Role Identity and the Complexities of Adjustments During Retirement

Theodore Ihenetu*

Raphe Adult Care Center, Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri, Nigeria

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*Corresponding author: Theodore Ihenetu, Raphe Adult Care Center, Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri, Nigeria, Tel: +2348067253290;
Email: theoihenetu2000@yahoo.com

Introduction

This article approaches the question of identity changes during retirement and old age. Retirement seems to be a crucial moment in the process of growing older since it is generally viewed as a point in time where old age begins. Retirees are often referred to as the 'young old', a term that shows some of the uncertainty of elderly people's age identity. They often do not feel old, but nevertheless find themselves suddenly belonging to the category of the 'elderly'. Furthermore, profession provides a very strong identity throughout our working time. The question arises of what happens to that vocational identity, once the profession is not practiced anymore.

Retirement and Self Re-Definition

Retirement is a relatively recent phenomenon, characteristic of affluent industrial and post-industrial societies. In many other cultures, and in our own culture of 100 years ago, retirement was virtually nonexistent. Work was part of life until illness or death prevented it. Now, however, we have compulsory age-based retirement in most occupational sectors, supported by social security schemes, and the tradition of retiring from work around the age of 65 in other sectors. At the same time, life spans are lengthening. Retirement can not only be viewed from the perspective of giving up work. Beside the work-related variable, the retiree needs to adjust to a number of other life change events associated with the process. Shifts occur in at least three important personal resources:

i. A decrease on personal income,

ii. An increase in free time, and

iii. A potential for declining health along with constrained activity.

In addition, there are socio-psychological variables that involve changes:

i. The altered relationships an individual has with his or her interpersonal environment, and

ii. The altered societal perceptions about his or her role in society now that retirement has taken place.

Retirement, therefore, is a complex process requiring adaptation in many spheres of life besides the work role. When retirement as a stage of life is conceptualized, there appears to be general agreement that it is the period following a career of job-holding, when income is usually secured by pension benefits, by virtue of having held a job for a minimum length of time in the past. However, defining retirement in operational terms is more difficult, and there is no widely recognized and accepted operational definition in the literature today. Operational definitions seek to define an abstract concept such as retirement in terms of simple, observable procedures. Researchers studying the field can choose from various approaches to operationalizing retirement, including defining it in terms of reduction in employment, proportion of income from pensions or self-initiated plans, and a subjective assessment as to whether the subject considers himself or herself as retired. This difficulty in defining retirement is a major problem, and Howard et al. even suggest that the variety of definitions in use probably account in large part for the problem of obtaining consistency in research results.

Ekerdt and DeViney introduce five criteria for defining retirement:

A. Separation from a Career: Under this criterion, persons retire upon leaving a job, position, occupation, or employer with which they have a long association. It is a criterion for which retirement is largely a one-time event. The idea is clear enough—people retire when they leave their life's main work. However, the idea is not easy to operationalize because not all workers have continuous careers in one place or line of work. For example, if a vocational education teacher concludes a career at the local high school but remains occupationally an active plumber, is this a career-ending retirement? When there is not enough common experience and homogeneity of experience regarding careers and endings, it is difficult to frame survey questions about these transitions. One post hoc strategy (i.e., devising a measure from data already collected) is to characterize the position with longest tenure as the "career job" and one's having left it as retirement.

B.   Exit from the Labor Force: Exit-retirements occur when an older worker has no current employment, as indicated by zero hours worked or zero earnings, and is not seeking employment. Operationally, labor-force exit is the easiest, most convenient definition of retirement, so long as the investigator does not overlook occasional or seasonal employment that occurs on a regular basis. It has, however, the disadvantage of grouping together as 'non-retired' all persons with any work activity, full-time employment along with nominal engagements in the labor-force. This dichotomy masks the nature of elderly persons' work patterns, which are increasingly characterized by part-time employment with advancing age

C.   Reduced Effort: By this criterion, retirement is a substantial reduction in labor supply or income, as indicated by a lower level of work activity or earnings. The "reduced effort" criterion is a refinement of the previous "exit" criterion, locating the cutoff for retirement/nonretirement higher up the labor supply distribution. Work effort is often called an "objective" measure of retirement, yet determinations of full, partial, or nonretirement are fairly arbitrary. Some clues about where to categorize along the work effort or earnings continuum can be had by reference to other criteria.

D.   Pension Receipt: Under this criterion, people retire upon receipt of retirement pensions. These are in the United States mainly the retired-worker benefit of Social Security or a pension from private or public employment. Pension eligibility is an administrative definition of retirement and already an amalgam of other criteria. Eligibility for the Social Security benefit is defined by age, previous employment, and reduced earnings.

E.   Self-Definition: Persons can be considered to be retired if they say they are. This is typically called a "subjective" definition of retirement, which is, as Ekerdt and DeViney point out, an unfortunate label. In social science generally, the quality of subjective data is usually compared unfavorably to so-called objective data with their greater validity, reliability, and intelligibility. When self-reports of retirement status are labeled as subjective, in contrast to the so-called objective indicators of reduced effort or pension receipt, it may be meant that retirement status is subjectively reported. It is still important to understand what people mean by their responses. When people say they are retired, are they confirming a role exit or assuming a social identity? Are they acknowledging facts about their employment or income?

For instance, it can happen that elderly women, who have been housewives for virtually all of adulthood but receive spouses' pension benefits, define themselves as retired. Other women with full and concluded work careers may see themselves as housewives. Claims about being retired may also be difficult to interpret among persons with histories of irregular work patterns or chronic unemployment. Another problem of the self-definition criterion is that self-definitions may change over time in ways that make it difficult to pinpoint the date or event of retirement. Persons may not decide they are retired until sometime after they have entered a set of circumstances. For example, after a certain duration of disability or unemployment, a person may later decide that he or she had retired when the new situation started.

Role Identity and Retirement Identity

Retirement seems to be a crucial moment in the process of growing old since it is generally viewed as a point in time where old age begins. Furthermore, profession provides a strong identity throughout our working time. The question arises of what happens to that vocational identity once the profession is not practiced anymore. And—more generally—how people in that age around the retirement view them; and if they change their identity in any way. The question to be answered more is; what are the contents of identity change, that is, what domains of the personal identity get more or less important during the transition to retirement. In this section, a special focus is placed on the development of the professional identity after retirement and their self-redefinition as retirees. Another aspect that is addressed is the question, how identity diversity is linked to life satisfaction for retired persons. To these, three other explorative issues are addressed:

i.   The question what effect the retirement has on different identity apart from the professional identity,

ii.   The question if and how the importance of these different identity change with increasing age, and

iii.   The question what kind of changes people perceive in their own persons due to higher age.

According to the social identity theory, individuals categorize themselves and others as a means of ordering the social environment, and locating themselves and others within it. Thus, categories are selected to provide meaningful distinctions between people or subgroups of people. Tajfel argues that because social categories are differentially valued within a culture, social identities also carry varying degrees of positive and negative values for the self. Individuals obtain an assessment of their in-group's value relative to an out-group through social comparison processes. He assumed that humans need positive and distinctive group identities, from which individual self-esteem and a sense of personal value can be derived. Thus, if the group to which an individual belongs is less highly valued than relevant out-groups, the individual becomes motivated to either leave the group or improve the group's standing.

Research in the field of stereotypes towards elderly people and images of aging show that old age is very often associated to negative attitudes. The beginning of old age can be dated in very different ways, since age is a blurred category. Borscheid pointed out that in pre-industrial societies a biological understanding of old age was predominating, "old age" being defined as an increase

in frailty- as a summon of death. Thus only those persons were seen as "old" whose physical and mental strength had decreased, and not necessarily those who had passed a certain calendared age. In the meantime, this biologically oriented concept of age has been replaced by a social-political concept, where the beginning of higher age is essentially defined by regulations of the statutory pension insurances, and accordingly by leaving the workforce.

These considerations imply that retirement is probably not viewed as an especially attractive social category, since it is linked so tightly to the category of higher age, and higher age is generally viewed rather negatively. According to the social identity theory, we can therefore expect that people will not view their status of being retired (and accordingly the fact that they have left the workforce) as an important aspect to define themselves. I assume therefore that the role identity remains an important aspect of self-redefinition even after retirement, and is not replaced by a retiree-identity. At the same time, we can also assume that the attitude towards old age has an influence on the readiness or reluctance with which people accept a self-redefinition as "retirees". If their personal view of old age is positive, we can expect them to see their "retiree-identity" as a more important aspect of themselves than if they have a negative view of old age [1].

Retired but Not Tired

Old age or retirement is typically a time when the work role becomes less important and leisure takes on more importance in life. We sometimes think of leisure as "free time," which obviously becomes more available after retirement. But leisure can be defined as any activity enjoyed for its own sake, pursued as an end in itself. Some elderly people are unaccustomed to leisure, so when they leave the role of work, they may try to replace it with lots of activity. "I'm busier than ever," is sometimes heard from people who are retired.

Does leisure in retirement actually replace the work role in later life? Does it become a source of meaning in its own right?

The answer depends on the quality of subjective experience during leisure. Leisure may be an end in itself, but moments of leisure also have a developmental pattern that is rich with purpose. Leisure, in short, can be serious business. For example, if we play sports or perform music or read a text, each moment leads to the next in some purposeful developmental pattern. By contrast, other common leisure activities, like viewing television, take up a lot of time for the elderly but tend to be passive or less demanding. In advising elderly people about the use of free time in retirement, we need to recognize that the use of time can vary tremendously in its meaning and purpose.

There is a common stereotype of retired people playing table tennis or all heading off for a music or computer course. Actually, as people get older they usually engage in the same activities as earlier in life, a fact recognized by the "continuity theory" of aging. True, with advancing age, there tends to be an overall decline in participation rate in many kinds of activities, whether going to worship centers or going to the music course. But it is a mistake to think in stereotypes about "elderly people's" activities, such as singing old-time songs. Age alone does not serve as a good predictor of what people will do with their leisure in later life. Elderly people are not all alike.

Conclusion

My aim here is to help retirees find their strengths and happiness in leisure. The grace they have to be retired is an opportunity to self-redefinition and taking up of new identity role. With this we can understand why Macnab sees retirement as a "waste of human resources, skills and experience" and Freedman also sees retirees as an "untapped resource for society". In further discussion, I shall employ concept of 'FLOW' to explore and explain how leisure could be for the retirees, a time and means for creating aging.

References

1. Theodore Ihenetu (2013) Aging in Grace. APT Publications, Owerri, Nigeria, p. 68-99.