

Is It Time to Put Retirement Out to Pasture?

As positive aging practitioners across many fields, we can become leaders in countering the negative effects of the aging mindset that permeates our culture

By Elizabeth Mahler and John Thompson

Like most people in our culture, we are subject to the influence of commonly held ideas. To illustrate, we offer the following quiz.

A woman pays a visit to a career counselor and provides the following information: she recently left a position and is now technically unemployed; she's in good health with plenty of energy; she believes she has another 20 years of work in her, but would prefer employment that is both less physically demanding and more meaningful; and she senses that she has a unique chance to do something different, but doesn't know what that is, or how to find out. Consequently, she is feeling discouraged.

Which of the following statements is most likely to be true about this person?

1. The client is forty years old and was recently laid off.
2. The client is fifty years old and recently quit her job after being diagnosed with a neurological disease that will begin to seriously affect her in about 20 years.
3. The client is sixty years old.

If you share our culture's aging mindset, we assume that you have chosen answer #1 or #2. We don't expect people who are sixty years of age to be looking for guidance around the next twenty years of their working lives. We expect them to be thinking about *retirement*.

This sixty-year-old woman can be said to be in a state of transition, but transition from what to what? Our culture provides developmental roadmaps for younger people, but there are few mainstream models of growth and development offered to those over 60. This made sense when life spans were shorter, but changing demographics call this thinking into question.

The results of an increasing life expectancy

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of Americans aged 55+ will grow from 76 million today to 112 million by 2030. Every day another 10,000 Americans turn 60 years old. Longer life spans and aging Baby Boomers will double the population of Americans 65 years or older during the next 25 years

What's happening is a "Longevity Revolution." Starting with the Baby Boomers, Americans have been given a "Longevity Dividend" (Olshansky, 2006). This gift of time is generating a new life stage that manifests *between* middle age and elderhood. While

culturally we have not yet settled on a label to describe this new stage, potential names are emerging, including the following:

- second adulthood or adulthood II (Bateson, 2010);
- encore (Freedman, 2007);
- the third act (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2009);
- the third age (Sadler, 2006); and
- encore adulthood (Moen, 2017).

Regardless of what “it” is called, cultural anthropologist Bateson (2010) suggests that “we have opened a new space partway through the life course, a second and different kind of adulthood, that proceeds old age, and as a result every stage of life is undergoing change.” She calls it “a new developmental stage ... not an extension tacked on to old age.”

A century has passed since a phenomenon of this magnitude caused a shift in our thinking about human development. It was only after adolescence was acknowledged as a separate developmental stage between childhood and adulthood in the early 20th century that social systems such as high schools became integral parts of our culture. We are beginning to experience a similar phenomenon when considering the implications of this “second and different kind of adulthood” on both individuals and society. This includes how we define, discuss and prepare for retirement.

Rueckert (2006) warns that, “You have to be careful with your metaphors.” Metaphors have a very powerful effect on how we define situations, and assess what the situation calls for. Our society uses the metaphor of *retirement* to conceptualize the end of the working life of older adults. To retire is to remove oneself from the field. We also use idioms to convey this idea of withdrawal. *Put out to pasture*. Implicit in this language of retirement is the idea that the time for accepting challenges and making meaningful contributions has passed. This metaphor is problematic for a society that has the resources to enable individuals to lead healthy and active lives well into their 80s and 90s. That makes for a lot of years of withdrawal. It also makes for a lot of lost opportunities for both the individuals involved and our society as a whole.

Helping older workers transition into a new life stage

Leaders from government, to education to the workplace have a lot to offer individuals who are transitioning to a post-60 working life, from the policy level to practice. To do this well, we need to find a name (or metaphor) to describe what is becoming a new and meaningful period of career development and engagement.

Consider the word “graduation.” Graduation marks a transition, but not as a process of withdrawal. Suzanne Cook’s (2015) term *redirection* also implies a transition process. Both these words indicate forward movement into a new phase of life that is worthy of esteem and ambition; one that offers individuals an opportunity to continue growing and developing.

As leaders in the positive aging and encore careers movement, we need to understand that many older adults have the chance to move into another important phase of life. This phase includes contributing through work, even if this contribution takes a new form. This new way of thinking recognizes that a person's career path does not stop at age 60. We have the rare opportunity to create a new understanding of that path – and of the length of time it occupies in one's life.

It is not the responsibility of only one profession to solve this problem of language, and the related effect of metaphors on perceptions. Pioneers from the positive aging movement already play a significant role. We can see the negative effects of the aging mindset that permeates our culture. This is a challenge we are well equipped to address. We already have the expertise to become leaders in this effort.

For these reasons, the time has come to put the idea of *retirement*, at least as it is currently understood, out to pasture.

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