

Ruminations on the Academic Afterlife

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Abstract

In this paper, the academic afterlife of a purposive sample of 12 recreation, park, and leisure studies educators from a variety of universities throughout the United States and Canada is discussed. The paper begins with a brief review of the literature on successful aging. That literature's insights are then applied to the lived experiences of the study's 12 participants. The results of the inquiry illuminate rich and varied individual differences. At the same time, there are commonalities across the study's 12 participants that underscore the importance of increasing control over one's time in retirement accompanied by an increasing sense of responsibility and accountability for the use of that time. The paper concludes by interpreting the study's results in light of Stebbins's (2013) three categories of leisure and five leisure lifestyles to better understand the prospects for leisure-centered retirement living.

Keywords: *casual leisure; ego integration; gerotranscendence; innovation; project-based leisure; retirement; serious leisure*

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“I think about retirement, but not seriously.”

—Tennessee Williams

The prospect of retirement can be daunting. After years of working with, and oftentimes for, others, retirees face a future that will be defined largely by how they choose to live life. Whether their future will be meaningful and fulfilling will depend on the intersection of a variety of factors, including health, finances, and social relationships, especially relationships among family and friends (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Weiss, 2005). But more than anything, the quality of retirement will depend on retirees' ability to be self-directing. Transitioning from an instrumental role (deriving a sense of self-worth from contributions made to the agendas of others) to a more internally driven role (deriving a sense of self-worth from contributions made to one's own agenda) can be challenging. Instead of having to meet other people's expectations, retirees now have to meet their own.

Complicating retirement are losses of various kinds that require modifications in living. These losses are also related to health, finances, and social relationships (Weiss, 2005). To account for them, Baltes and Baltes (1990) developed the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model to illustrate adaptations that are often necessary in later life to reduce the limiting effects of aging. Essentially, SOC reasons that aging's inevitable winding down means selectively limiting certain activities in ways that allow older persons to compensate for those losses by redirecting their remaining energies and abilities to a smaller repertoire of their most meaningful activities. This optimization of effort makes continued growth and development possible in old age despite increasingly limiting conditions (Burnett-Wolle & Godbey, 2007; Kelley, Little, Lee, Birenda, & Henderson, 2014; Kleiber, McGuire, Aybar-Damali, & Norman, 2008; Langer, 2009).

The aging process is also frequently accompanied by a transition from self-centeredness to what Erikson (1982) termed a more generative orientation to living that is manifested in making contributions to successive generations and a growing concern for what he called “ego integration,” or coming to grips with one's place in the order of things. This transformation is characterized by attempts to make sense of one's life in relation to the larger world. It requires retrospection as the individual considers the implications of her or his own finite life in relation to the ongoing and never ending stream of life. Tornstam (2005) amended Erikson's thinking with his own theory of gerotranscendence, which proposes a metamorphosis of self when “self-preoccupation ends and one accepts oneself as being part of the stream of life, past, present, and future” (Kleiber, 2013, p. 25). Tornstam's theory replaces the retrospective aspect of Erikson's view with what Kleiber (2013) calls a forward-looking communion with the universe.

Barring involuntary or unplanned retirement, an absence of income, an unhappy home life, or bad health, retirement thus appears to offer an opportunity for self-fulfillment through leisure (Kleiber & Linde, 2014; Stebbins, 2013; Vaillant, 2002; Weiss, 2005). Stebbins (2013), in particular, speaks of the possibility of cultivating a leisure lifestyle in retirement. He describes three categories of leisure and five leisure lifestyles within which to plan for successful retirement. Additionally, for those who seek it, retirement also provides an opportunity for innovation and meaningful change in later life (Nimrod, 2008) informed by what Langer (2009) calls the “psychology of possibility.” This is an especially important aspect of retirement given trends toward increasingly longer lifespans. New retirees will likely have more time to work with than their predecessors. What people make of their

retirement years is thus an open question, a question that is particularly intriguing to ask of individuals who have made the study of leisure their life's work.

Of interest in this study were the experiences of recently retired recreation, park and leisure studies educators. The researchers' curiosity stemmed from their own aging and thoughts of retirement. What might they learn from professors in the field who have preceded them into the academic afterlife that might benefit them? What do the researchers have to look forward to, what should they be concerned about, and what should they plan for?

Method

To shed light on these questions, a purposive sample of 12 retired recreation, park, and leisure studies educators (four females, eight males), who had worked at a variety of universities throughout the United States and Canada, was selected. All of the retirees in this study were in their 60s or 70s. They were "young old" (60 to 75). They were healthy, financially secure, and enjoyed the support of family and friends. While these conditions were bound to change over time, for now the retirees were in a position to make the most of their days, weeks, and years.

The researchers recognized the participants' privileged position in retirement, as well as recognizing that it would not be possible to generalize the participants' experiences to a larger population of retirees. But the purposive sample was deemed appropriate for generating research questions based on the experiences of a small subset of academic retirees with expertise in understanding leisure's contributions to the quality of life.

After identifying and recruiting the 12 recently retired participants, the researchers crafted the following prompting paragraph, asked the participants to ponder it, and then asked them to respond to it in writing as it applied to their own life:

We are interested in knowing what people do after they disengage from full-fledged academic life. Do they leave it behind them entirely? Do they hold onto certain elements of it? Do they employ their academic expertise in new and innovative ways, or do they move on to entirely different things? Do they miss academic life? Is life as rich or possibly even richer now? Is retirement a joyful existence, or is it something else? Finally, is the academic afterlife characterized by 'freedom from the necessity of being occupied,' as the ancient Greeks characterized the leisure ideal?

The paragraph was designed to elicit responses to a priori questions of interest to the researchers, questions that focused on the centrality of academic life to the participants, the ease with which the participants were able to leave academic life behind them, and the significance of their academic expertise in shaping their retirement years. The researchers then analyzed the participants' written responses to the seven questions embedded in the prompting paragraph using constant comparative techniques (Saldaña, 2012). Once again, the researchers were particularly interested in knowing if the participants' leisure expertise was reflected in the way they were living their own retirement years.

Results

Before reporting the results, it is important to reiterate that these were 12 highly educated individuals who had made the study of leisure the centerpiece of their academic careers. They had the financial wherewithal to design their own retirement, and health issues were not a major factor in determining how their retirement unfolded. To a considerable extent, the study's participants were free to make of their retirement years what they wanted. While these conditions were undoubtedly more favorable for this small sample of retirees than retirees in general, and while any conclusions from this study must be tempered accordingly, the results are instructive for understanding what is involved in transitioning to a meaningful and fulfilling retirement.

For reporting purposes, the responses to each of the seven questions embedded in the study's prompting paragraph are now summarized:

1. *Did these retirees leave academic life behind them entirely?*

Only three (25%) of the 12 participants left academic life behind them entirely. Indeed, several of the educators eased into retirement via phased retirement programs that allowed them to gradually disengage from full-time work. Moreover, while some retirees left academic life behind them more so than others, most of them reported considerable satisfaction in being able to pick and choose what aspects of academic life to leave behind and what aspects to carry forward into retirement.

2. *Did they hold onto certain elements of academic life?*

One hundred percent (100%) of the respondents reported a continuing curiosity for learning while celebrating the increasing amount of freedom they had to direct their own learning. Some maintained a passion for writing; some for teaching beyond the university; and some for service to the larger profession and community.

3. *Did they employ their academic expertise in new and innovative ways, or did they move on to entirely different things?*

While three (25%) of the respondents moved on to entirely different things (e.g., building houses, taking up new and interesting hobbies like "growing flowers and butterflies instead of growing students"), nine (75%) of the respondents employed their academic expertise via consulting, starting their own business, continuing to serve on graduate thesis and dissertation committees, continuing to publish with graduate students and colleagues, and starting new writing and publishing ventures. They reported that their satisfaction came from doing what they chose to do (meeting their own expectations) instead of serving other masters. They enjoyed holding themselves responsible and accountable for the way they were spending their retirement years.

4. *Did they miss academic life?*

While two (17%) retirees reported missing the satisfaction that came with student interactions, on the whole the educators said they did not miss academic life. They attributed this feeling, in part, to the fact that they were able to transport much of what they loved about academic life with them into retirement while discarding those aspects of their former work life that they found unrewarding (e.g., grading papers, attending committee meetings, putting up with underachieving students, overbearing administrators, and disgruntled colleagues)

5. *Was life as rich or possibly even richer now?*

All 12 respondents (100%) indicated that life in retirement was richer than ever. They attributed this feeling to a combination of factors: a) they were able to bring the best part of academic life with them into retirement—a curiosity for learning; b) they had increasing control over their time, which allowed them to pick and choose from a cornucopia of interesting things to be engaged in; and c) they continued to enjoy relatively good health, which made that engagement possible. As one respondent put it, “retirement has allowed me to move into the next phase of my life; a life that is richer than any other phase, because I now have almost complete control over how I engage in life.”

6. *Was retirement a joyful existence, or was it something else?*

For 10 (83%) of the 12 educators, retirement was joyful. But for two (17%) others retirement was characterized by self-examination and a brooding nature. Had their life been meaningful? Had they made a difference? Should they devote themselves to fully savoring a comfortable retirement or should they devote themselves to making a positive mark on the larger world while they were still able? One respondent remarked that she felt she was no longer in the process of ‘becoming,’ and that bothered her greatly. Simply enjoying retirement was not enough. She still wanted to make a positive difference in the world. Yet another added, quoting E.B. White, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

7. *Was the academic afterlife characterized by “freedom from the necessity of being occupied,” as the ancient Greeks characterized the leisure ideal?*

One hundred percent (100%) of the retired recreation, park, and leisure studies educators surveyed in this study reported that they had sufficient financial resources to be free of everyday concerns. In that sense, they believed they were free from the necessity of having to earn a living. At the same time, their responses to the questions embedded in the prompting paragraph reflected a sustained interest in occupying themselves in ways that gave meaning and purpose to their lives. As one of them concluded, “I can’t imagine a life without purpose.” They vacillated between a carefree mindset and an obligatory mindset that turned on the question of how best to invest their remaining years.

Discussion

This exploratory study, though small in scale, raises a number of interesting questions about the academic afterlife. These questions are first explored by focusing on what the retired recreation, park, and leisure studies educators had in common that afforded them the opportunity to create their own retirement, and how their lifestyles conformed to what the literature says about successful aging. The paper then concludes by detailing Stebbins’s (2013) three categories of leisure and five leisure lifestyles in considering the prospects for leisure-centered retirement.

Control over One’s Time

While acknowledging that professors have considerably more control over their time than many other professionals, every participant in this study felt that increasing control

over their time was one of the highlights of retirement. They were freer than ever to direct their attention and energy to pursuing activities that really mattered to them. Liberation from the workplace meant they could exercise their newfound freedom any way they wanted, and with increasing control over their time came increasing numbers of choices as to how they might employ their time. Rather than being seen as a constraining influence as it often was in the workplace, time was seen by all of the study's participants as a welcome resource to be used in ways that could enhance the quality of their retirement years.

The experience of increasing control over their time coupled with increasing freedom to choose what they wanted to do with that time created necessary, but insufficient, conditions for the study's participants to transition into leisure-centered living. The retirees had to add their own energy and enthusiasm for living into the mix. Essentially, their challenge was to convert their newly found freedom "from" the demands of the workplace into the freedom "to" engage in life in new and meaningful ways. They chose to do this, among other things, by tutoring low-literacy adults, fund-raising, collecting and giving away books to children in lower income families, distributing groceries to seniors through a food bank, volunteering in parks, preparing taxes for elderly and low/moderate income taxpayers, and serving as a classroom assistant for Head-Start classes.

A Continuing Purpose in Life

How best to fill their newly acquired free time was not a problem for this study's retired educators. For some it meant taking on large projects like building a new house. For others, it meant discarding the least rewarding aspects of their academic life while simultaneously transporting the best aspects with them into retirement. These patterns seemed to reflect the importance of maintaining a sense of internal continuity in the lives of the study's retirees (Atchley, 1999, 1993, 1989). Others headed in entirely new directions and cultivated new interests, hobbies, and identities through volunteering, travel, and otherwise "reinventing" themselves. For these individuals, in particular, retirement did not appear to be a time for winding down as much as it was a time for winding up in new, interesting, and creative ways (Langer, 2009; Nimrod, 2008, 2007; Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). One individual revived his life-long interest in writing and publishing poetry. Another moved overseas and began the life of a Bohemian in Paris. Yet another dedicated herself to nurturing black swallowtail butterflies through their life cycle.

Regardless of the path they were on, all of the study's participants referred to a delicate balance between enjoying themselves fully in retirement while also continuing to make contributions to larger causes. What was clear from the responses was that maintaining a sense of purpose in life was important to these educators. They appeared to be working through what Erikson (1982) called "ego integration," and Tornstam (2005) called gerotranscendence. On the one hand, they were firmly rooted in the here and now as they enjoyed the fruits of long and distinguished careers. On the other hand, they were trying to understand their place in the cosmos. One respondent, in particular, expressed the latter concern by describing her attempts to immerse herself in nature and "walk with and in beauty" and by quoting Emerson's "Whose life is the better for who you are?" These lived experiences suggest that retirement can be a time for continued growth and development as well as a time for reckoning. In this regard, the study's findings support both Langer's idea of the "psychology of possibility" (2009) and Baltes and Baltes (1990) SOC model, featuring the conscious choice of how and where to invest one's time and energy in later years.

In sum, the results of this study suggest to the researchers that the retired recreation, park, and leisure studies educators sampled were handling retirement well. Nevertheless, they, too, continued to entertain life's big questions, and they, too, concerned themselves with the past, present, and future. What they had going for them from years of study was an appreciation of leisure's potential as a vehicle for their continued growth and development. Converting that appreciation into a practical retirement plan was a challenge for them, as the researchers expect it is for most people.

Stebbins's Categories of Leisure and Leisure Lifestyles

Stebbins's (2013) work on retirement planning may provide additional insight here. Stebbins proposes three all-encompassing types of leisure: casual leisure, serious leisure, and project-based leisure. Casual leisure is what most people think of when the term "leisure" is brought up; those enjoyable, transitory moments of free time activity ranging from watching television to taking in a sporting event to having dinner with friends. Serious leisure, on the other hand, when pursued in earnest over time, can lead to lasting, highly satisfying, and one might even say, fulfilling unpaid 'careers' for their enthusiasts. Examples of serious leisure include amateurism, hobbies, and volunteering. Project-based leisure is similar to serious leisure, but of intermittent and shorter duration (as described in Dustin, 2015).

Stebbins reasons that a successful leisure lifestyle includes all three types of leisure, varying by degree in accordance with an individual's geography, predispositions, and abilities. In the present study, several examples of serious leisure (e.g., organic gardening, writing poetry, volunteering, community fund raising, charitable work, raising butterflies), project-based leisure (e.g., building houses, clearing land with a tractor, branding cattle, baling hay), and casual leisure (e.g., sitting in a Parisian sidewalk cafe people watching, throwing parties, going to the beach, playing golf) were noted. Collectively, these three types of leisure provide a menu from which retirees can select meaningful and fulfilling combinations of leisure pursuits to satisfy their individual tastes (Heo, Stebbins, Kim, & Lee, 2013; Hutchinson, & Kleiber, 2005).

Stebbins adds further that one's leisure repertoire is governed to a considerable extent by one's geographical setting. He describes five different leisure lifestyles (homebody, traveler, townie, outbacker [living a rural life], and part-time retirement) that are differentially conducive to the pursuit of casual leisure, serious leisure, and project-based leisure, and he demonstrates how a leisure lifestyle preference affects opportunities to experience the three types of leisure. The present study, for example, was populated by all lifestyle types, including homebodies, travelers, townies, an outbacker, and at least one part-time retiree who could be categorized as a 'devotee worker'; that is, he no longer had to work, but his passion for the work he was doing was so intrinsically rewarding that it approached being leisure for him (traveling to and from China to help educate their hospitality management workforce). In sum, Stebbins's three categories of leisure and five leisure lifestyles interact in ways that may impact leisure's ability to serve as a strong source of purpose and identity for individuals in later life. The challenge is to think through these potential interaction effects before deciding where to retire and what forms of leisure to pursue during retirement.

Recommendations for Future Research

The work reported here raises more questions than it answers. The results of this study suggest that leisure experiences can give purpose to the lives of recreation, park, and

leisure studies educators who have retired from the workforce. But does that hold for other populations of retirees as well? Indeed, do most retirees possess the self-directing skills to bring that purpose to life through their judicious use of increasing amounts of free time that retirement affords? And how do less privileged retirees negotiate financial, health, and social constraints to experience the promise of a leisure-centered retirement? Finally, how do Stebbins's three categories of leisure and five leisure lifestyles interact to influence the possibility of leisure-centered retirement? Answers to these questions will be critical to planning for a future that may be characterized by less work and more leisure for young and old alike.

Conclusion

In many respects, "retirement" is an inadequate word for describing the transition from the work stage of one's life to the postwork stage. As reported here, some "retired" recreation, park, and leisure studies professors are as engaged as ever. They have simply moved from one stage of life to another, a new stage that is replete with opportunities for engaging in casual, serious, and project-based leisure. Whether a leisure-centered life can be as fulfilling as a work-centered life is an open question, but for those individuals participating in this study, life's later years have come at a time when they are ripe for living life to its fullest. Having the wisdom of years to sustain them, a curiosity for learning to motivate them, and an appreciation for life to buoy them, they appear to be enjoying their twilight years with youthful exuberance.

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