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Masters of their own time? Working careers' visions about combining retirement and caring

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Abstract

How do working careers anticipate the timing of retirement and the weight of care commitments related to other activities when retired? This question is discussed by analysing the experiences of Finnish working careers. Most of the interviewees indicated that helping parent(s) would be part of their own retirement, but after leaving full-time work they would also like to devote time for their other personal interests, too. Working careers are willing to engage in caring when retired. However, they also have a desire to outline their caring tasks and manage their own time.

Key terms: Retirement, family care, productive aging, working careers

Background and objective

In times of political efforts to extend the working careers of adults, the research literature has also started to produce data related to the problems and possibilities of combining work and family care (1, 2) and to the factors considering longer careers (3, 4). The negative effects of caring roles for women's later-life employment and retirement incomes are well-documented (5, 6, 7). Difficulties in reconciling work and family life have been documented to be associated with intentions to take early retirement (8, 9). In contrast to extending working careers, the question of this article approaches from a different angle. The article focuses on combining retirement and caring for parents.

Retirement is often seen as a period for a person's own personal interests after duties in paid employment. On the other hand, retired people are expected to participate in so-called productive activities by continuing to work, volunteering or being involved in various caring tasks. At the same time, both the life expectancy and the number of frail older people are increasing and many aging adult children face the increasing care needs of their parent(s). How would people who are approaching their retirement and who are caring for their parent(s) like to spend time freed from full-time working?

The theoretical background of the paper is based on the discussions related to productive aging (11, 12) and third age (13). These highly gerontological concepts are surrounded by discussions of care research: the concepts of care time, work time and personal time (14). Productive aging (11) is usually defined as engagement in paid work, volunteer work or care activities after full-time employment. The concept tries to counterbalance the 'burden talk' and stresses the contributions aging people make to their kin, community and the whole of society compared to the societal costs they incur as retired, non-employed persons. Further, the aspiration towards personal fulfillment is the core dimension of the concept of the third age, initially proposed by Peter Laslett (13). The third age, the age after active working years is usually defined as time freed from both work duties and childcare.

Fiona Williams (14) writes that the ethic of work should be balanced with the ethics of care. She suggests that rather than fitting people's care needs into the requirements of work, life should be seen as consisting of three different yet tightly connected areas of life: personal time and space, care time and space, and work time and space. Accessible, affordable, flexible and good-quality social care services and support are essential to meet the needs of the second area. Meeting the needs of the third area requires, for example, paid care leaves and sabbaticals. Strikingly, Williams writes that people's needs for personal time (maintenance of body and soul, relationships and relaxation) can be met, for example, with suitable domestic services, which also provide opportunities to participate in work life. The experiences related to these areas of life may vary. For example, for some people care time is their personal time or vice versa.

Considering the situation of retired people, these concepts presented by Williams pose slightly different, but interesting questions: How do retiring or retired family careers combine their productive roles as careers and/ or workers with their other leisure activities, i.e. their personal interests? How is the interconnection of these areas of life manifest in the life situations of people out of full-time work? The research questions in this study are formulated as follows:

1. How do working careers anticipate the timing of retirement related to care commitments?
2. How do working careers anticipate the weight of care commitments related to other activities when retired?
3. How can working careers' visions of activities after full-time working be understood in terms of 'productive time' and 'personal time'?

Methods

The data consists of 20 interviews with working careers who were born in 1953 or earlier and helped or cared for their parent or both parents (i.e. were 'parental careers'). The interviews were conducted in a larger research project focusing on the work-care interplay (WoCaWo). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the permission of the respondents. Before analyzing the data more exactly, 'talk about retirement plans and future' was identified and separated from the other data. The coding was facilitated by the ATLAS.ti program. More detailed analysis was conducted by paying attention to the statements in which the interviewees assessed: 1) their desire (emphasis) to disengage from full-time working/ continue working, 2) their care commitments related to the timing of retirement and 3) their views on the relation between care and other activities during retirement (see Table 1).

The interview statements were first categorized according to interviewees' desires regarding leaving full-time work or continuing working (i). Second, the statements of the interviewees in these categories were analyzed and differences concerning timing of retirement (ii) were pinpointed: the retirement decision may be strongly or loosely connected to care commitments or there is no connection. Third, regarding the variance among these retirement decisions the statements of the interviewees' anticipated retirement activities (iii) were analyzed. Considering the differences between these statements various visions were formulated and they are seen as 'ideal types' (cf. 10). The six different visions stress certain elements common to most cases of the given vision.

Results

Table 1. Visions of parental care-giving during own retirement.

Characteristics of interviewees

(i) Stresses the desire to **disengage** from full-time paid work

1. Intended activity to replace full-time working

(ii) Leaving work **strongly** connected to parental care: wants to retire soon in order to get more time for parent(s) and continue caring

(iii) Parental care an extensive activity during retirement

2. Part of the way of living opposed to work-centered life

(ii) Leaving work **loosely** connected to parental care: wants to retire soon in order to get more time for own hobbies, self-care and close people in general

(iii) Care including parental care substantial activity during retirement among other leisure activities

(i) Stresses the desire to **continue working**

3. Circumscribed activity due to problematic relationships

(ii) Continuing work **strongly** connected to parental care: sees work as a way to autonomy as opposed to a caring relationship

(iii) Setting limits to one's care tasks important when retired in order to get time for work and leisure activities

4. One pastime among other work and leisure activities

(ii) Continuing work **loosely** connected to parental care: sees working as a meaningful activity in itself/ financially necessary

(iii) Setting limits to one's care tasks important when retired in order to get time for work and leisure activities

(i) Stresses neither the desire to disengage from work nor the desire to continue working

5. Squeezing and worrying activity

- (ii) Timing of retirement **not closely** related to parental care
- (iii) Worry and/ or anxiety about care duties during own retirement which is anticipated to be time for self and leisure

6. Uncertain activity

- (ii) Timing of retirement **not closely** related to parental care
- (iii) Always unpredictable future care responsibilities not a desired issue to be pondered

Although insecurity (and the vision in which caring for parents was interpreted as an uncertain activity) is always prevalent in such care and although there were a number of interviewees who indicated that they have negative or at least uneasy feelings related to their possible caring duties when retired (parental care as a squeezing and worrying activity), most of the interviewees described visions one (parental care as an intended activity to replace full-time working), two (parental care as part of the way of living opposed to work-centered life), three (parental care as a circumscribed activity due to problematic relationships) and four (parental care as one pastime among other work and leisure activities). Namely, most of the interviewees wanted to help their parents during retirement but they also stressed the possibility to help and care in manners reasonable to themselves and the possibilities to limit one's helping. They indicated that helping parent(s) was an essential part of their own lives but they also stated that when retired they would like to devote time to their other personal interests, too.

Discussion and conclusions

Applying the concepts of productive aging and the third age familiar from social gerontological research and discussions relating to the relationship of care time, work time and personal time, this study concludes that the interconnection between the visions pinpointed can be illustrated by a continuum from 'productive time' to 'personal time' and vice versa. The components of this continuum are 'work activities', 'care activities' and 'leisure activities' (Figure 1). The starting point is that care and work activities are categorized as productive time and leisure activities as personal time. However, actual situations of the interviewees were much less clearcut.



Figure 1. Interconnection of 'productive time' and 'personal time'.

In those cases in which parental care was anticipated as an intended activity to replace full-time working or part of the way of living as opposed to a work-centered life caring for parents were also anticipated as a part of life and as a part of personal time. First, the interviewees were eager to decrease their working time, i.e. hours worked. Second, helping/caring for close people and leisure activities were interconnected when the interviewees anticipated their future plans although in the latter vision parental care as such did not carry so much weight as it did in the previous vision.

By contrast, in those cases in which caring for parents was anticipated as a circumscribed activity due to problematic relationships, one pastime among other work and leisure activities or a squeezing and worrying activity helping/caring for parent(s) and leisure interests were interpreted as separate spheres of life. Devoting time to personal

interests (work or/ and leisure) was said to be interviewees' 'own time' in contrast to time devoted to other people needing care. The difference between these visions was that when parental care was interpreted as a squeezing activity the adult children's thoughts involved distress and uneasiness whereas the informants in other two visions appeared to be highly ambiguous when considering their future.

To conclude, the interviewees' views on future care responsibilities varied but they were not afraid of caring or helping during retirement if the care activities are anticipated as reasonable, i.e. they leave time for work and leisure activities. This is a significant message for policymakers. In aging societies there are pressures to stress both aging workers' and older people's productivity and societal contributions as the recent political and public debate proves in Finland, too. According to this study working careers in their late 50s or early 60s do willingly and able to spend for 'productive time' when retired. However, they also have a strong wish for 'personal time'. Older people are a resource considering the increasing care demands of their parents, but they should not be regarded only as a resource. Depending on family situation and personal valuations time freed from paid work can be used in various ways. Leaving gainful employment does not necessarily mean leaving 'productive roles' as citizens. However, pensioners' contributions as careers are both socially and personally meaningful only if they satisfy all participants of the caring relationship.

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