



Between activity and solidarity: Comprehending retirement and extended working lives in Swedish rural areas



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ABSTRACT

The expected costs of population ageing have generally led to perceived needs to postpone the age of retirement. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews, the aim of this paper is to describe the ways that the possibility of an extended working life is comprehended by persons over the age of 60 living in sparsely populated areas in northern Sweden. While defining themselves as active, the interviewees argued strongly in favour of the right to retire. What are often described as opposing retiree subject positions – healthy and active vs. vulnerable and dependent – were partly transgressed in the interviews. The interviewees performed a solidarity that had the potential of including their future selves as possible objects of solidarity. Another important result was that in comprehending the possibility of an extended working life, morally charged notions of geographic place became central.

Introduction

When Statistics Sweden published their report on estimated future dependency ratios in 2015, the media were quick to emphasise the effects these would have on the Swedish statutory retirement age and on rural residents with expressions like: “Rural residents will have to support more” (Norran Jan 9, 2015) and “Do you live in a rural area? Then you will have to work for two in the future” (Land Jan 23, 2015). This designation of geographic place caught our attention. Because the inhabitants of said areas have a history of social democratic support, traditionally cherishing an understanding of retirement as a well-deserved period of rest, we became curious of how they would themselves respond to the suggestion of an extended working life. Would their comprehensions of work and retirement counteract or support such suggestions?

Generally, the research on retirement and retirement age is situated within, and is motivated by, the costs that are supposed to come with expected population ageing (Örestig, 2013; Pond, Stephens, & Alpass, 2010; Post, Schneer, Reitman, & Ogilvie, dt., 2012; Radl, 2012; Walter, Jackson, & Felmingham, 2008). Policy makers are looking for ways to delay retirement age (Hagemann & Scherger, 2016; Nyqvist, 2008; Phillipson, 2011), and there is an increased academic interest in the

factors affecting the timing of retirement (Örestig, Strandh, & Stattin, 2013). Such research suggests a general reluctance to consider working past the statutory retirement age (Örestig et al., 2013; Stattin, 2006, 2008). This entrenched “early-exit culture” (Laliberte Rudman & Molke, 2009) seems to prevail also in a European perspective (Esser, 2005).² But, as Statistics Sweden (2006) acknowledges, personal retirement preferences are not always the result of “free” choices. On an individual level, decisions to retire before the age of 65 are often connected to impaired health, low socio-economic positions, low education, and high levels of physical workload (Örestig et al., 2013: 115; Radl, 2013). It has also been suggested that geography matters because different regions offer varying working-life possibilities, and that local unemployment impacts on retirement decisions among older workers (Galarneau, Turcotte, Carrière, & Fectaeau, 2015). In this sense, northern Sweden had been identified and represented as specifically exposed (Paulgaard, 2017; Eriksson, 2010).

Even though it has been argued that for workers with low pension entitlements there is economic necessity to work at least until the statutory retirement age (Radl, 2013), it has also been suggested that financial considerations might generally not be the prime motive in cases where retirement age is postponed, but that it is rather the case that people who postpone their retirement have a positive attitude to

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² D’Addio, Keese, and Whitehouse (2010) point out a trend towards an increase in labour-force participation rates in OECD countries between 1970 and 2008, explained primarily by the increased participation of women. Also, Chomik and Whitehouse (2010) predict a slight increase in average retirement age by 2050.

their work and workplaces (Stattin, 2006) and find an intrinsic value to work (Vickerstaff & Cox, 2005). Also, retirement may well be comprehended as a desirable end to working life and a well-deserved rest (cf. Jönson, 2001), or, as a social space free of responsibilities in which self-fulfilling activities could be pursued, the so-called “third age” (Laslett, 1989). In line with this, Radl (2012:756) points out how norms and attitudes related to retirement as eagerly awaited might indeed “hinder the prolongation of working lives” and how the efficacy of pension reforms aimed at deferring retirement ages could easily fail without public support (see also Hult & Stattin, 2009; Litwin, Achdut, & Youssim, 2009).³ This reflection emphasises the significance of discourse and the way people create meaning around retirement, and it constitutes an important backdrop for this study.

There is a vast field of research engaged in qualitatively scrutinising the complexity of discursive constructions of retiree positions (Han & Moen, 1999; Moen, Sweet, & Swisher, 2005; Radl, 2012; Rees Jones, Leontowitsch, & Higgs, 2010; Robertson, 2000; Vickerstaff & Cox, 2005). Studies of newspaper representations have shown how the ideal retiree is constructed by a neoliberal political rationality (Laliberte Rudman, 2006; Laliberte Rudman & Molke 2009), emphasising how what is today commonly represented as successful ageing is intimately connected to a norm of busyness, and where persons who are working past official retirement age are portrayed as youthful rather than old (Rozanova, 2010; Katz, 2000).⁴ The acknowledged norm of busyness, or busy ethic (Ekerdt, 1986), has been described to evoke new types of retiree positions, defined by “blurred lines” between life before and after retirement (Gilleard & Higgs 2000; Birkett 2013). Gilleard and Higgs (2010: 125) have, however, suggested that “the fourth age” be conceptualised in terms of an “event horizon” of ageing, constituting an absolute boundary between the more blurred old age identities and what lies beyond them (but see Grenier, 2007 for a discussion). For our purposes, this distinction became important because the interviewees recurrently returned to it when talking about the limits of legitimate expectations to prolong one’s working life.

Partly because of the estimated effects of population ageing, the Swedish statutory old-age pension system was reformed in 1999. It is part of the social insurance system and covers everyone who has worked and lived in Sweden. Its core is an income-based pension (Regeringskansliet, 2016). In a study of the shift towards neoliberalisation in the Swedish pension system, Belfrage and Ryner (2009:280) describe the Swedish pension reform of 1999 as an important condition for “mass investment culture” symbolising the “intellectual decapitation of the old social democratic Swedish model”. The new system privileged and positioned pension savers (“investors”) as active rather than passive, and, as part of this, it also comprised a “flexible retirement age” that replaced the fixed retirement age of 65 with one where each citizen applies individually to retire from the age of 61. In practice, this

³ Highlighting the power-laden connection between retiree norms and socio-political policies, Vickerstaff and Cox (2005) emphasise how labour-market demands condition whether older workers are positioned as desirable (seen as skilled and experienced) or not (seen as inefficient and technically ignorant). Laliberte Rudman and Molke (2009: 385) similarly warn that the perceived need to keep the older workforce due to the expected costs of population ageing tend to re-construct retirement “away from a socially supported right towards an individual responsibility”. In Sweden, similar claims of a relation between politico-economic interests and notions of old age and retirement have been put forth by Gaunt (1992), who argues that during the construction of the welfare state older people were described as lonely, sick, and in need of assistance. Already in 1992 he noted that these descriptions had changed towards picturing older people as rich, healthy, and socially active, suggesting that this new imagery was backing up the on-going dismantling of the welfare state (see also Jönson, 2001). In this sense, it is possible to say that neoliberalism has generated ideologies that promote specific (often productive and consumerist) ideal subject positions for its older citizens to take (Katz 2001/2002; Laws 1996; Laliberte Rudman, 2006).

⁴ Similar results have been found in the Swedish context. A study of guidebooks to retirement showed that they represent an ideal where activity and being useful were central, and where the retiree was both subjected to the expertise of the guidebooks and made responsible for their choices before and after retirement (Mannerfelt, 1999).

meant that the system included incentives to work longer, since the level of the income-based pension “limits the individual choice” (Nyqvist, 2008:96). Postponed retirement is generally seen as the goal of the state (Pensionsmyndigheten, 2011), and is also seen as a necessity to counteract the lowered pension benefits that population ageing might otherwise lead to (Kruse, 2010).

Belfrage and Ryner also recognise the emergence of what they call a core-periphery cleavage in Sweden, arguing that while the degree of commodification of consumption needed for the neoliberalisation process is “far advanced in the metropolitan core of Sweden’s knowledge-based economy”, this is less so in the semi-urban hinterlands that are “economically peripheral but heartlands of social democratic support”. Such results indicate that suggestions to raise the retirement age might be at odds with the concrete working-life possibilities as well as with the ideological foundations of the inhabitants of said areas. While studies on retirement and rural contexts have tended to focus on questions of retirement migration (Blaakilde & Nilsson, 2013; Stockdale, 2014) and how the resulting demographic ageing of rural areas affects the identity of ageing residents (Winterton & Warburton, 2012), fewer studies have addressed the question of how life in declining rural areas affects the meaning-making around the possibility of extended working lives.

Aims and objectives

As should be clear from the above, notions of retirement and retiree identities are inevitably related to power structures. Taking Belfrage and Ryner’s (2009) suggestion of a core-periphery cleavage seriously, we have been specifically interested in how the circumstances of living in areas that are generally vulnerable to processes of population ageing, out-migration, and cutbacks in public services are present in retirement narratives and (perhaps) negotiated in relation to neoliberal tendencies. We therefore set out to interview persons over the age of 60 living in areas of northern Sweden that are sparsely populated and that have a history of strong social democratic support. In light of the policy incentives to postpone retirement age, *the aim of this work was to describe the way the possibility of an extended working life is narrated, specifically focusing how notions of an extended working life are made comprehensible in the context of the interviewees’ own experiences and in relation to different power orders*. In line with Radl (2012), we argue that understanding how people make retirement matter within the realms of their own lives is key to understanding their retirement behaviours and the way they react to the goals of public retirement policies. In this pursuit, we account for the way different and partly antagonistic discourses about retirement were put to work when people aged between 60 and 72 years reflected on their retirement plans and decisions and how these plans and decisions were actively connected to the interviewees’ working lives in Swedish rural areas.

Theoretical points of departure

This study was informed by discourse theory, and we define discourse as temporary configurations of meaning ascribed to a phenomenon that might itself appear to be permanent. Such configurations comprise ways of thinking and talking within a specific domain, but also the materialisations that regulate the phenomenon (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Because our main material consists of narratives told within interviews, we have primarily focused on oral articulations of discourse, i.e. ways of constructing meaning through speech. However, in order to understand the importance of such discourse, it is necessary to emphasise how narrated discourse is co-produced by, and inseparable from, the material aspects of the discourse. When the interviewees answered questions about retirement, they were already caught up in an intricate web of material circumstance; they were all entangled in the pension system that decided their (present or future) income, and they were, or would soon become, identified as retirees, which meant

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