

Middle Class International Migration: French Nationals Working in the UK

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Received March 7th, 2012; revised April 10th, 2012; accepted April 28th, 2012

International migration researchers have generally focused on either high-level managers and specialists working for multinational corporations, or laborers and blue collar workers who move from developing to developed countries. But international migration patterns are clearly more diverse in composition and structure. Middle class workers who voluntarily leave their home countries in search of white collar positions represent one under-researched group. The few international migration studies that have been conducted for this group have focused on workers from English-speaking countries. This research will concentrate on a significant number of French speakers (up to one-half million), mostly under the age of 35, who have crossed the English Channel to live and work in the United Kingdom. I will examine the mechanisms that facilitate such migration, the kinds of jobs these migrants perform, and how their migration fits in with their long-term employment plans. The majority of French migrants are strongly career-oriented, unlike many of their counterparts from English-speaking countries who emphasize self-realization and exploration. I also explore the question of why EU migration from non-EU countries still exceeds intra-EU migration.

Keywords: Self-Initiated Expatriates; Highly Skilled Migrants; Middle Class Migration; UK; French Migrants

Introduction

International migration researchers have generally focused on either high-level managers and specialists working for multinational corporations, or laborers and blue collar workers who move from developing to developed countries (Conradson & Latham, 2005). Urban studies researchers have tended to concentrate on how global cities serve as focal points for polarized international migration (Sassen, 1991). Generally missing are studies on middle class workers who voluntarily leave their home countries in search of white collar employment. This group exemplifies how international migration patterns have become more diverse in terms of composition and structure.

Many national economies, especially those in more developed countries, offer more broadly distributed opportunities for their middle class citizens to migrate across international borders (Favell et al., 2006). Since 1993, member states of the European Union (EU) have given their citizens the freedom to migrate to other EU countries in search of jobs, thus making international mobility outside of transnational corporations much more accessible for middle class workers. The most mobile EU citizens are young, single, and well-educated; students comprise a large percentage of this group (Favell, 2008; Fouarge & Ester, 2009; Zimmermann, 2009).

London, a global city and financial center, is a prime example of a polarized urban center with large numbers of service-based businesses at both the top and bottom levels of its economy (Sassen, 1991). In addition to wealthier EU states, it is also attracting large numbers of young, educated middle class migrants from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Favell, 2008). However, research-

ers have generally neglected the impacts of English as the dominant global language, plus various institutional factors such as economic systems and cultural norms, on the international migratory experiences and intentions of middle class workers.

Middle Class International Migration

In Western countries, multinational company executives, upper managers, and other economic elites have significantly more opportunities to acquire social, cultural, and economic capital via overseas experience in support of their professional careers. They are now being joined in international migration by a growing number of middle class Westerners. Conradson and Latham (2005) describe these workers as well-educated and motivated to find professional positions. Even though many organizations state an interest in workers who have international experience, they generally do a poor job of helping their employees gain such experience, therefore a growing number of middle class Westerners are pursuing it on their own, creating boundary-less rather than corporate careers (Inkson, 2006; Banai & Harry, 2004; Stahl et al., 2002). In the management literature, these workers are referred to as self-initiated expatriates, as opposed to company-assigned expatriates (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Inkson et al., 1997; Jokinen et al., 2008; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Vance, 2005).

For a growing number of Westerners, self-initiated foreign assignments represent a more attractive strategy than corporate overseas assignments for knowledge acquisition and individual enrichment (Inkson et al., 1997). In addition, pursuing an overseas experience—commonly referred to as OE—is increasingly

popular among Western youth because they perceive it as fun, challenging, and supportive of personal growth. As Amit (2002) notes, international borders are easily traversed by Western youth or professionals who are adventurous, who have a desire to escape their settled lives via travel, and who are willing to take advantage of short-term contractual employment and temporary work visas.

Three kinds of motivation account for most middle class international migration activity: career paths, lifestyle preferences, and relationships (Scott, 2006). There is considerable blending in the first two groups, which I will refer to as career seekers and lifestyle pursuers, respectively. For the first, international migration is viewed as a way to develop a professional career while at the same time exploring personal growth. For individuals in the second group, travelling, self-realization and experiencing different cultures comes first, and if they decide later to pursue careers, the time spent overseas adds value to their resumes (Conradson & Latham, 2005). A large number of lifestyle pursuers are college students or those recently graduated.

Some researchers now view international migration as a "normal" activity for Western middle class workers rather than something exclusively confined to upper-level managers and executives (Amit, 2002; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Scott, 2006). International mobility has gained stature as a way of lifestyle for middle class workers to distinguish themselves, and is therefore becoming an increasingly important factor in reproducing middle class identity (Scott, 2006). Conradson and Latham (2005) further describe how New Zealand has formed a national culture of mobility in which thousands of young professional citizens move overseas for a period of time for self-development; other countries that have similar cultures are Canada, Australia, and South Africa. While I acknowledge the extent of this international migration trend among Western middle class white collar workers, I contend that the lifestyle and personal growth motivations have been overemphasized.

The primary focus of most research on Western middle class international migration to date has been on workers from English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, with a few studies conducted on white collar workers from South Africa. Since English is currently the primary medium of political, academic, and business communication in the world (Crystal, 2003), it is much easier for middle class workers from these countries to cross borders and find jobs that require English skills, including moderately or well-paid English teaching jobs (Tzeng, 2010). The ease with which English speakers can find jobs in foreign countries likely makes travelling option more attractive than pursuing professional careers in their home countries. Since border crossing is more challenging for middle class workers from non-English speaking countries, my goal was to identify home and host country mechanisms that facilitate international migration. I have chosen the movement of French middle class workers to the UK (especially to London) as an example.

Methodology

I conducted in-depth interviews with French nationals in London in 2009, plus analyzing secondary data. Due to time limitations,¹ I mainly performed what Flick (2009) refers to as "expert interviews" with three high-level managers in three

French organizations based in London, plus interviews with three middle class French migrants. According to Flick, expert interviews are aimed at gathering data on a specific group of individuals who may have special insights due to their status, position, or experience. These individuals represent a group rather than a single instance of expertise. In fieldwork, specially targeted experts are commonly used as sources of information on topics in which a researcher has no experience. In terms of sampling methodology, expert interviews are considered an example of critical case sampling, in which a small number of important cases are likely to yield the most information and have the greatest impact on knowledge development (Flick, 2009; Patton, 2002).

The three London-based organizations in which my expert interviewees work have made significant contributions to the movement of young French middle class migrants to that city. The first, the Employment Office of the French Consulate in London, helped French citizens with university degrees, relevant job experience, and good English skills to find professional jobs in the UK.² The other two organizations are the Centre Charles Péguy (CCP) and Centre d'Echanges Internationaux Ltd. (CEI). The CCP is a charity trust created in 1954 by the Marist priests of the Notre Dame de France Church in Leicester Square; its original purpose was to reinforce links between English and French communities in London. Since 1982, it has been subsidized by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and its current objective is helping young French people between the ages of 18 and 30 find jobs and living accommodations in Great Britain, especially London. CEI was established in France in 1947 to promote exchanges between young people of different nationalities and cultures. In London, the two organizations perform similar functions, although CEI also offers English language courses and helps French students find internships. Both the CCP and CEI charge annual membership fees for clients, but do not charge employers who use their service. CEI guarantees its clients at least one job interview (mostly with hotels and restaurants) within two weeks of their arrival, and provides interview coaching. CCP is more limited in terms of what it offers, but it does provide access to a more diverse range of jobs, including administrative and sales positions; still, approximately one-half of its openings are in restaurants or hotels. According to the CCP, there are often more job openings than qualified applicants, with English fluency an important factor in terms of filling positions.

Since there is potential for expert interviews to produce limited, selective, and biased data (Flick, 2009), I interviewed experts from different organizations to maximize the range of information, as well as for purposes of cross-validation and triangulation. In addition, I interviewed three French middle class workers who initiated their own moves to London: a male employee in a French bank and a female working for the French Economic Commission in London,³ both single and in their late 20s; and a woman in her mid-forties who is married to a British national, who has lived in London for 13 years, and who runs an employment recruitment company with a business partner. Thus, the primary limitation of this research is the

²The Employment Office was closed in August 2009 because it was considered redundant to local job centers and EURES (European Employment Services). Two former employees of the Employment Office immediately started a recruitment company called French Resources.

³The male first worked for an American bank, and the female worked for a British trading company.

¹I had to abruptly return to Taiwan due to a family emergency.

2009 and June 2010 was approximately 67,000, and in the entire country approximately 122,000 (**Table 1**); neither figure includes almost 13,000 university students. However, several of my informants believe that the actual numbers are much higher—approximately 500,000 in the UK and 250,000 - 300,000 in London alone, with most under the age of 35. Thus, the London Macadam media company describes itself as “targeting 300,000 French people in London.” This explains Favell’s (2008) assertion that London may be the world’s fourth largest French city after Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles. According to the French consulate, up to 400,000 of London’s 7.6 million residents are French citizens, possibly making them the largest minority nationality in the city (“The French,” 2011).

Problems with accurately measuring French populations in London and the UK are similar to those for recording all migration within the EU (Braun & Recchi, 2009; Favell & Recchi, 2009; Zimmermann, 2009). Due to the shortage of transnational surveys, data on EU migration are incomplete and contradictory. One finds inconsistencies in statistics-gathering procedures, differences in national residence registration systems, and reluctance to report migration figures to other EU member states. Zimmermann (2009) therefore claims that EU migration can only be observed in micro-level segments. Favell (2008) further points out that many French migrants only stay in London temporarily, and according to Bellion (2005), two-thirds of French expatriates in the UK at any time never register with their consulates because their plans are to gain short-term international job experience or to study English. According to one interviewee, “France and the UK are so close, it’s not like going overseas. [London] is just two hours from Paris. Taking a train to another country is like commuting to another city.” He also offered this explanation for why French citizens enjoy staying in the UK:

It’s a country with a long history, yet you still have room to be different. Being different here is not a handicap. In the UK, especially in London, you’ve got people of all colors, coming from India, from America, from all over the world. And they’re represented everywhere in society, which is less the case in France.

English Skills and Career Prospects

According to my interviewees, geographical approximation and open social environment are secondary to “professional stays” as the primary motivation for French citizens to move to London. This category includes jobs, internships, and activities such as learning or improving English skills, which is viewed as central to long-term career plans. French students have lower English proficiency compared to students in Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries. According to my informants, the reason is the emphasis on traditional teaching approaches and cultural values over language skills, despite the fact that English instruction begins in elementary school. This may change, since English has become the dominant global language, and many jobs in France now require English proficiency. Even for jobs that do not require English, fluency may be cited as a reason to hire or promote one job candidate over another. French companies are also increasingly interested in applicants who have overseas work experience. As one interviewee told me, “You can find a good job [in France] after spending a couple of years abroad.”

The majority of French citizens move to the UK either during college (between the ages of 18 and 21) or immediately following graduation (between the ages of 22 and 25); a small percentage attend UK universities. A large number of French schools and universities have overseas internship requirements, and London is a favored English-speaking destination among applicants. Other students move to London at the end of the school year, and spend the summer working in restaurants, bars, or small shops before returning to university in September. Students who arrive in London in January are generally taking extended leaves from their studies, with plans to return to school after six months. I was told that the French school system is very bureaucratic, and that students cannot make any changes in their class schedules once they register. Instead of taking classes they have little interest in, they may move to London temporarily to gain some work experience and improve their English. In September or October, another group of temporary migrants can be observed moving to the UK to spend a “gap year” before returning to France to continue with advanced studies or to find permanent employment. Others in this group move to the UK because they cannot find jobs in France, or because they want to start their careers with international experience in order to earn better positions in France upon their return. With the exception of bank employees, few members of this group expect to earn a great deal of money during their time in the UK.

Jobs performed by young French people in the UK vary according to planned length of stay and English proficiency. Those with the most basic English skills often work in behind-the-scenes food service jobs until their English is sufficient for working with the public. Other jobs that do not require strong English skills include teaching/tutoring French, serving as nannies or au pairs, and working in childcare centers. There are many examples of young French migrants with degrees in marketable majors such as engineering who work in kitchens and spend much of their free time working on their language skills. This can trigger frustration in an ambitious young person, but as a recruiting agent pointed out:

Would you prefer working as a kitchen worker in an English language environment, or as a sales assistant in a French shop? Working as a commis waiter with French colleagues but without any contact with customers in a French restaurant is not really an efficient way to improve your language skills. What’s the best—having experience in your field but within a French environment, or finding a job not related to your studies but that allows you to improve your English?

I was told that French language skills are downplayed even in large French firms operating in the UK. Many of these firms tend to hire British employees, especially in the banking and finance sectors. Within the past decade, a growing number of French companies with subsidiaries or branch offices in the UK have stopped paying expatriate bonuses for employees sent from France in favor of recruiting French nationals who already live there, especially those with strong English skills. Depending on their other qualifications and credentials, French citizens with good English and presentation skills can find clerical, sales, business development, or administrative jobs in British companies. A prized position among bilingual French workers is in an import/export firm that does business with agents in the

English- or French-speaking regions such as North America or West Africa. I was told that trade companies in the UK find it easier to hire native French speakers with strong business English skills than British employees with sufficient French language skills.

Opportunity versus Security

Many French migrants view the UK as more market- and sales-oriented than their home country, and as a place that encourages entrepreneurs. Some call Great Britain “UK PLC [Private Limited Company],” implying that the country resembles a large corporate enterprise, one with a labor market that emphasizes dynamism rather than stability. I was told that UK labor market characteristics are the result of greater competition plus flexibility in employment contracts. One interviewee stated that French employers are much more concerned about the specifics of educational backgrounds, and that promotions are much harder to earn in France. First-time French employees must complete internships for one year, followed by a series of short contracts. In contrast, UK employers are more likely to offer permanent positions based on perceived skills and motivation, and to give young employees responsibility as a test of their abilities. I heard one opinion that in the UK, an individual without a college degree can still achieve high levels of responsibility and pay, based on a willingness to work hard. In the words of one interviewee, “Here you go to the Gap [a multinational clothing retailer], you start as a sales assistant, you prove yourself, and you can become an assistant manager within six months.”

In the UK, private firm employees who do not perform well are likely to be fired. I was told that employers in France are very careful about employee selection because labor laws make it very hard to fire workers once they are hired, even if their job performance is poor. According to one interviewee, French citizens who are more concerned about job security than anything else do whatever they can to get jobs in government:

A few years ago there was a survey of young French people about what kinds of careers they wanted. The results were terrifying: 70 percent said they wanted to become civil servants because they wanted secure jobs. You don't need a business degree to be a civil servant!

In the succinct words of another informant, “In the UK you have more opportunity, but in France you have more security.”

As shown in **Table 1**, the number of French citizens living and working in the UK fell during the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. It is reasonable to assume that many French returned to their home country for security, yet some of my interviewees argued that even during the recession, the UK economy was still more dynamic than France's, and that during the crisis, French citizens in the UK were more likely than their counterparts in France to quickly find employment if they were laid off from their current jobs. Although the number of French migrants in the UK and London increased after the global financial crisis, the number from July 2009 to June 2010 was less than that for the preceding twelve months (**Table 1**). It is unknown how this number was affected by the shutdown of the Employment Office of the French Consulate in London in August 2009.

For most French migrants, the average stay in the UK is 1 - 5 years. Only a small percentage stays permanently, with many in

that category marrying British or other nationals living in Great Britain. Upon their arrival, most look for jobs that will help them practice their English. After one year, they look for jobs that will give them the kinds of experience that might impress future employers. Those who marry generally face the important “leave-or-stay” decision after 8 - 12 years of residency. If the spouse is a British citizen or a non-French foreigner, the couple is more likely to stay in the UK if the non-French spouse cannot speak sufficient French for employment purposes. If the spouse is French, there is a much higher probability of returning to France.

There are considerable benefits for those who do return to France, especially in terms of cost-of-living: the UK is far more expensive. The UK health care program has a reputation for long waits and questionable care, which is not the case in France. Retired French workers have much better pensions than their UK counterparts. In terms of children's education, many French people believe that UK state schools are not nearly as good as those in France. Many junior high school students in the UK have poor reading and math skills. Education in France is much cheaper compared to the UK, and nursery schools in the UK are not subsidized in the same way as they are in France, adding a considerable expense to raising a child.

Move-or-stay decisions are greatly dependent on the life stage of the decision-maker. As one interviewee told me:

When we come here we are young, twenty-something or in our early 30s, and more career-oriented. What we want is to work, earn money, enjoy ourselves—you know, “I'm in London, it's fun!” We don't think about security until we get to 35, 40. And then we go back to France for security when we have a family.

Another added, “It may be more secure in France in terms of job regulation, but it's harder to find a job... I won't stay here [UK] forever, but I think it's easier to start a career here.”

Conclusion

According to official UK data, French citizens represent the second largest group of foreigners from western EU countries (as opposed to former eastern bloc EU nations) residing in London and the UK, after migrants from Ireland. The majority are young, college-educated members of the middle class who move to London on their own initiative. Their main motivation is long-term career development. Unlike the rigid labor market found in France, the UK labor market is viewed as dynamic and as rewarding individual merit, effort, and competitive success. As part of this long-term career development perspective, temporary French migrants work in the UK in order to improve their English. Since French companies highly value strong English language skills and overseas experience, there is strong incentive to spend some time in the UK or other English-speaking country before searching for a permanent job.

Most French migrants live in the UK for 1 - 5 years before returning to France. Benefits of returning include a lower cost of living, greater job security, and better pensions. For young families there are the added benefits of subsidized day care and less expensive state-run schools. Migrants who decide to stay in the UK permanently mostly do so because they marry foreign spouses who cannot find suitable employment in France, mainly due to insufficient French language skills. Since most French who migrate to the UK eventually return to France,

there is little potential of “brain drain,” therefore both countries may be viewed as benefiting from the short-term migrant phenomenon.

Since most French migrants have poor command of English upon their arrival in the UK, many have to work in low-level hospitality sector jobs, even though they may have degrees in professional disciplines. In other words, they experience initial downward mobility, unlike their counterparts from English-speaking countries such as New Zealand, whose citizens can find relatively well-paid professional work in London (Conradson & Latham, 2005). However, for young migrants from English-speaking countries, primary motivations often consist of opportunities for travel, experiencing different cultures, and enjoying a free lifestyle before settling down into a career—in other words, an emphasis on self-exploration, with career advancement a distant secondary concern. In contrast, French people are more likely to move to the UK for long-term career development purposes (e.g., language learning and overseas work experience to add to their resumes), with lifestyle viewed as an extra bonus.

EU countries now allow their citizens to freely move across the borders of member states in pursuit of economic opportunities, yet EU migration from non-EU countries still exceeds intra-EU migration. The primary migration pattern from developing countries to Europe has not changed since the formation of the EU. As Hooghe, et al. (2008) point out, migration flow to European countries is driven by labor market shortages and past colonial links. Since there are no major discrepancies in economic performance and social welfare programs in western EU states, those factors are unlikely to motivate intra-EU migration. And even though both European Employment Services (EURES) and local job centers are available to all EU citizens, those services are not actively involved in facilitating intra-EU migrants’ job searches to the same degree as the three French organizations in London that I described in this paper. Then there is the obvious factor that the UK is the only EU country that uses English as its first language, which is a major draw for young EU citizens who want to improve their English language skills. I also found a difference in terms of mobility culture. In western EU countries, only a small number of middle class workers are motivated to move to another country in the interest of adventure, lifestyle change, or social distinction—for instance, some of British citizens who move to Paris (Scott, 2006). In the absence of a strong mobility culture, support organizations, and a preferred language, intra-EU mobility is likely to remain dominated by blue collar migrants due to significant wage differences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Institute of European and American Studies in Academia Sinica for my travel grant, and the Institute for the Study of European Transformations (ISET) at London Metropolitan University for hosting my research. The list of individuals who helped me with this project is too long to present here, but I wish to express my specific appreciation to Professors Allan Williams and Pei-Chia Lan, Dr. Monica Threlfall, Mr. Jacques Reland and my research assistant, Mr. Po-Jen Hsiao.

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