



No more lock-step retirement: Boomers' shifting meanings of work and retirement

Erik Kojola ^{*}, Phyllis Moen

University of Minnesota, Department of Sociology, 909 Social Sciences, 267 19th Ave S., Minneapolis, MN 55455, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 August 2015

Received in revised form 25 September 2015

Accepted 1 December 2015

Available online 26 January 2016

Keywords:

Retirement

Aging

Boomers

Career transitions

Encore careers

ABSTRACT

Standard pathways for work and retirement are being transformed as the large Boomer cohort moves through typical retirement ages during a moment of economic, social and political change. People are delaying retirement and moving into and out of paid work as the standard lock-step retirement becomes less dominant. However, little research has explored how and why Boomers are taking on these diverse pathways in their later careers. Accordingly, we conduct in-depth interviews with working and retired white-collar Boomers, exploring how they are working and the meanings and motivations for their decisions and plans in their later careers. We find that there is no single dominant pattern for retirement, but rather a diverse mix of pathways shaped by occupational identities, finances, health and perceptions of retirement. Boomers express a desire to have control over their time and to find meaning and purpose in either paid or unpaid activities. However, life course transitions, normative cultural scripts, and gender and class locations as well as workplace and social policies constrain their decisions and plans.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The social institution of retirement is in flux, as traditional lock-step and linear pathways from full-time work to full-time retirement have been upended by demographic transitions, technological advances, cultural changes, and shifts in the global political economy—all of which are transforming the organization of work, career paths, and retirement exits (Cahill, Giandrea, & Quinn, 2005; Moen & Flood, 2013; Osterman, 1988; Osterman, 1996; Osterman & Shulman, 2011). Growing numbers of people are working longer and transitioning into and out of retirement through part-time, bridge and encore jobs (Cahill, Giandrea, & Quinn, 2011; Cahill, Giandrea, & Quinn, 2006; Giandrea, Cahill, & Quinn, 2009; Quinn, 2010). The dismantling of retirement protections, the uncertainty of personal and institutional retirement savings, and chronic job insecurity in an unstable global economy have meant that as

Boomers move through their 50s and 60s they can no longer rely on secure and stable employment or retirement (Leicht & Fitzgerald, 2014; Lippmann, 2008; Rosnick & Baker, 2010; Price, 2000). Thus, many older workers are postponing the traditional one-way, one-time retirement exit from all paid work (Brougham & Walsh, 2009). At the same time, Boomers are living longer, are more educated than past cohorts and appear to have different conceptions of retirement – wanting to continue being active and engaged – often through paid work or volunteering (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Rix, 1996). Boomers are also the first cohort in which large numbers of women are in the labor force and retiring from careers. But traditional retirement was institutionalized around male breadwinner norms that do not reflect women's distinctive career and life course paths (Christie-Mizell, 2006; Moen & Roehling, 2005; Szinovacz, 2003).

Despite these transformations and the distinctive experiences of Boomers, much existing research on retirement and late careers is based on prior cohorts. Yet, as Riley (1987) argues, cohorts age differently, such that the experiences of past cohorts may not necessarily hold for Boomers. Research is

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kojol002@umn.edu (E. Kojola), phyllmoen@umn.edu (P. Moen).

needed that examines how Boomers in the U.S. are navigating contemporary work and retirement pathways. Quantitative research on older workers from pre-Boomer cohorts has documented increases in job shifts, returning to work after retirement, and taking on bridge jobs (Cahill et al., 2005; Cahill et al., 2011; Cahill et al., 2006). Initial research on Boomers in their later careers shows many in their early and mid 50s change jobs, careers and occupations (Johnson, 2009). Quinn (2010) argues that the U.S. is undergoing a dramatic change in retirement patterns, which is likely to accelerate as Boomers age, but much of the existing retirement research is on earlier cohorts.

Our paper aims to capture the deinstitutionalizing of existing lock-step retirement scripts as well as contemporary meanings of retirement from the vantage point of Boomers. Through an interpretive framework using in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 27 working and retired white-collar Boomers in Minnesota we examine the ways Boomers talk about their jobs, careers, and expectations for retirement. Our paper contributes to the literature by using in-depth interviews to provide more nuanced data on the contemporary experiences of Boomers as they move through – and rewrite – the traditional retirement years (Carr & Manning, 2010).

We investigate when and how Boomers plan to retire and transition out of paid work, and how Boomers are making retirement and work meaningful. We focus on factors shaping their plans and decisions around retirement and what they want from their jobs or work more generally in encore adulthood. We draw on theory from the sociology of aging, critical gerontology and the gendered life course to explore how retirement has become a project, rather than an event, often involving a series of choice points shaped by micro, meso and macro level factors, including the ways in which the shifting social institutions of work and retirement influence individuals' actions (Moen & Flood, 2013; Szinovacz, 2003). We conceptualize gender, class, age and family circumstances as key social locational markers dynamically intersecting with organizational structures and broader economic, political and cultural contexts to produce diverse yet patterned retirement expectations (Moen, Sweet, & Swisher, 2005). The conventional retirement years are being transformed as a period of engagement and development (Laslett, 1991), but we also consider critiques from critical gerontology that examine normative assumptions and inequalities in the ability to “actively” retire (Estes, 1999; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Katz, 2000; Liang & Luo, 2012).

Literature review and theoretical framework

Third age and active retirement

Theories of productive and successful aging contend that norms and meanings around retirement and old age are changing; proponents of this approach attempt to redefine the traditional retirement years as a life stage of activity and social engagement rather than a period marked by the fragility and dependency associated with old age (Laslett, 1991; Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 1998). Laslett (1991, 1989) developed the concept of the “third age” as a time between the adult career stage and old age in which people develop meaningful lifestyles that are neither dominated by career work nor marked by a retreat from society (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002). Freedman

(1999, 2011, 2007) argues that retirement has become the beginning of the third age in which people may shift to part-time work, encore jobs or other forms of socially engaged work, paid or unpaid. Moen and Flood (2013) describe this stage as encore adulthood. For some Boomers retirement is no longer full-time leisure, but rather a life stage of continued learning, engagement, and work (Freedman, 2007; Moen & Flood, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Simpson, Richardson, & Zorn, 2012). Still, negative perceptions of retirement persist, at odds with self-perceptions of being active and engaged (McHugh, 2000; Noonan, 2005; Price, 2000; Sargent, Lee, Martin, & Zikic, 2013).

While successful aging advocates have pushed for a more active notion of the retirement years, critical scholars have cautioned against normative assumptions of “successful aging” which can overlook inequality and structural barriers to activity (Estes, 1999; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Katz, 2000; Liang & Luo, 2012). Political economy approaches examine how the aging process is shaped by intersecting political, economic and ideological structures (Estes, 1999). This approach critiques the concept of productive aging for its emphasis on productivity and efficiency, what Ekerdt (1986) terms the busy ethic, which reflects the cultural imperatives of capitalism and the hegemony of paid labor (Rudman, 2006). Cruikshank (2003) and Katz (2000) argue that older adults, at least those from pre-Boomer cohorts, feel a need to be “busy” and try to embody social roles and activities that are perceived as culturally desirable even if they don't recognize the exact source of these pressures. A productive aging frame constructs neo-liberal individualistic identities and risks around personal choice and individual motivations, thereby devaluing those who cannot, or chose not to, conform to emerging norms of ongoing activity and employment (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003). Dominant norms and expectations can be contested, but people still operate within existing cultural schemas and institutional logics (Dannefer, 2000; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009).

The fact is, not all people have access to the resources – material and cultural – to engage in what is deemed to be successful aging. Holstein and Minkler (2003) argue that normative assumptions about volunteerism create an idyllic of the “good” old person that can obscure the ways in which gender, class and racial inequalities constrain the ability to be “productive” through volunteering and employment. Liang and Luo (2012) also argue that productive aging ignores the actual physical and health changes associated with growing older, constructing an unrealistic ideal of agelessness, often based on male and hetero-normative assumptions. Chapman (2005) contends that exploring how aging well is a process of identity construction and meaning-making can reinterpret successful aging to emphasize how people are aging, rather than prescribing particular ways that aging is “successful.” Nevertheless, there is a body of research that shows that at least some ongoing and voluntary engagement in meaningful activities (such as paid work, unpaid community civic participation or informal family care) promotes healthy behaviors and health outcomes amongst pre-Boomer and the oldest Boomer cohorts (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Moen & Flood, 2013; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Morrow-Howell & Wang, 2013). Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) find that older workers, including some leading edge Boomers, describe a

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1081795>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1081795>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)