Older Women: Finding Meaning Outside the Bounds of Paid Work

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Overview

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• Research Gap
• Research Study Background
• Methods of Analysis, three levels of narrative analysis (storying)
• Findings. Level one. Jenny’s story
• Findings. Level two. Five narrative themes or journeys (a thematic story)
• Findings. Integrationist Journey
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Purpose of the paper

• The purpose of this paper is to present findings from an interpretive study of 21 older women who have returned to New Zealand after self-initiated expatriation (SIE) and experienced significant personal and professional transformation during their SIE.

• This paper focusses on one of the five subgroups within the broader participant group (the integrationists) and draws on the life story of one participant (Jenny) as illustrative of the older women’s search to establish a more holistic and meaningful life path outside the bounds of organisational employment.

• In a context of demographic change and extended working lives the paper also questions the traditional concept of retirement as an adequate nomenclature to adequately capture the complexity of older peoples’ lives.
Older workers...

• Since the turn of the century, labour market participation rates for older men and women in New Zealand aged 65 years plus have steadily increased.

• Participation rates for women have increased to a greater extent, from 2% in the mid-1990s to 15% in 2014, while men’s participation rates have increased from 8% to approximately 25% (Callister, 2014).

• It is expected that women’s participation rates will continue to increase at a greater rate than men’s, partly due to women’s longer life expectancy. While female participation rates have incrementally risen, especially in the older (50 plus years) age cohort, they still remain lower than male participation rates, but are at the upper end of the OECD.
Managing older workers...

• The dominant theme in the literature on the older worker is that of managing older workers in a context of demographic change and extended careers (Callister, 2014).

• The older worker literature has problematised the issue (Tikkanen, 2011), aggregating it as a management challenge that appears to take limited cognisance of the fact that as individuals age, their pathways are more diverse (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).
Retirement...

• Concept has its origins in late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and embedded into social and economic policy after the Second World War.

• Previously older people’s lives evolved out of younger and mid life experiences and adjustments made as physical and mental abilities changed or declined.

• Retirement institutionalised throughout 20\textsuperscript{th} century, by 1960 women experienced retirement as well albeit in a different patterning of activities and responsibilities (Sargeant et al., 2013)
Retirement research...

- Initial studies drawn from UK and US
- Research often dichotomous...to work or to retire.
- Demographic changes, social and economic context changes led to formulation of government policy to retain older people in the workforce (Inkson et al., 2013)
- Economic imperative has been dominant in retirement research at the expense of a social perspective (Moulaert & Biggs, 2013; Post et al., 2013)
Gender and retirement

• Gender has been neglected in retirement studies (Loretto & Vickerstaff; 2013; 2015). The Area is under researched and under theorized
• Benchmarked against patterns and practices of men.
Research Gap

• This research questions the dominant economic imperative of paid organisational work in later life as a primary source of meaning and individual identity.

• In order to understand older people and their changing identities, researchers need to also look at non-paid-work-related activities (Moulaert & Biggs, 2013).

• Currently, there is an emerging curiosity about new ways of conceptualising and theorising later life experiences in a social, political and economic context that is very different from a generation ago (Moulaert & Biggs, 2013). This research study addresses these curiosities.
Research Study Background

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of 21 older New Zealand women who withdrew from their established personal and working lives to undertake SIE, a period of extended travel and work overseas (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). More specifically, this thesis seeks:

• to develop an understanding of the motivations, experiences, and triggers for older women in the pre-SIE decision-making process;

• to develop an understanding of the SIE experience;

• to explore the extent to which an SIE affords older women an opportunity for career and personal development;

• to explore the extent to which an SIE affords older women an opportunity to reflect on, clarify and enact longer term career and life path goals.
Methods of analysis

• Narrative Inquiry

• Utilised narrative to gather (life story), analyse and present findings

• Narrative analysis (involving three levels of storying)
Jenny’s story

I’m trying to allow myself to do what I really want to do
Jenny. I’m trying to allow myself to do what I really want to do.

• It is an interpretive story, illustrative of the transition and change experienced by all six of the integrationists, though each story is personal and unique.

• The interpretive story details Jenny’s SIE journey, literally and figuratively, and in the act of storytelling Jenny was able to make sense of her SIE and attribute meaning to her past experiences, clarify her values, tap into her passions and reclaim her dreams.

• As a result of the SIE experience Jenny and other integrationists were able to deconstruct and reconstruct their lives in a more authentic and meaningful way so that their values, beliefs and practices aligned and their professional and personal lives became integrated.
Five narrative themes

• Tandem Journey

• Internationalist Journey

• Redemptive Journey

• Integrationist Journey

• Spiritual Journey
Integrationist Journey

• The six participants who experienced the ‘integrationist journey’ were involved in varying levels of volunteer and paid work while on SIE.
• The work gave the participants an opportunity to take on greater responsibility and risk, to work autonomously and to gain new knowledge and skills.
• They worked among diverse cultures and were confronted by a different kind of ethics, which caused them to rethink their own beliefs and values.
• On their return to New Zealand, the participants (aged from early fifties to mid sixties) were intent on establishing a more meaningful way of being compared to their pre-SIE lifestyles.
Integrationist Journey...

• Economic perspectives no longer shaped the integrationists’ lives.
• They were prepared to engage in work only if it truly excited them.
• Consequently they were not prepared to return to paid work in a formal organisational structure despite their reduced circumstances.
• Most importantly the integrationists wished to remain in control of their post-SIE life.
• They were determined to engage in activities about which they were passionate.
Other Integrationists. Post SIE

• **Susan.** Permaculture, beekeeping
• **Lucy.** NFP. VSA
• **Cassie.** University studies in development, sustainable practices, tutoring.
• **Sharon.** University studies in visual arts, arts practice and networks
• **Diana.** Publishing cultural cuisine practices
Conclusions

• While Sargent et al. (2013) argue that there remains a lack of understanding of retirement pathways, I would argue more broadly that there is a lack of understanding of the differences and nature of present and potential later life pathways.

• The ‘integrationist’ participants in this research reflect a different way of being.

• A more holistic and integrated society is by implication inclusive of all older people who no longer define themselves by paid work roles and responsibilities.
Conclusions

• In this study, the participants’ act of working was the central core around which their lives revolved pre-SIE. During and after their SIE, participants began to construct and shape a different life-path that was based on a core of evolving individual values.

• Although participants experienced career development, longer term work-related goals were a low priority for the participants on their return home.

• It was as if their notion of career as a way of defining themselves was no longer relevant, and the need to become connected, to belong and to engage in a broader and more meaningful life path was more important.
Conclusion

• This research signals a move towards recognising that for some older women, such as the integrationists, this later-life stage is not so much about traditional perceptions about paid organisational work success, but more about reclaiming oneself and engaging in activities that individuals are passionate about.

• The integrationists were no longer prepared to engage in increasingly meaningless organisational work. Instead they sought a more holistic, purposeful and meaningful life path outside the normal bounds of paid work.
References