to have a higher ratio of expatriate friends. Patricia refers to the transience of the island as a challenge to her making and keeping deep relationships with people. While she also alludes to the general sense of segregation that occurs, she does not feel that it is a problem that causes concern to her.

*Patricia: Cayman is a difficult place, with regard to trying to adopt any sort of local culture, cause again the place is so transient and you get a lot of expats here who bring a lot of their own culture and the reality is, it turns into a massive melting pot, also I mean, although there isn't a deliberate segregation of locals vs expats, that's what, you know, tends to happen... I have a few Caymanian friends but I have more expatriate friends, but I think that's a general rule in Cayman for everybody.*

While the participants noticeably played down the affects of the segregation that exists between expatriates and locals what was almost unanimous was the discrimination that exists and the encounters they have directly or indirectly experienced, against expatriates. It was clear that perceived local attitudes about expatriates, paired and at times fuelled by the policies of the Government contributed to very real experiences of discrimination.

### 3.3 Discrimination

The most prevalent issue of discrimination faced by the participants was surrounding the area of their expatriate identity, with only two reporting that discrimination based on their gender was a minor problem. These two women reported the presence of an 'old boys network' at their place of work and while there was little direct discrimination against them, it existed by the exclusion of them from it. One woman felt that she had to justify herself a lot more than her male counterparts when she made decisions but was adamant that she never discusses her gender and uses her knowledge and understanding of her male co-workers to solve any problems she may encounter with them. However, a number of participants discussed that expatriate discrimination seems to be a part of the culture, and is a social norm that is encouraged by the Government of the Cayman Islands through their policies. Most of the participants described how expatriates are forced to accept the situation, if they wish to stay on the island and are faced with circumstances where they "feel scared about saying something" for fear of their permits being revoked and where they live with "some kind of threat over their heads". Chloe describes the shock and injustice she felt when reading letters submitted to the local newspaper, and the subsequent defensiveness that a number of the participants exuded, when discussing the matter.

*Chloe: ...reading the papers and the way they really don't want the expats here, I've found that completely shocking, I came in, if there had been someone else who could have done my job they'd have got a job, I wasn't just chosen cause I was English, I've got two degrees, a finance degree and a law degree and all this management experience and there wasn't anyone here that Nancy could find and she had to keep looking but you know.... some of the letters they write or things that are written in the paper, you just wouldn't be allowed to write it in an English paper, you'd be put you up before the European courts of Human rights, (for) discriminating against people.*

Illustrating the dissonance one feels when confronted with abrasive situations because of her expatriate identity and the effects that this can have on building relationships, and on performance at work, as well as the feeling of being forced to accept it, is outlined below by Courtney:

*Courtney: ...in sessions where we are planning for the future, I have made comments about what I think the direction should be and have had comments made back along the lines of ' that's our business as Caymanians, its got nothing to do with you' and things like that so yes I have had, definitely felt that my opinion wasn't as welcome because of my status as a foreigner... it doesn't encourage bonding with those individuals, it makes me feel like backing away from those people with my professional opinions and personally as well. Every time you hear those comments and you get knocked back you have a decision to make, whether you fight it, and I don't think you are going to win, so you have to decide are you going to be all aggressive and fight which isn't necessarily going to help the next time you have a work permit to be reviewed, or are you just going to shut up and let it go and that's what I tend to do, which isn't, I don't think it's the right thing, if it was happening to my daughter or my friend I wouldn't advise that. But you are always held to ransom by your work permit and your 7 year status and those types of things and I have seen examples in my company where expats have had letters written up to the government completely falsifying, just to try and get rid of someone who is different and I don't want to go down that path so its not worth it, so I think you give less, I think professionally you give less and personally you do.*

What was noticeable was that while the segregated society may fuel and be fuelled by prejudiced attitudes it is also functions as a source of refuge, where the participants could turn to their support network of expatriate friends to get away from the insecurity and instability that comes with being an expatriate in Cayman. The participants also spoke of dealing with these feelings by ignoring them or by trying to empathise with locals.

Although the women painted a picture of living with uncertainty and discrimination all of them spoke of the satisfaction they feel living and working overseas. They were happy, content and enjoyed the lifestyle and the environment around them. The participants felt positive and in some cases inspired for their future which made amends for the negative experiences they may feel surrounding their expatriate identity on the island.

### 3.3 Value of International Experience

Five of the six women reflected on their time so far and reported that they have grown both professionally and on a personal level. Two participants indicated that their inter-personal and communication skills have grown “leaps and bounds” and another mentioned that her “confidence” has improved. Five of the six participants reported that they have learned many new skills in their jobs and one woman has been challenged in ways that made her “strong enough to move forward”. Two women reported that their jobs and the technical and organisation skills developed were the crucial factor in determining future career success. For these women it was the job and not the experience of working internationally that was most important. This sentiment is illustrated by Daniellas comments:

*Daniella: I have something to add, some significant items I could add to (my CV), so it would add to my employability.(and) it's what I have done abroad, not really the country or being abroad, but what I have done abroad is what matters.*

An alternative feeling to this is held by Chloe who holds positive perceptions of international experience and the effects it can have on future career.

*Chloe: just having offshore experience on your CV is great (and) it can only ever benefit your career , cause people know its taken quite a bit of you to come out of your comfort zone, and go abroad and try something new, so it'll always help.*

It was perceptions such as Chloe's that were predominant amongst participant responses, with some of the participants highly in favour of international experiences and the benefits that can be reaped from taking one on. Courtney whose career has been built on the international front best highlights these positive feelings when asked whether she felt her international experience would benefit her career:

*Courtney: I very strongly do, I guess its kind of like asking the pope what he thinks of being Catholic...I do because I see people who have spent 20 years in the same company, in the same country in the same job and In some respects, unless they are really hungry to advance themselves you become complacent, I think, not always, but I'm generalising, and once you become complacent I think its very easy for someone on the outside to come in and sneak into the next available management position without you being considered cause you haven't grown your skills. I don't think I'd be where I am now if I didn't move around as much as I have... I think you can increase your salary by moving in different companies cause you move up faster than if you stay within the same one, so I think it can have financial benefits, I think the world is changing like that, I think we travel more as a people so its more accepted as well.*

Patricia, who has undergone a career change while being in Cayman, is extremely pleased with her career, her social life and the country in which she is living. In a similar vein to Courtney's sentiments Patricia feels very strongly that working offshore is a very positive move to make in terms of building and developing a career and achieving success a lot quicker than what would be had in ones home country.

*Patricia: I think that if anyone is bright and really wants to get ahead then offshore is probably really the best thing you can do for your career. In London, there's that whole added, you know, too many fish in the pond or whatever it is, here there is less competition for the roles available and also people tend to take more of a chance with employees, you know, my boss took a chance on me, I'd never done recruitment before so he just said well, I know you and I think you could do it and that would just never happen in London. In London, if I was to change careers and move into recruitment, I would have to start at the very bottom... and I would be there for 5, 6, 7, 8 years even before I even get promoted to the place I am now and for me it happened within a yea here, so...I mean if I were to go back home now, with the experience I've got here, offshore recruitment experience, I'd pretty much expect to walk in to a role at the same level that I am at now.*

Working with many different nationalities, although presented as a challenge by one participant, was favourably accepted by the rest, who saw the experience as improving their cultural awareness and “tolerance”. The perception was that such an experience will make one a more “interesting candidate” or be seen as a “plus factor” to future employers. These perceptions centred mostly on aspects of personal development as enhancing their career prospects.

*Patricia: international experience, means employers see you as more rounded individual able to take more risks even, you know, able to cope with situations,(and) move out of your comfort zone.*

Having had the experience of living and working in Cayman, all of the women taking part felt that they would take on another international experience and the sense of achievement has inspired them all to think of the future differently in terms of what they want. This idea is illustrated below:

*Brenda: Its kind of given me a different outlook on life as well, in terms of, for myself I've decided that if I was in the position that I couldn't stay here, rolled over or whatever it might be, then I would probably go for a career change, seeing that I've got to the level now, I've enjoyed it but I want to try something a bit different... something environmental.*

*Patricia: I mean I have thought about leaving Cayman in the past, the problem is, I don't know where else I would go, I think I made the best decision coming here, so I'm not entirely sure where else I would go and still have the same opportunities as I have here. Business is going well, my social life is great and I'm very happy. I've been here almost three years now and it's been good, and I would absolutely do it again. Initially I was here for a year but then I got my job and I got my two year contract and so that was my time limit really, my two year contract has ended and I'm still here. And then every time I go home, everyone seems so miserable, everyone here is quite happy, so I don't think I'll be leaving anytime soon.*

While all but one of the participants were unsure about how long they would remain on the island, they all reported that the seven year immigration policy introduced by government would be the most influential factor in their decision to leave. These thoughts suggest that these women are looking for a sense of permanency and stability in their lives. This was also illustrated across the sample with a number of women going through a change of mindset in terms of how long their stay would be. It was commonly reported that they have opted to stay longer than originally intended. One woman's desire for stability was choosing to leave the island and the insecurity that comes with it so that she could settle down and start a family. When asked whether she would have made the decision to leave if the roll over policy was not in existence Courtney had this to say.

*Courtney: it's unlikely, generally my husband and I have always said that we would eventually go back home in the south pacific somewhere but I don't think I would have chased opportunities as hard as I have done now. It's just the hassle factor as well and not feeling settled, although as expats you maybe never feel quite as settled, but it would have been nice to think about staying here longer, whereas now the thought of staying longer is tied with all the hassle involved and the complications. Now that I'm at the age where I'd like to start a family, my sister is having children, my parents are getting older and it has a pull towards home for us now for myself and for my husband so, I think, although there's plenty of expat women who have children overseas, for me I'm more encouraged to look for a posting close to home, cause you can't live out of a suitcase forever.*

#### **4. Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of self-initiated professional female expatriates by way of the three research questions that were generated to help elucidate on matters such as what influences female professionals to choose a self-initiated international work experience, how the overseas work experiences of professional female self-initiated expatriates effect their perceptions of their future career and employability and finally, whether self-initiated professional female expatriates experience discrimination while overseas.

The findings presented above shed light on all three areas presented by the research questions. Participant responses illustrated that there were a number of influences combined that led to their SIE. Unlike studies of self-directed academics (Richardson & Mallon, 2005) career was identified as one of the major incentives to expatriation for professional females in this study. Another important influence was the location, the participants demonstrated careful and strategic thought processes when deciding where to take on their SFE. Contributory factors were; having no ties, dissatisfaction with current lifestyle, the right timing, desire for a challenge and seeking independence. It was clear that there were many factors involved in making the final decision. The participants unanimously held positive perceptions of their international experiences and felt that in one way or the other it would benefit their career prospects and their employability. All participants believed that they would take on another international overseas in the future. While few of the women reported experiences of gender discrimination most of them reported experiencing either direct or indirect discrimination because of their identity as an expatriate. They were able to manage this by seeking support within expatriate society, ignoring it or trying to empathise with and understand local attitudes.

The experiences of these six women working in the Cayman Islands indicate that professional women are pro-active in taking control of their own careers as is characterised by the protean career concept (Crowly-Henry & Weir, 2007; Briscoe et al, 2006; Inkson, 2006). They have displayed risk taking behaviours in the search for personal and career related challenges. Unlike those that take on an OE (Inkson et al, 1997; Inkson & Myers, 2003) the participants in this research are career focused and have found a way to enrich themselves by personal and professional development through SFE. This study as shown that the participants consistently reported positive perceptions of their future career prospects and employability because of their international work experience, which corroborates what has been found with traditional expatriates (Bolino, 2007; Stahl et al, 2002; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007). The proposition put forward by Suutari and Brewster (2000) that SFEs are more likely to represent early and less professional career stages was not evident in this study. The participants reflect women working in professional positions at managerial and senior management levels. Over half the sample chose an SFE in the middle of their already developed careers, while one participant had had continuous international experience from the start of her career. The participants illustrated areas of competencies across all levels of Caligiuris' (2006) table of KSAOs for competency in global leadership. This indicates that it is possible that professional women SIEs could offer a "ready made" candidate to MNCs (Selmer & Lam, 2004).

#### 4.1 Conclusions

In light of the three research questions guiding this research, it can be seen firstly that the decision to expatriate for professional females can be understood in terms of a multi-factor decision making process. In answer to the second research question it has been illustrated that positive perceptions of career prospects and future employability are held by these female professionals, and are seen as a consequence of their overseas work experience. Finally, the discrimination encountered by professional expatriate females in the Cayman Islands, is mostly due to their identity as expatriates but does not impair their overall positive experiences of living and working in the Cayman Islands.

This topic area would be enhanced by a longitudinal study comparing the perceptions professional women have of their future career prospects with what occurs once they have completed an initial international experience. Other potential research could look at the effects of discrimination on work performance, or on the potential for MNCs of using those who have chosen SFE as replacements for traditional expatriates.

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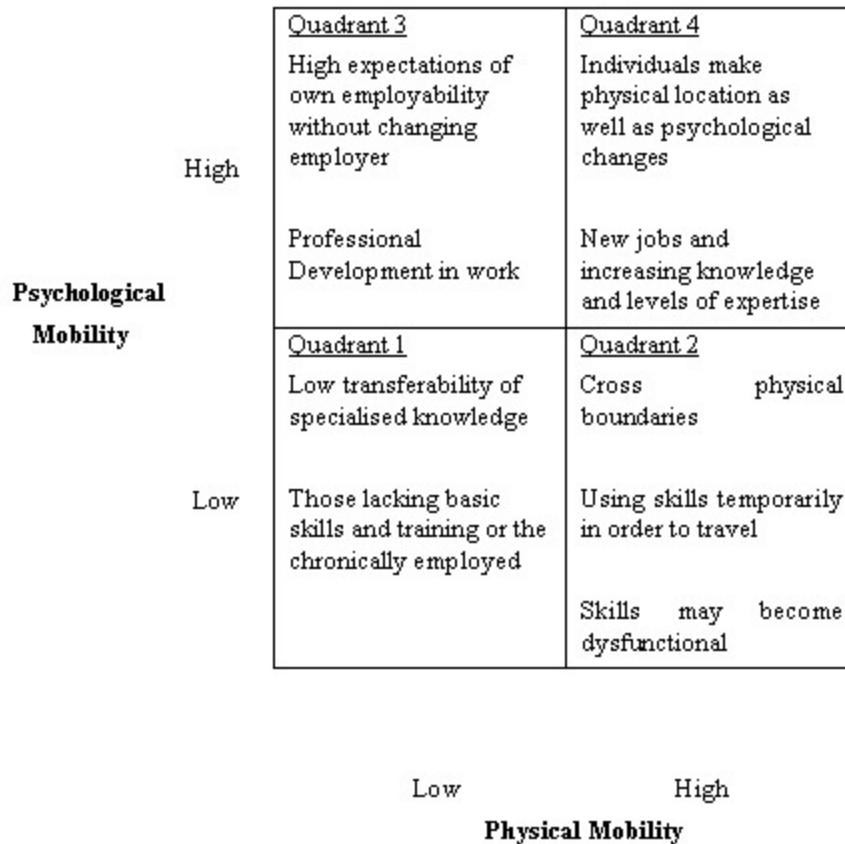


Figure 1. Two dimensions of boundaryless careers. Adapted from Sullivan & Arthur, 2006, pp. 22.

Table 1. The KSAOs for competency in global leadership (Caligiuri, 2006, pp. 221-223)

<b>Knowledge</b>	Culture -general Knowledge Culture-specific Knowledge International business Knowledge
<b>Skills + abilities</b>	Intercultural Interaction Skills Foreign Language Skills Cognitive ability
<b>Personality Characteristics</b>	Extroversion Agreeableness Conscientiousness Emotional stability Openness or intellect

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Sample

Pseudonym	Nationality	Age Group	Education	Industry	Job Title	No. of International Work experiences.	Previous Job Title	Years in Cayman	Married	Children
<b>Brenda</b>	British	30-39	Post Grad	Retail	HR Manager	1	People Manager	2	Yes	0
<b>Sarah</b>	Filipino	40-49	Post Grad	Public Sector	Director	0	Director	4	No	0
<b>Courtney</b>	New Zealand	30-39	Undergrad	Telecoms.	Manager	4	Programme Manager	4	Yes	0
<b>Patricia</b>	British	20-29	Undergrad	Recruitment	Vice President Of Finance	0	Accountant	2.5	No	0
<b>Chloe</b>	British	40-49	Undergrad	Legal	Vice President Internal Audit	0	Manager	1	No	0
<b>Daniella</b>	Filipino	30-39	Undergrad/Prof. Studies (CPA)	Utilities	Manager	0	Auditor	2.5	No	0