



# Activity in the third age: Examining the relationship between careers and retirement experiences



Holly Birkett\*, Fiona Carmichael, Joanne Duberley

University of Birmingham, Birmingham Business School, University House, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to enhance understanding of how career histories affect broader retirement experiences. Drawing on life course and resource-based perspectives, the study theorizes the mechanisms underlying the relationship between career trajectories, resource accumulation and retirement experiences. We utilise retrospective life course data and a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how the career histories of 50 older men and women are linked to their expectations and experiences of retirement. The approach enables the research focus to include older people's long working lives prior to retirement. The results suggest that there is a strong relationship between career trajectory, resource accumulation and experiences of retirement. One implication is that differential access to resources over life courses significantly affects how people experience and adjust to retirement. In addition, some resources had a more significant impact on retirement outcomes than others, namely, financial resources, health and, in some cases, social networks. The analysis also highlights the complex and varied nature of retirement and adds to current debates around retirement and the boundaryless career.

## 1. Introduction

As life expectancy is extended, health outcomes improve and state retirement schemes and pension policies evolve, people's perceptions of, and activities in, later life are changing. Older people increasingly move in and out of employment, become self-employed, engage in volunteer work and bridge employment and undertake caring responsibilities, all of which impact on what it means to be retired (Sargent, Lee, Martin, & Zikic, 2013; Vickerstaff, 2007). Indeed, Moen and Flood see this as a new life stage—the 'encore stage', or, as Laslett (1987) calls it, a 'third age'—which they characterise as 'an on-going engagement with meaningful activities' (Moen & Flood, 2013, p. 206), including both paid and unpaid employment, education and informal forms of helping out. Thus, for Moen and Flood (2013) retirement is an on-going process. This is very different from the conventional view in which full-time employment is replaced by full-time leisure, and it is the perspective on retirement adopted.

From this perspective, retirement can be seen as a further stage of career development; 'late career development' (Shultz, 2003; see also Shultz & Wang, 2008; Wang, Adams, Beehr, & Shultz, 2009) or 'an active phase in the lifelong process of creating a sustainable career' (Froidevaux & Hirschi, 2015, p. 350). Some authors focus on the third age as a period of 'extended vitality' (Carr & Hendricks, 2011, p. 207, p. 207), but, following Moen and Flood (2013, p. 4), we recognize that this process, and its associated outcomes, are very dependent on the retiree's access to resources. As such, in line with Wang, Henkens, and Van Solinge (2011) and Wang and Shultz (2010), resources are both an outcome of the retirement process and the key factor driving retirement outcomes (Wang & Shi, 2014, p. 220). So, while some retirees may have opportunities to engage meaningfully through employment,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [h.birkett@bham.ac.uk](mailto:h.birkett@bham.ac.uk) (H. Birkett), [f.carmichael@bham.ac.uk](mailto:f.carmichael@bham.ac.uk) (F. Carmichael), [j.p.duberley@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.p.duberley@bham.ac.uk) (J. Duberley).

volunteering and family activities, as well as make choices about the combination of activities they undertake, others find themselves far more constrained. This insight raises questions about how access to resources, not just during retirement, but also over the life course, affects experiences and expectations in later life. Such questions are even more important in the context of current debates in the career literature around boundaryless and bounded careers (Guest & Rodrigues, 2014; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012).

This paper utilizes retrospective life course data to address these questions. The use of retrospective data allows us to address a limitation of previous research that has, predominantly, focused narrowly on the period immediately prior to, and after, retirement. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how career histories affect broader retirement experiences. In addressing this omission, the research seeks to provide new evidence regarding the relationship between career trajectory, resource accumulation and people's experiences of retirement in the third age. Our theoretical contribution highlights how access to resources, and the timing of resource acquisition, influences career trajectory and how career trajectory impacts future access to resources. This iterative interaction, between career trajectory and resources, then impacts both expectations of retirement in work and the individual's activities and experiences once retired.

### 1.1. Life course and resource-based approaches

The idea that retirement is a distinct life stage involving withdrawal from employment is thrown into question given some people continue to work (Johnson, 2009), others opt to retire early from their primary employment (Ekerdt, 2010), while some are 'retired' against their will as a result of organizational downsizing (Sweet & Moen, 2012). Current research on work in later life and retirement experiences is rooted in five key approaches: continuity theory, where life follows patterns including retirement (Atchley, 1989); role theory (Ashforth, 2001), which sees work as one of the key roles in our lives, making retirement a significant transition; stage theory (Super, 1990), where retirement is one of many distinct life stages; the life course perspective (Moen & Spencer, 2006), which emphasises that our life histories impact the choices we can make and actions we can take in later life; and, finally, the resource perspective (Hobfoll, 2002), which suggests that adjustment to retirement is impacted by the changing resources we have access to in later stages of our lives. Although their focus may be slightly different, there are clear links between these different approaches, with each highlighting the importance of understanding a person's career in terms of their life stage. In this paper we draw particularly on the latter two approaches.

A life course approach is particularly relevant when studying older people's lives and careers because it draws attention to change over time (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) and recognises that the past can shape the future (Mitchell, 2003), with positive or negative pathways, to an extent, reinforced over time (Madero-Cabib, 2015). As such, Kok (2007, p. 205) argues that the perspective is contextual, seeking to understand the 'behaviour of individuals within their personal networks, and within their specific place, historical time and society'. There is also an important recognition of the relationship between structure and agency<sup>1</sup> (Hendricks & Hatch, 2006; Szinovacz, 2013).

For example, Moen and Spencer (2006, p. 157) argue that the life course operates within 'a structural and cultural environment legitimating and even necessitating some choices and not others' and bound by a logic based on existing options, cumulative contingencies and historical and biographical circumstances (Moen & Spencer, 2006, p. 160). In other words, people make decisions about their lives, careers and retirement, but not in a context of their own choosing, and this context can cause them to make some choices without even considering possible alternatives (Archer, 1995). The life course approach offers a nuanced approach to the interrelationship between work, domestic circumstances and access to resources and health over time. The approach also enables consideration of how career histories are bounded and associated with the accumulation of advantages and disadvantages, and ultimately resources, over time. These processes are then reflected in the experiences and expectations of people in later career stages (Moore, 2009).

Duberley and Carmichael (2016) utilise a life course approach for their study of the retirement experiences of a small group of predominantly professional women. They divide women's retirement experiences into 3 categories, enabled, constrained and non-traditional and map these outcomes back to the broad career pathways of the women. Their argument is that there is a relationship between the type of career pathways experienced and future experiences in retirement. While this offers a fruitful way of looking at retirement experiences, what is missing from this study is any explanation of how and why different career pathways may lead to different experiences of retirement. Here, we fill that gap by arguing that career pathways influence retirement outcomes through the effect they have on resource accumulation over time. In addition, Duberley and Carmichael (2016) use a small sample of only women. This makes it difficult to gauge the extent to which gender specifically is an influential factor upon retirement experiences or rather, merely mediates the pattern of experiences, and therefore resources, which the respondent is able to accumulate throughout his/her life course.

Consideration of how an individual's experiences over the life course impact upon access to resources leads us towards a resource based perspective, which argues that there is a relationship between a retiree's access to resources in the run-up to retirement and his/her retirement adjustment (Wang et al., 2011, p. 206). Recognising the increasingly diverse nature of activity in later life, this approach (Shultz & Wang, 2008) sees individuals as developing different work and leisure arrangements depending upon their

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, agency can be defined as: "the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions" (Hay, 2002, p. 94) and structure as: "the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and require meaning" including the "ordered nature of social and political relations", in which "political institutions, practices, routines and conventions appear to exhibit some regularity or structure over time" (Hay, 2002, p. 94). The interactive and iterative relationship between structure and agency (here accumulated resources and retirement decisions/action) over time is examined in Archer's (1995, p. 61) discussion of the Morphogenetic Cycle.

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