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# Gender, careers, and kids: a qualitative study of the partners of international employees

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relocation experiences of sixteen women and men who moved with their children to Aotearoa New Zealand when their partners took up career positions in that country. It analyses the relative weight they gave to their careers and their relationships with their partners as they responded to the challenges posed by these transitions. Attention to the interests of children is also identified as significant in their career decisions. Interviews with similar numbers of women and men whose partners were globally mobile employees enables analysis of the diverse ways in which gender shapes career pathways during a period of transition. The findings contribute to a complex analysis of the situation of those previously referred as a 'trailing' or 'accompanying' spouse when a dual career couple engages in international relocation.

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Gender; dual-career couples; international careers; globally mobile employees; career role salience; partner role salience; parental role salience

## Introduction

Research relating to the partners/spouses<sup>1</sup> of expatriates<sup>2</sup> who take up positions outside their home country has tended to focus on the families of those who are transferred by their employing institution to work temporarily outside their home country or recruited to work in another country for a specific period of time (Harvey and Buckley 1998; McNulty 2012). In the past, the partners of those who take up these 'expatriate' positions were predominantly women (Ridgway 2021, p. 48). In the twenty-first century, women who accompany their globally mobile partners often have their own professional careers, and more men are the partners of international employees (Altman and Shortland 2008; Anderson 2001; Cole 2011, 2012; Selmer and Leung 2003). This contributes to professionals of both genders encountering challenges to their careers when their partners engage in these international career moves.

This paper focuses on the experiences of male and female partners of globally mobile employees with children who took up professional and managerial positions in Aotearoa

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New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> Research participants included expatriates<sup>4</sup> who made this transition during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) to escape the risks of contracting the virus and/or to give their children access to face-to-face schooling and the experience of life outside their home country. There were several participants whose access to the country was the outcome of their partners being recruited as ‘essential workers’.<sup>5</sup> They included partners of medical practitioners recruited in 2020 during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

In the last three decades, there has been increasing attention to the international relocation of professionals as a component of contemporary globalisation (Brooke and Seabrooke 2020, p. 399). While only 3.5% of the world’s population live outside their country of birth (McAuliffe and Khadria 2020, p. 2), professionals who are recruited internationally are increasingly important in the delivery of specialized services and the economic development of the countries in which they relocate.

The spouse or partner of a professional or manager who takes up a position abroad was in the past often referred to as ‘the trailing spouse’ (Harvey 1998; Shaffer and Harrison 2001). Partners were identified as influencing decisions to relocate and the success of expatriate assignments (Harvey and Buckley 1998). Their satisfaction with the experience of life in a new context was identified as a factor shaping the success of international recruitment strategies (Anderson 2001). However, there was less attention in these studies to partners of expats as individuals with their own professional qualifications and career goals and to their strategies to craft or re-craft their careers.

These issues are now receiving attention as women increasingly pursue long-term careers and as international mobility among professionals intensifies (Suter and Cangià 2020). Petriglieri and Obodaru (2019, p. 694) state that ‘dual-career couples have transitioned to being the new normal in the world of work and this poses particular challenges for couples responding to international opportunities for career development’. Dual career couples (DCCs) may find it challenging to reach agreement on critical career decisions, especially if they involve opportunities to relocate internationally (Mäkelä et al. 2011). Relocation to a new country in the twenty-first century frequently depends on partners’ assessment of their employment opportunities in a different country and the geographical mobility of professionals is recognized as posing significant challenges for accompanying partners (Cole 2012; Käsälä et al. 2015; Kanstren 2021; Suter and Cangià 2020).

Over the last twenty years, the language of the ‘trailing spouse’ has been replaced by discussion of the ‘accompanying partner’ (Bernard 2014). Men are increasingly accompanying partners of women who relocate internationally to pursue their careers (Collins and Bertone 2017; Harvey and Wiese 1998; Salamin and Hanappi 2014). More information is needed on how the partners of those who take up positions abroad influence decisions to relocate, and the impact of these transitions on men and women in dual career households. This is the focus of this paper.

The next section presents the conceptual tools that shaped this qualitative inquiry and then the questions addressed through this research. The research process and strategies for analysis are outlined. Vignettes from in-depth interviews with the partners of globally mobile professionals are the focus of the subsequent section. Discussion of findings includes the presentation of a model of how career goals, the importance of partners’

careers, and parental responsibilities interact to shape the career strategies of accompanying partners when they relocate to Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Couples and careers – conceptual tools**

Changes in women's involvement in paid work affect the geographical mobility of those in professional and managerial positions. van der Velde et al. (2017, p. 197) argue that decisions by expatriates assigned to relocate by their international companies are shaped, not only by the importance individuals give to career challenges, but also by employees' partners. They offer a dyadic perspective on the factors shaping decisions by assigned expatriates to take up positions abroad – an approach that explores the importance of their own careers (career role salience) and the significance individuals attach to their relationship with their partner and its connection to their sense of self (partner role salience). van der Velde et al. (2017, pp. 202–203) also indicate that decisions about international relocations frequently entail attention to the implications for both partners of these moves, and their mutual willingness to make these transitions.

We use aspects of van der Velde et al.'s (2017, p. 196) discussion of 'role salience' in the analysis of findings from a small-scale qualitative study of factors shaping the international relocation of families for professional and managerial work. They define role salience as 'the level of importance or value attached to performing in a given role area', in this case, the importance people attach to their careers and the significance they give to their relationship with their partner and their opportunities to embrace career challenges.

Van der Velde et al. address some of the issues relating to the intersection of career strategies and interpersonal relationships considered by Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019) in their analysis of careers in accounting. Vidwans and Du Plessis explore how the crafting of career trajectories entails the negotiation of 'possible selves' – in particular, the relationship between people's career identities and other dimensions of their lives, including relationships with partners and other family members. They highlight the ways people craft their careers against the background of their location in intimate relationships, families, communities, vocational education, the organisation of workplaces and community activities as well as shifting gender expectations. This paper draws on their approach to the crafting of careers and the construction of occupational identities to analyse how the partners of globally mobile employees responded to relocation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Unlike many other studies of the experiences of the partners of globally mobile employees, this study included similar numbers of female and male research participants. Relevant to this research was work done several years ago by Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) into the different and overlapping ways in which men and women prioritised their career aspirations or sought to balance their careers and their family responsibilities. Their focus was to examine the effect of gender differences on careers – a key goal of the research discussed in this paper.

On the basis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, Sullivan and Mainiero (2007, pp. 246–247) distinguished an 'alpha' career pattern characterised by an initial focus on responses to career challenges, followed by 'authenticity' or integrity in pursuit of career goals, and then efforts to achieve a balance between career and family responsibilities. A contrasting 'beta' pattern also gave initial priority to responding to career

challenges, followed by balancing career and family responsibilities, and finally a focus on authenticity. The gendered dimensions of these different career patterns (Sullivan and Mainiero 2007, pp. 247–253) is relevant to the analysis of the narratives offered by accompanying partners about their career strategies following their relocation to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Discussion of the key questions pursued, and the research design are outlined below.

## Research questions and the research process

This paper presents the findings of research directed at answering the following research questions:

- What factors shape the career strategies of the partners of globally mobile employees with children when they relocate to Aotearoa New Zealand?
- In what respects are the impacts of relocation gendered?

Research process:

Participants were identified in 2020 and early 2021 via public information about career appointments, personal networks of members of the research team,<sup>6</sup> and through referral from participants or snowball sampling.<sup>7</sup> The focus was mainly on the partners of those recruited to take up positions in Aotearoa New Zealand by commercial and public sector organisations rather than international assignments by global companies (Habti and Elo 2019).

Target participants were male and female partners of globally mobile employees who had relocated in Aotearoa New Zealand five years before the research commenced. Difficulty finding men who were partners of globally mobile women employees led to a decision to include some participants who were less recent arrivals. Those interviewed were all in dual career households before relocation.

The twenty-one participants recruited for this research included parents and those without children. This paper reports on findings relating to a sub-set of 16 participants who were parents. The decision to focus on this set of participants was directed at exploring the family responsibilities of parents as a possible factor shaping decisions to relocate to Aotearoa New Zealand and the dynamics of relocation.

Semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted using a set of open-ended questions. Interviewees were provided with an information sheet outlining the project and the contact details of the lead researcher. After discussion about the research with the interviewer, participants signed consent forms that had been reviewed and approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the academic institution that employed the lead researcher. Audio recordings of each interview were fully transcribed.

Since no research in this field had been done in Aotearoa New Zealand, a small-scale qualitative project was an appropriate way to initially research the experiences of the partners of globally mobile employees. Interviews were only conducted with ‘accompanying partners’ and not with other family members.

Interviewers contacted participants at least a week before the interviews were conducted and discussed what participation in the project would entail. Most interviews took about an hour and digital audio recordings were transcribed by two postgraduate

students who were trained as research assistants. They were required to treat all the research material as confidential and stored the transcriptions in a secure password protected site on a university server that was only accessible to researchers on this project.

The interview schedule facilitated conversation about decisions to relocate; the factors that prompted these decisions; previous ways of dividing the responsibilities of paid work, childcare and domestic tasks in their households; and whether the allocation of these responsibilities changed when they shifted to Aotearoa New Zealand. Interview transcripts provided information on the factors shaping the decisions of couples, the transition process, and the impacts of relocation on participants' careers.

The interviews were analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.<sup>8</sup> A coding process was employed that focused on selected themes in the interviews. These codes were independently reviewed and checked by the authors of this paper. Participants had the opportunity to review and edit the transcripts of their interviews before they were analysed. This contributed to the trustworthiness of the research findings and the control by participants of the research material. Pseudonyms were used to achieve anonymity and confidentiality. Details of their home countries and the positions held by the participants and their partners are not disclosed.

The data generated through this research process enabled analysis of the relationship between their partners' careers and their own career trajectories. Detailed qualitative information from both women and men enabled discussion of complexity in the impacts of relocation and transition to life in a new country.

## Profile of participants

The relocation of participants' families was mainly self-initiated, an increasing phenomenon among highly skilled people (Habti and Elo 2019). Most of the partners of those interviewed applied for positions in Aotearoa New Zealand and were appointed before

**Table 1.** Demographic data of participants.

<b>No. of participants</b>	Female	9
	Male	7
<b>Age group</b>	30–39	5
	40–49	6
	50–59	5
<b>Year of arrival</b>	2012- 2015	2
	2018/9	8
	2020	6
<b>Country of origin</b>	The Netherlands	3
	UK	3
	USA	4
	Australia	2
	Sri Lanka	1
	South Africa	2
<b>Number of children</b>	France	1
	1	3
	2	9
	3 or more	4

the household relocated. Some of them received assistance from the relevant employer. Only one participant was the partner of an expat whose international company organised his fixed term position with an Aotearoa New Zealand enterprise. See below for a summary of demographic information relating to interview participants.

As the [Table 1](#) indicates, most participants came from home countries with similar government systems, organisational cultures and cultural connections, a factor that [Andresen et al. \(2021, pp. 5–6\)](#) have identified as significant for those involved in global relocation. They had all been exposed to English, even if it was not their home language. The one participant from Asia, came to Aotearoa New Zealand via a period of time in Australia. Just under half of the participants anticipated being in Aotearoa New Zealand temporarily, or were unsure about whether they would stay, while the rest considered that their relocation was long term. The majority of participants had arrived within a few years of the interviews.

## Research findings

An overview of trends in men and women's narratives about the relocation of their families to Aotearoa New Zealand (informed by themes identified in the interviews) is followed by a focus on the situations of participants that highlight intersections between their own careers and their partner's careers. A key finding from the research was the importance participants attached to the interests and needs of their children. As a result, 'parental role salience' was identified as a key factor influencing decisions to relocate and their career strategies following relocation. These findings are organised according to the key themes identified in NVivo analysis of the transcribed interviews of participants. Other relevant research is indicated in the presentation of findings and initial analysis is offered.

## Relocation and shifts in family responsibilities and paid work

Over half of the participants indicated that the division of household, childcare, and paid work responsibilities was equally shared with their partners before relocation to Aotearoa New Zealand. Prior to relocation, both partners were involved in paid employment, although one partner was sometimes identified as having a stronger commitment to their career. In a small number of cases, one partner was involved in part-time employment or contract work with flexible hours of paid work. Sometimes this followed a time when that partner had been the major earner in the household. This is indicative of shifts identified by [Sullivan and Mainiero \(2007\)](#) in how individuals and households may balance careers and family responsibilities.

After their partners took up positions in Aotearoa New Zealand, both family and career involvement were less likely to be equally shared. This situation was often defined as temporary, a response to the transition, rather than a permanent change in the division of domestic and paid work responsibilities. Most of the women and men interviewed aspired to the equal sharing of family responsibilities and paid employment. In some cases, this was seen as difficult to achieve when children were pre-schoolers or in their first years at school, or when families had lost the support of extended family and



friends. In this respect, they acknowledged the contextual factors shaping careers that Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019) have identified.

Interviewees frequently discussed the advantages for their partners' careers of taking up a position in Aotearoa New Zealand and their commitment to support their partners' careers. In this respect, participants demonstrated what van der Velde et al. (2017) refer to as high 'partner role salience' – potentially a necessary quality for those accompanying a partner taking up a position abroad. But for most of those interviewed, their own career and family goals remained relevant, even if their careers were paused or 'on hold' during the period of transition. In this respect, the interviews highlighted the salience of the careers of those referred to as the accompanying spouse (Bernard 2014; Harvey and Buckley 1998; Shaffer and Harrison 2001), as well as the importance they attached to their partners' careers.

### **Gender and career role salience**

Levels of commitment to their own careers varied for the women and the men interviewed, and several participants discussed how there had been changes in whose career had priority. Support for their partners' career was frequently articulated by participants of both genders. However, female partners whose children were pre-schoolers or younger primary school-aged children were more likely than male participants with young children to prioritise their parenting responsibilities, and delay embarking on the search for employment after they moved to Aotearoa New Zealand. This is consistent with the findings of Käsälä et al. (2015) in their study of how Finnish dual career expatriate couples coordinated their career goals in the context of global relocation.

Female partners were more likely to use the transition to life in Aotearoa New Zealand as a time to focus on the needs of their children, especially if the children were pre-schoolers or children who were just starting school. For some of the women interviewed this meant finding part-time work that did not advance their careers; for others it involved suspending employment. Parental role salience, at least for a period of time, was a significant factor shaping their own careers in a new location. This finding echoes the conclusion of Sullivan and Mainiera (2007, p. 17) that the decision of whether to prioritise family over career is a function of 'where an individual is at a given point in the life cycle.'

Nancy found a part-time position related to her career in her home country, but it was not consistent with her expertise in that field. However, as her son got older, she planned to actively pursue new career challenges. Her anticipated shifts in career and family responsibilities are consistent with the 'kaleidoscope' career pattern that Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) have identified in the lives of many highly qualified professional women. They have argued that as shapes shift when a kaleidoscope is turned, so there are shifts in the importance attached to career challenges and parental responsibilities.

Male partners of globally mobile employees also increased their parental responsibilities in the period after they relocated for their female partners' jobs. However, while a few of the women interviewed chose to be full-time parents after they arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand, none of the male partners engaged in full-time care for their children for longer than a few months. Most of the male partners considered that 6–8 weeks was a



sufficient commitment to facilitating their partners' transition into a position in a new country and their children's adjustment to a new home.

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) argue that, while women are more likely throughout their careers to attempt to balance career goals and relationships with partners and other family members, men are more likely to first prioritise their careers and then try to balance career and family commitments. For most of the male participants in this study, a temporary shift in the career kaleidoscope was possible, but longer-term rebalancing of career challenges, family and their professional identities was difficult. Käsälä et al. (2015, p. 2192) found that men experienced more stress than women when they had to adjust to changes in their partners' work routines, including changes following female-led international relocations of families. These stresses may contribute to men in this study returning more rapidly to paid work than female participants with young children.

Charles (an engineer and the partner of a medical professional) spoke about taking on a greater share of parenting when his family arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand. He said that: 'I did enjoy it for a bit. And then, I was like, you know, like going to work'. The full-time job he initially took up was in a different city, and he spent two days a week away from home. But was only a short-term contract. While Charles was a qualified engineer with expertise managing transport projects, his immigration status was dependent on his partner's status as an 'essential worker'. For this reason, Charles stated that 'we have to put her career first', and he became the parent who took on extra responsibilities when their children could not be in day-care or school. His challenges in finding work consistent with his career contributed to him anticipating a return to their home country.

While both male and female participants took time out from their own careers to facilitate the transition of their children into a new context, gender and the age of children in the household had an impact on how participants crafted their careers after relocating. This indicates the relevance of what Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019, pp. 37–38) identify as a 'matrix' of contextual factors, interpersonal relationships and understandings of self that influence the career trajectories of individuals. Those contextual factors crucially include the availability of positions relevant for the career of the accompanying partner and persisting gendered understandings of the responsibilities of parents.

### **Ambivalence, frustration and definitions of self**

For some participants giving priority to their partners' careers (even temporarily) generated ambivalence. Sue, who had previously held several high-level academic positions in her home country, said that: 'for a long time it was my career over his.' The move to Aotearoa New Zealand entailed a shift in the priority of her career and their parenting responsibilities. While she embraced the prioritising of his career at this time, she was uneasy about not earning her own money and was unsure about how long this situation could be sustained.

Two other participants, Merel and Sam, were strongly committed to the equal importance of the careers of both partners, while also giving priority to the career of their partners during transition to life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Merel was prepared to suspend her career in order to get her children settled, but she was deeply frustrated when she

found herself being defined solely as a wife and mother. It made her feel ‘invisible ... and that feeling is not really nice’. Her professional identity was obscured during the transition, an experience of other expatriate partners as Collins and Bertone (2017) have illustrated. This was inconsistent with her sense of self and her status as a skilled professional in her home country.

Once Merel encountered this challenge, she embarked on a range of career-focused strategies that included enrolment in a demanding online professional course. She gradually established herself as a consultant and was recruited into new project teams. Having encountered the negative consequences of high partner and parental role salience, Merel actively ‘re-crafted’ (Vidwans and Du Plessis 2019) her professional self in a new context.

Sam was some years older, very successful in his career, and committed to facilitating his partner’s transition into a high-profile position in Aotearoa New Zealand. (He found the job advertisement for the position to which she was appointed). After focussing on his family’s relocation, he applied for high-level managerial positions and submitted 25 unsuccessful job applications before obtaining a position in his field – an experience consistent with other research on the partners of expatriate professionals (Känsälä et al. 2015, p. 2205). However, neither Sam, nor those around him, questioned his identity as a successful executive. Gendered expectations and stage in the family life cycle contributed to others seeing Merel (but not Sam) as a parent and a ‘trailing spouse’ – a definition she resisted after years of working as organisational expert and successful entrepreneur.

### **Online jobs and international relocation**

Research participants engaged in remote work were able to continue their careers after relocation and among those most satisfied with their career situation. Elke was employed by a company in her home country that required working in the evenings and weekends. Doing this work in Aotearoa New Zealand, given the time difference, meant that she worked during the day and enjoyed ‘the work-life balance’ that fitted the needs of her baby. For Elke, being an ‘accompanying partner’ did not disrupt her career and facilitated family friendly working hours. Eventually, she obtained a face-to-face position with flexible working hours that recognised her professional expertise.

It was important to Elke that her partner ‘really loves the type of work he is doing ... being able to see him ... in his element is really awesome.’ At the same time, she wanted to pursue her career and care for her child. In these respects, Elke demonstrated high partner, career and parental role salience. Her career remained a key component of her sense of self while pursuing what Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) would define as a ‘beta’ career pattern.

James, a medical spouse, described himself as an ‘introverted artistic type’, relative to his outgoing, science-orientated partner. They had earlier moved between cities in their home country as she completed her medical training. He worked from home as a writer engaged in projects that were satisfying and lucrative and was the primary caregiver for their four children. The relocation for his partner’s career was consistent with their joint goal of living elsewhere and the interests of their children (they wanted them to experience life in a new context) but involved no disruption to his satisfying online professional

work. James, like Elke, managed to combine high career, partner and parental role salience during this relocation.

### **Access to employment through partners' employment – opportunities and challenges**

Liz's experience after her partner was recruited into a high-level sports coaching position in Aotearoa New Zealand indicates some of the challenges for partners of international relocation. She and her partner were both involved in sports coaching and sports administration in their home country. Liz's position in Aotearoa New Zealand only became available when her partner took up a top sports coaching job. However, it was not an ideal fit for her expertise and entailed a range of different demands for more than one organisation, and what Liz described as 'ridiculous' hours.

Liz tried to organise her demanding job around care of their young daughter and took her to work when childcare was not available. Her strategies to negotiate the content of her job illustrate the concept of 'career crafting' outlined by Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019). In a new national context, Liz was actively seeking to redefine the requirements of her position and reconcile it with her family responsibilities. Her husband wanted to share parenting, but it was difficult for him to integrate this with his career as a coach in an elite men's sport – an indication of the multiple factors that shape the relationships between careers and parenting.

Sometimes a partner with lower career salience can find a satisfying job through his partner's recruitment to a career enhancing position. Pierre was a qualified materials engineer but defined himself as 'not career focused.' His partner, also an engineer, found a position in Aotearoa New Zealand. A key attraction was their mutual interest in outdoor activities, and they continue to enjoy the outdoors with their children. When he first arrived, he did not anticipate getting work in his specialised field and worked in a number of non-professional jobs. At the time of the interview, Pierre had taken up a permanent position as a business manager in the organisation that hired his partner. While initially exhibiting low career role salience and high partner and parental role salience, at the time of the interview Pierre's work was very important to him.

### **Disrupting assumptions about 'leading' or 'following' partners**

Glen and her husband, who were both medical specialists, decided to explore positions abroad. Glen recalled telling their children that 'their dad was looking for a position in New Zealand' which suggests that within the family, his career was considered dominant, regardless of Glen's high flying medical research career. Glen had experience of living in other countries as a child and wanted her children to have this opportunity. The couple's interest in working in Aotearoa New Zealand intensified after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the experience of long periods of home schooling for her children in their home country. Glen and her partner saw the relocation as in the interests of their children, an example of mutual parental role salience.

While the initial focus was on her husband finding a job in Aotearoa New Zealand, Glen was offered a job in her field of medical research before his position was finalised. This illustrates how the categorisation of partners as either the 'leading

partner' or 'accompanying partner' in international relocations is often inappropriate for DCCs. Glen and the children arrived before her partner, however, they set up home in the city in which her clinical specialist partner would be based, rather than the city in which her employment was located. Glen commuted to her job in another city when it was necessary, but largely worked from home. Because she commuted for work, she reported that her partner saw himself as the primary caregiver. However, Glen stated that she was more involved in the care of the children, as she spent more time working from home. Her comments indicated that she and her partner had different understandings about who exhibited most parental role salience and who put most effort into the balancing of career and parental responsibilities.

### **Sequencing of career role salience**

The strategy of temporarily prioritising the career of one partner also illustrates the flexible and strategic international employment strategies of some couples. Janis prioritised his wife's career when she was approached to consider a position as chief executive of a major commercial company in Aotearoa New Zealand. His career had priority earlier in their relationship. Janis said that: 'We had a change in career paths ... About half-way through we switched, and so now it is her career that brings in the majority of the income.'

After pursuing an 'alpha' orientation to his career which entailed high levels of international travel, Janis consciously shifted to a 'beta' orientation when his partner had a significant career opportunity (Sullivan and Mainiero 2007). However, partner role salience was not the only factor in making a decision to relocate. Janis and his wife also valued their daughters' opportunities to experience life in Aotearoa New Zealand. The findings of Käsälä et al. (2015) indicate that shifts in the importance given to the careers of partners also occurred in the lives of a number of Finnish dual career expatriates they researched. Pixley (2009) has also explored sequencing by dual career couples in the priority given to their partners' careers.

While Janis fully embraced prioritising his partner's job, he found the first six weeks very difficult as he worked to get the household set up and did not have his own professional life. However, he soon obtained an academic position in his field due to the departure of a female academic recruited internationally whose male partner did not want to stay. Janis' experience illustrates the importance of researching the dynamics of dual career couples' international mobility and the career trajectories of both partners.

### **Men who prioritise their partners' careers**

While some of the couples relocating to Aotearoa New Zealand had a strong commitment to pursuing the careers of both partners, others had a history of prioritising the career of one partner. Jeroen relocated with his partner and young children early in 2020 when she took up a position as a medical professional. Early in their relationship he accepted that her career would have precedence. He worked in key management positions for an international company in Europe for many years but was prepared to suspend his career when his wife found a job in Aotearoa New Zealand through a medical recruitment agency. They both wanted a change in lifestyle. He initially

defined this as a sabbatical, 'If it turned out to be not positive, there was not a big problem.' His company promised he could get his job back at the same level, if and when he returned.

At the time of the interview, he was working two days a week from home as a marketing and sales consultant for a small company. He enjoyed spending more time with his children and defined his current job as 'not a step back, but it's more a side-step'. Jeroen had a 'beta' career pattern, but he also said that he looked forward to being able to 'achieve something', perhaps a shift in priority to what Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) refer to as 'career challenges' and the pursuit of 'authenticity.' Partner and parental role salience were strong for Jeroen. Being in Aotearoa New Zealand was mainly 'for the kids – give them a good basic start up.'

Isuru similarly gave priority to his partner's career and parental responsibilities when relocating to Aotearoa New Zealand. He was a bank executive in his home country, but after the move, he worked part-time and was the major caregiver. He demonstrated high partner and parental role salience, but at the time of the interview was pursuing a qualification in information technology – indicative of a desire for career challenges (Sullivan and Mainiero 2007).

### **Gender, maternity and partner role salience**

Like others with medical spouses, Kay had already moved on multiple occasions. Her partner's alpha career pattern, and her high partner role salience, was a feature of their lives before relocation. The combination of these factors meant that, while highly qualified, Kay had a 'beta' career orientation. At the same time, they were a dual-career couple. Kay had a doctorate and worked as a services and operations manager in her home country while she had young children.

Kay initially continued with her online job on relocation, but she was on leave at the time of the interview. She had found it difficult to meet the requirements of her work during the Covid-19 lockdown in March and April 2020. Her preschool children could not be in day-care, and she often had to work at night. Over time, the pressures of the job built up and Kay realised: 'this is costing me too much.' Like Jeroen, Kay defined her current situation as temporary – 'it's a season, like it's not forever'.

Kay's story indicates the difficulties of pursuing a full-time career when children are young and one's partner is in a job with significant demands on their time. These challenges were intensified as a result of the relocation and the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Her partner had also started elective sports training which meant he had less time at home – an indication of his relatively low partner and parental role salience.

### **Conventional gender roles and parental salience**

Alicia worked as a full-time senior administrator in the tertiary educational institution before coming to Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work was 'very stressful', and she was keen to have more time with her pre-school children. Relocation led to Alicia being a full-time parent. She had never imagined herself 'not working' and anticipated being in part-time employment when they were older. Parental role salience at the time of the interview eclipsed career challenges.

Irene, who was in part-time paid work before her family relocated, considered her husband's career was most important after the birth of their children, even though he was involved in their care. At the time of the interview, Irene organised part-time work around her children's needs. Relocation to Aotearoa New Zealand was a continuation of a pattern of gendered prioritisation of her partner's career and her high partner and parental role salience. Both Alicia and Irene were classic examples of the beta career pattern.

## Discussion

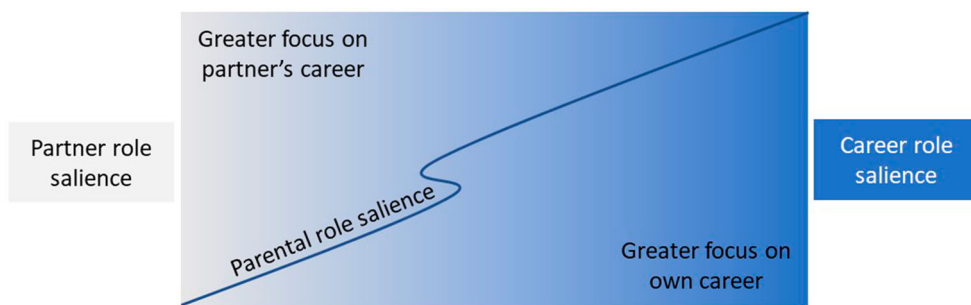
### *Career, partner and parental role salience*

van der Velde et al. (2017) have analysed the significance of career and partner role salience as factors shaping decisions by professionals to accept a placement abroad by their international company. This research has demonstrated that a key factor influencing international relocation for their partners' employment was parental salience – or the significance attached to being a parent. This requires expanding the conceptual model of van der Velde et al. (2017).

The research findings illustrate interactions between the significance participants assigned to their partners' careers, their own careers, and what they define as the interests of their children. The relationship between partner, career and parental role salience are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 represents the dynamic interaction between the importance participants attached to their own careers and the careers of their partners. It models how attention to the interests and needs of children intersects with the importance attached to a partner's career and an individual's own career aspirations. This impact is affected by factors such as the age of children, the number of children, and the availability of childcare outside the family.

Parental role salience as well as career and partner role salience shaped the career trajectories of the partners of globally mobile professionals who participated in this research. Their narratives of transition indicate the variety of career strategies pursued by professionals relocating to a new country when their partners take up positions outside their home country.



**Figure 1.** A triadic model of the dynamic interaction between career, partner and parental role salience.

## Career trajectories, contexts and self-definition

The career matrix outlined by Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019) highlights the range of contextual factors that shape the career trajectories of professionals. Their focus was on male and female accountants; however, their findings are relevant for professionals and managers in other fields. The narratives of participants in this small-scale qualitative research indicate how gender (as one of the contextual factors identified by Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019)) is relevant for decisions about employment by those relocating with their partners. A global pandemic was another factor that influenced decisions by a number of participants to move from their home country, while also making continuation in employment difficult for others when childcare outside the home was temporarily suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Access to online work facilitated ongoing employment after relocation for some of the participants in this study, particularly James, and initially Elke. However, for parents of pre-school children like Kay, online work required access to childcare outside the home and family support, neither of which were available in March and April 2020 after their move to Aotearoa New Zealand. These findings highlight the interaction between multiple factors shaping the careers of those relocating from their home countries when their partners take up positions abroad, temporarily or permanently.

Vidwans and Du Plessis (2019) consider the impact of understandings of self on the career trajectories of male and female accountants. This paper has documented the importance of self-definition in the responses of participants to the pursuit of careers in a new national context. Merel and Sam, for example, both articulated frustration during relocation when their identities as experienced and successful professionals were not recognised by others in their social circle, or those recruiting public sector managers. For Sue, being financially dependent after being the core professional in her family, was also a source of unease in her current situation and inconsistent with her sense of self.

## Alpha and beta career patterns and international relocation

Some of the men who had accompanied female partners exhibited what Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) have identified as 'beta' career patterns. This was most evident in the narratives of Isuru, Pierre and Jereon. Other participants, such as Janis and Sue, had previously prioritised their careers over family responsibilities, but chose to rebalance these commitments on relocation for their partners' careers. Their narratives of transition illustrate discussion by Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) of shifts in the significance given to careers relative to family life and the interests of children during the careers of professionals.

## Relevance of this research

These findings are particularly relevant for dual career couples considering the implications for an accompanying partner of international relocation. It is important for them to consider before relocation whether their particular qualifications and expertise are in demand in a different national context, and to consider the availability of suitable employment.



Insights from this research also have the potential to inform those engaged in recruiting professionals from elsewhere to take up positions in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly Human Resource Managers with responsibility for facilitating continuity of employment among globally mobile employees. Buettner-Wobst et al. (2020) have highlighted the importance of support from recruiting organisations for the partners and children of international appointees.

As competition for skilled professionals accelerates across the world, attention to the strategies that support the recruitment and retention of globally mobile employees is vital. This includes attention to the career opportunities of the partners of those recruited internationally, and potentially support for them during the complex process of transitioning to life in a new country (Cole 2012). Since Aotearoa New Zealand is seeking to increase international recruitment of professionals with scarce skills, further work in this field is imperative.

### **Conclusion – contributions, limitations and future research**

Detailed analysis of the narratives offered by the partners of those who took up career positions in Aotearoa New Zealand illustrates complexity in how gender and other contextual factors shape their careers in a new context. Initially almost all participants had some difficulty pursuing their careers after the relocation. This contributed to experiences of ambivalence and frustration during periods of transition. While men are less likely to withdraw from paid work or choose to work part-time, a number of the men interviewed gave priority, sometimes temporarily, to the demands of their female partners' careers and the needs of their children. Women with young children demonstrated a longer-term commitment to adjusting their involvement in paid work and in this respect replicated traditional gender expectations. Gender and the age of children in the household had a significant effect on the way participants crafted their careers after relocation for their partners' work.

van der Velde et al. (2017) identify lack of attention to actual relocation as a limitation of their research. This qualitative project acquired detailed information about relocation experiences and the challenges some participants encountered as they took on major responsibilities for childcare and domestic work on arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mayrhofer et al. (2021) argue that the family members of self-initiated expatriates are frequently seen as appendages rather than those involved in making decisions about their own life course. This research remedies the relative invisibility of accompanying partners and makes their voices accessible and documents their active responses to the challenges of relocation.

While this small-scale qualitative study illustrates variety and complexity in the experiences of partners of professionals who relocate internationally, it has certain limitations. Only accompanying partners were interviewed, rather than both the partners involved in these transitions. Further research in this field would benefit from a larger number of interviews with couples in a range of employment situations and also the collection of both qualitative and quantitative research material.

Brooke and Seabrooke (2020) consider that future research on professional work should investigate women's under-representation among those who are internationally mobile. They suggest this is an outcome of the ongoing gendered allocation of unpaid

caring work that makes geographical mobility 'more culturally, emotionally, and economically problematic for women than men' (p. 411). A number of the women participants in this research identified distance from family members and friends made pursuing their careers more challenging when they relocated for their partners' work. Challenges in identifying male accompanying partners to interview, indicate the gender imbalances among globally mobile professionals that Brooke and Seabrook identify.

This paper has explored the careers and family lives of those involved in relocation when their partners took up professional and managerial work abroad. The possible career, partner and parental selves they envisage (Vidwans and Du Plessis 2019), and the strategies they use to craft their careers in new geographical contexts requires more detailed attention within Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally.

## Notes

1. In this paper partner rather than spouse or husband or wife is used to refer to a person who is an intimate, long term live-in partner. Long-term intimate partners are increasingly not married and may be a same sex couple. The term 'partner' is therefore more comprehensive. All the partners in this study were in a heterosexual relationship.
2. An 'expatriate' or 'expat' is someone who lives and/or works in a country other than their country of origin. They are usually professionals, managers, artists or skilled workers recruited to work internationally for specific periods of time. Expatriates may be 'assigned expatriates' or AEs whose employers assign them to positions in other countries, or they are 'self-initiated expatriates' or SIEs who choose to work for a new employer outside their home country (Suutari et al. 2018, p. 38).
3. Te Reo Māori was declared an official language of New Zealand in 1987. Māori is the indigenous population of New Zealand, and the use of 'Aotearoa' as the te reo equivalent of New Zealand is increasingly used to be inclusive.
4. The partners of those interviewed were mainly recruited from outside Aotearoa New Zealand by employing organisations within that country. Usually the partners of interviewees had taken the initiative to apply for advertised positions. In this respect, they shared some (but not all) of the features of Self Initiated Expatriates (SIEs) (Doherty et al. 2013). They relocated across a national border and they were individually motivated to move countries. However, they varied with respect to whether the move was intended to be temporary and the extent to which their relocation was assisted by their new employers.
5. The Essential Skills Work Visa enabled workers from other countries who were offered full-time employment in a position that could not be filled by a local employee to work in Aotearoa New Zealand for up to 3 years. Partners and dependent children could apply for visas based on their relationship to the essential worker. This visa was replaced by the Accredited Employer Work Visa on 4 July 2022. <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/apply-for-a-visa/about-visa/essential-skills-work-visa> Accessed 6.1.2023.
6. The authors of this paper were born elsewhere, as were 27.4% of all Aotearoa New Zealand residents according to the 2018 Census of Population. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/2018-census-data-allows-users-to-dive-deep-into-new-zealands-diversity/> (Accessed 11.08.2022)
7. Snowball sampling is a strategy for identifying potential research participants through those already recruited for a study. It is often used in qualitative social research when there are no lists available of sets of people which researchers want to interview.
8. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software package used by qualitative researchers to organise, analyse and store unstructured or qualitative interview material. It is produced by QSR International. Transcripts of interview material generated during this study were uploaded into NVivo, coded using a variety of categories, and then analysed (Jackson and Bazeley 2019).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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