

Retire or not

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Summary report

“The word “retirement’ will soon be retired.” When I read this response from an informant on my research blog, it sounded catchy. Now after more than a year of research on people’s reasons for retirement or continued work beyond retirement age (what each person considered that age to be), I agree. Previously, I had defined “retirement” as a slowing down, and being more on the sidelines of life. This is not what I discovered.

A quick perusal of the dictionary suggests that retirement is an act of leaving one’s job permanently. For some of my informants, I would have to say, “Which job?” Since a number of my participants, reinvented themselves multiple times after leaving a long-standing job.

However, before I share what I have learned from my work, let me explain a little about my process. I began my inquiry based on my own curiosity. Through an interactive blog, focus groups, email, and telephone interviews, I learned from 59 informants of their reasons for and experience with retirement or continued work (ages 62 to 73). One significant finding for those that described themselves as retired and, those who said that they are still working, is the importance of engagement. Engagement is described as involvement in volunteer work, community activities, travel, exercise and time with grandchildren. For those who are still working, engagement means enjoying work and work relationships, mentoring, helping organizations in the community, and travel.

Among those that are retired from long-term jobs, I identified 3 groups: the serendipitous, the planners, and the re-inventors. The serendipitous described circumstances that either forced or allowed for retirement. The planners are those, as the name suggests, developed a pre-retirement plan, to include, finances and activities or experiences that they plan to pursue in retirement. For me, the re-inventors are a fascinating group of people who started new businesses at age 60, went back to school for further training, or worked part time to supplement their incomes for travel and other activities. To my surprise, I met more re-inventors at senior centers.

The transition from fulltime work into retirement appears to be a challenging time. Several respondents reported that it took 2 years to find a comfort zone of the right balance of activity and engagement post-retirement.

Reflections on my work and findings. As I look back on my work and discoveries in the past year, I am now aware that my very project title set-up a polarity, of retire or not, which I now believe is not so meaningful. I now think of this process as more on a continuum of people who are

financially able to disengage with former structures (work) and begin a process of engaging with new structures and activities. For those respondents who described themselves a “retired, many worked part time. Similarly, among those who described themselves as “working,” some had cut back their hours, and were engaged in other activities in addition to their work.

The participants in my study have socially deconstructed these categories for me away from the notion of separate and somewhat opposite. It is my hope that this process may have also occurred for some of my informants as they read other blog posts or participated in the focus groups. How often after the age of 60 are we asked, “Are you retired? When do you plan to retire?” At this time in our history, the language that we use in our seventh or eighth decade, and is used around us, creates this polarity, and influences our thinking. I am now retiring the word, “retire” from my vocabulary.