



Metaphors for retirement: Unshackled from schedules [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study uses metaphor analysis to examine the meanings of retirement for a group of 35 retired Canadian executives and managers. Our analysis identified eight metaphors relating to the meanings of retirement. The findings provide us with a range of insights into the experience of retirement, from loss of purpose and identity to liberation from the constraints of work to retirement being constructed as a new beginning or renaissance. Based on the accounts given by each manager, metaphors were collated and compared across retirees to reveal four distinct configurations that conceptualize retirement as exploring new horizons, searching for meaning, contributing on your own terms and putting your feet up. We discuss the implications of these metaphor configurations for understanding the consumer and producer-oriented meanings of retirement and challenge dominant career constructions of retirement as disengagement and decline. Our findings reveal that retirement appears to be better understood by incorporating future-focused and agentic forms that contribute to different types of identity work in retirement.

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A dramatic wave of aging employees on the cusp of retirement is building in workplaces around the developed world (United Nations, 2007). Given this trend, careers researchers are called to focus their attention and energies on whether and how these employees will bring new meanings and new understandings to the experience of retirement. Existing career models represent retirement as amongst the most predictable of career stages, with retirement happening in a particular time span and being characterized by individual decline and disengagement (Levinson, 1978; Schein, 1978). Are these conceptualizations of retirement outdated? A number of authors suggest change is occurring in how people think about and behave in relation to retirement. For example, Freedman (2007) has written about the encore career, which involves work that combines income, greater meaning and social impact in the second half of life and is seen by some to be a substitute for retirement (Kristoff, 2008). Dychtwald, Erickson, and Morison (2004) have suggested that organizations can no longer afford to think of retirement as a 'flash-cut,' permanently separating work life from leisure and should be responding to calls for more flexible approaches to retirement that allow people to continue contributing well into their seventies. In this paper, we investigate the current constructions of retirement by analyzing the metaphors that retirees use to describe retirement.

In the past decade there have been fundamental changes to national discourses regarding retirement (e.g., Everingham, Warner-Smith, & Byles, 2007). Some argue that retirement is undergoing structural and linguistic transformations in response to

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the aging population and neo-liberalism (Rudman, 2006). Accordingly, the current imagery of a retirement lifestyle evokes a positive transition to a new life, rather than continuation of or disengagement from the old. The picture of later life has shifted from illness and decline to health and liberation (Blaikie, 1999). Many OECD nations are re-shaping who is responsible for what in retirement, emphasizing “productive”, “active” and “positive” aging, in terms of policies relating to the repealing of pensions and user-pays health services and the continued engagement in work to be “forever productive” (Rudman & Molke, 2009).

Most of the current conceptualizations of retirement do not account for this “active” approach to retirement (e.g., Wang & Shultz, 2010). For example, work-in-retirement is viewed as a “bridge” to “full retirement.” The assumption underpinning this conceptualization is that retirement is a time of decline and disengagement and therefore someone who “works in retirement” must be in transition to that state; but this may not be the case. Maestas' (2010) recent work on *unretiring*—that is, retiring from the workforce only to return to work at a later time, indicates an expectation of going back to work that was not a result of poor financial planning. While her work identifies that retirees are engaging in a more productive approach to retirement, it does not provide insights into the nature and quality of work undertaken.

Rather than focusing solely on productive activity through paid work, Rudman's (2006) textual constructions of consumption and production may provide a timely and useful framework to expand the meaning and experiences of retirement. Consumption in retirement refers to retirees engaging in activities that involve acquiring and consuming products, services and knowledge. In contrast, the production-based retirees live by the motto of “if you rest you rust.” Engaging in productive activity, largely paid, is one construction. Rudman (2006) goes on to argue that consumption and production constructions may be too narrow and that there may be more diversity in the actual experience of retirement that is not captured in her newspaper-based analysis of constructions of retirement. Our research seeks to critically assess the extent to which these and other constructions of retirement are employed through a metaphor analysis of how retirees talk about retirement.

We explore the meanings of retirement by drawing on metaphor. Metaphor helps us to “create compact descriptions of complex phenomena” (Weick, 1989; p. 529), thus aiding the process of theory construction and development. Metaphors act as careers researchers' “labels, lamps and lathes” (Inkson, 2006, p. 60)—allowing us to understand retirement and provide greater illumination into the meanings of retirement; they also enable us to construct new and unique conceptual and practical insights into the dynamics of retirement. In the present study, we conducted a comparative analysis of interviews with 35 retired Canadian managers and executives about work in late career and retirement. Through our analysis, our study makes several contributions to the field. Eight categories of metaphors emerged as ways in which retirees expressed the meaning and experience of retirement. Further, these metaphors were aggregated into four combinations of meanings that weaved through retirees' talk about retirement. These configurations highlight the distinct variations in consumption and production meanings of retirement and the linkages across late working life into retirement by focusing on the narrative form, temporal orientation and the identity work undertaken. Thus, our work demonstrates the differences in the use of metaphors and provides important contrasts in the way retirees view their experiences and make sense of retirement. Further, by examining the distinct combinations of metaphors, we provide a methodological contribution regarding the value of metaphor analysis beyond the single metaphor approach as outlined by El-Sawad (2005).

In the remainder of the paper, we first provide an overview of the metaphors literature in the context of organizations and careers. Second, we introduce our data collection and analysis methods. Third, we present our findings and discuss their implications.

1. Metaphors

While many definitions of metaphor exist in the literature, most scholars agree that metaphor is an integral part of human language and thought (Lakoff, 1993) that can be understood as a cross-context mapping of meanings (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005) such that one thing is understood in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors encourage creativity and help us to see things in new ways (Schon, 1993). Today, metaphor is widely accepted as a valuable tool for understanding processes and phenomena in organizations (Cornellisen, 2005). Grant (2004) argues that “metaphors act as generators of new meaning” that further research by creating new images and lines of inquiry. Moreover, while metaphor has clearly made its mark on the study of organizations, career theory has also been inspired by a metaphorical approach (e.g., El-Sawad, 2005; Smith-Ruig, 2008). Metaphorical thinking is accepted as an inevitable component of human discourse and thought processes (Ortony, 1993), while the evaluation of how people tell their career stories is a valuable tool for gaining insight into how individuals understand and account for their careers (Cohen, 2006).

Marrying metaphor to careers has provided invaluable new insights and furthered the field (e.g., Mignot, 2004). For example, by employing Morgan's (1983) multiple metaphor approach, Inkson (2007) contends that nine careers metaphors—inheritances, cycles, actions, fit, journeys, roles, relationships, resources and stories—provide a balanced and integrated understanding of careers and how they work across the lifespan. In addition, Smith-Ruig (2008) found that accounting professionals use the metaphors of “journey,” “path” and “road” to make sense of and conceptualize their career trajectories. Today, scholars conceptualize careers as “protean,” “boundaryless,” and “kaleidoscope” (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), demonstrating the use of metaphors to illuminate the changing nature of careers.

While several studies of career metaphors appear in the extant literature, there has been little research attention given to retirement metaphors and their meanings. Therefore, in this paper we are interested in studying two research questions: First, how does a metaphorical approach provide understanding of the variation in retirement meanings and experiences? Second, what

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