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The retirement experiences of women academics: a qualitative, descriptive study

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ABSTRACT

Retirement is now considered a process rather than a single event. Pathways to retirement are evolving and the retirement experiences of academics are becoming increasingly relevant given the aging academic workforce in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide. Academic retirement studies highlight that most academics continue to work in retirement. However, gender tends to be overlooked. Based on semi-structured interviews with eleven retired women academics, ranging in age from 64 to 73 years of age, who were employed in the Republic of Ireland, this article explores the impact of retirement on their daily lives and their personal and professional relationships. Following thematic analysis, four main themes were identified: (i) the impact of retirement on identity, (ii) the freedom of retirement, (iii) striving for health and wellbeing and (iv) the value of ongoing professional relationships in retirement. The majority of women continued to engage in meaningful work (paid or unpaid) which was central to their daily lives and identity following retirement. Three academics, in senior roles, who had long uninterrupted careers and who had strong research track records experienced dissatisfaction with mandatory retirement yet were able to continue research activities in retirement. Those with less research activity were more likely to retire early and describe the impact of stress and fatigue upon their health. Together, the findings illustrate that women academic's retirement pathways are heterogeneous. The findings have implications for the academic profession, human resource and retirement planning professionals.

Introduction

Retirement is a dynamic evolving process. Rather than choosing retirement as a traditional single exit from work, many approaching retirement are now pursuing pathways of full or partial continuation in the workforce and gradually withdrawing over time to full retirement (Cahill et al., 2006; Kojola & Moen, 2016).

The academic workforce is aging worldwide with more academics than ever before transitioning to retirement (Kaskie, 2017). Age and experience have been highly valued in academia (Danson & Gilmore, 2012) and for those who have been in their academic role for decades, approaching retirement can be daunting because of the potential threat to their strong professional or academic identities (Strage, 2018). With the increased longevity of populations worldwide, academics will spend longer in retirement than previous generations (Kaskie, 2017). However, knowledge about the late career academics retirement experiences is limited (Altman et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2014).

Over the past 20 years, studies of academics' retirement experiences (men and women) have consistently shown that most academics continue working beyond the age at which they could retire (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2014; Cahill et al., 2019; Dorfman, 2000, 2002, 2009; Dorfman & Kolarik,

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2005; Firmin & Craycroft, 2009; Fishman, 2010; De Guzman et al., 2008; Williamson et al., 2010). Most studies have included mixed samples, typically with more men than women, mirroring their representation in academia. Furthermore, gender differences in academic retirement literature have largely tended to be overlooked, and few studies have examined women academics' retirement experiences (Cahill et al., 2019). Yet it has been accepted in the general retirement literature that men and women may experience retirement differently (Dahl et al., 2003; Duberley et al., 2014; Radl, 2013). Women live longer than men and experiences earlier in the life course may influence how men and women experience the retirement transition (Duberley et al., 2014). For example, many women have careers with intermittent interruptions or breaks due to caregiving and domestic responsibilities across life stages. Women's underrepresentation relative to men at higher levels of organizations, including academia, has the potential to leave women financially insecure in later life (Duberley et al., 2014; Payne & Doyal, 2010). These factors, as well as the potential loss of their professional identity and desire to remain productive (Price, 2000) have the potential to influence women's retirement decisions, timing and experiences (Duberley & Carmichael, 2016; Warner-Smith et al., 2006). Women may remain working longer than men of equivalent retirement age due to the impact of shorter or fragmented work histories on their available capital (Duberley et al., 2014; Léime, 2017). While research on women and retirement is growing (Byles et al., 2013; Price & Nesteruk, 2015), there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative studies exploring women's retirement narratives (Borrero & Kruger, 2015; Loe & Johnston, 2016).

In recent academic retirement literature, gender differences in attitudes toward retirement were highlighted in two studies. A Swedish study of university professors, lecturers and administrators (male and female) attitudes to working beyond retirement age (65 years) found that male academics were twice as likely as women to want to work until 70 years of age and that women's self-perception of being healthy was an additional influencing factor in their intention to continue to work until 70 years (Kadefors et al., 2016). A Canadian study of 24 academics (13 women and eleven men) experiences of a phased retirement program found women aligned their retirement plans with their partners and secondly, they found that the demands of teaching were a reason to pursue retirement (Rapoport et al., 2015).

In the past decade, three qualitative studies have attempted to shed light on women academics' retirement experiences. Williamson et al. (2010) found that they continued to work beyond the normal retirement age in the United States due to feelings of security, fulfillment, positive self-esteem and the perception that work promoted health and provided positive relationships. Strudsholm's (2011) study of health and wellbeing in six retired Canadian women academics found that opportunities and choices to structure their time supported well-being during the retirement transition. Emerald and Carpenter's (2014) auto-ethnographic study of Carpenter's retirement from academia explored the identity challenges associated with navigating Carpenter's identity as a retiree. These studies, with small sample sizes, focused exclusively on women academics' retirement experiences in North America and the United Kingdom where the majority of academics do not have a mandatory retirement age.

While little attention has been paid to women academics late career experiences, their early and middle career experiences as well as the reforms that have taken place within HEIs over the course of their careers are well documented. Women academics, who were born between 1946 and 1964 ('baby boomer' cohort), who are now eligible for retirement have, over the past 20 years, experienced significant reforms of the Republic of Ireland's Higher Education Institution's (HEI) organizational culture linked with the enactment of gender equality legislation, the increase in female students participation in higher education and a change in managerial focus on university rankings because of its importance in determining the international standing of the university (Harford, 2018; Harford et al., 2012). They advanced their careers despite systemic barriers within university organizational cultures and practices known to impede women's progression within the HEI (Harford, 2018, 2020). Furthermore, studies have illustrated that women academics (in North America) spend more time on service-related activity (Guarino & Borden, 2017) and less on research than male faculty (Misra et al.,

2011; O'Meara et al., 2017) as well as being less likely to obtain internal grant funding (Roos & Gatta, 2009). Many women faculty earn less than male faculty and this gender pay gap is often influenced by a combination of institution type (liberal arts college versus university), academic division (humanities versus science and mathematics) and their rank within the institution (Renzulli et al., 2013; Toutkoushian & Conley, 2005). This gender pay gap can have consequences for their available pension in retirement, affecting their retirement choices, given that women have a longer life expectancy and typically spend longer in retirement than men (World Health Organization, 2019). These contextual factors which impact women academics career progression may impact women academics experiences particularly their opportunities to continue to work in retirement (Rowson & Phillipson, 2020).

Although women are still underrepresented at senior levels in academia internationally (Fitzgerald, 2014; Fuller & Harford, 2016; O'Connor, 2011, 2019), there is an increasing number of women academics within HEIs largely due to the gradual diminishing of these barriers (Rauhaus & Carr, 2020). With the sustained focus to increase the number of women academics in HEIs at senior levels, the recent appointments of women Presidents in some Irish HEIs, as well as the raising of retirement ages, internationally, it is timely to explore retired women academics experiences.

The purpose of the study is to describe what retirement means and the impact, if any, the transition to retirement has had upon on retired women academics lives, and on their professional and personal relationships. The guiding research question is "how does retirement impact on the everyday lives of women academics and their professional and personal relationships?".

Theoretical framework

In this study, we use continuity theory as a framework to illuminate the impact of retirement on eleven retired women academics from two HEIs in the Republic of Ireland, focusing on the potential impact of retirement on their daily lives and their professional and personal relationships. Continuity theory (Atchley, 1989, 1999a, 1999b), suggests that individuals strive to continue or maintain their previous life routines and patterns in retirement, accommodating changes or transitions without the experiences being stressful or disruptive (Atchley, 1989, 1999b). It assumes a focus on a gradual evolution in one's sense of self (Atchley, 1989). An unsuccessful life transition or a poor quality of retirement transition occurs, according to continuity theory, only in severe circumstances when general continuity of life patterns cannot be maintained (Wang & Shi, 2014), for example, with financial or health deterioration (Gallo et al., 2000; Wang, 2007) and functional capacity changes (Wang & Shultz, 2010). During transitions, for example, work to retirement, continuity theory suggests that one will aim to maintain a coherent sense of self by retaining experiences, habits and lifestyle patterns acquired during their life. Continuity theory is commonly used as a framework to contextualize retirement as an adjustment process (Wang & Shultz, 2010). It is also employed as a framework in studies of academics' retirement experiences (Davies & Jenkins, 2013; Dorfman, 2009; Fishman, 2010; Rowson & Phillipson, 2020).

Study context

In the Republic of Ireland, the academic workforce is aging, with 48% of academics aged between 40 and 54 years of age and 19% over the age of 55 years (HEA, 2019). The academic career structure includes a hierarchy of academic positions which are relatively consistent across HEIs (Clarke et al., 2015). However, while the UK and Republic of Ireland systems are similar, some universities in both countries have recently begun adopting a similar academic career structure to that used in North America. Table 1 shows a general comparison of academic career structure titles across the Republic of Ireland, UK, and North America, and offers a framework for the academic career structure in the Republic of Ireland in HEIs from which this sample was drawn.

In this study, retirement is defined as being in receipt of an occupational pension benefit from an HEI. Academics working in HEIs in Ireland are considered public sector employees and are bound by

Table 1. University academic career structures.

Ireland	UK	North America
<i>Lecturer (below the bar) or Assistant Professor</i>	<i>Lecturer</i>	<i>Assistant Professor</i>
<i>Lecturer (above the bar) or Assistant Professor</i>	<i>Lecturer</i>	<i>Assistant Professor</i>
<i>Senior Lecturer or Associate Professor</i>	<i>Senior Lecturer (or Associate Professor)</i>	<i>Associate Professor</i>
<i>Associate Professor</i>	<i>Reader (or Associate Professor)</i>	<i>Professor</i>
<i>Professor</i>	<i>Professor</i>	<i>Professor (endowed chair)</i>

retirement ages which differ according to the date of commencement of individual employment contracts and occupational pension entitlements. Early retirement (before the mandatory retirement date) can be pursued depending upon a variety of factors including the number of pension contributions and years of service completed. Consequently, the retirement experiences of Irish academics vary based upon when the contract of employment commenced and occupational pension entitlements. All 11 participants in this study had a mandatory retirement age of 65 years (prior to December 2018, Irish legislation stated that those employed in the public sector before April 1, 2004 had a mandatory retirement age of 65 – please see the table footnote in [Table 2](#)).

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Education and Health Science ethics committee of the University of Limerick (UL Ethics Approval Number: 2016_12_17_EHS).

Procedure

Participants and recruitment

Maximum variation sampling was used to obtain a sample of recently retired women academics. Initially, an e-mail of invitation including the participant information leaflet, seeking participants who had retired within the last three years, was distributed to all members of one HEIs retirement society by the society chairperson. However, only one participant responded to the e-mail invitation through this recruitment avenue. To increase the sample size, permission was granted by the ethics board to widen the inclusion criteria to include all women academics who had retired from the institution (any length of time), to utilize snowball recruitment and to distribute an e-mail of invitation, including an attached participant information leaflet to academics in a linked HEI. (All retired members of staff retain their institutional e-mail). Interested potential participants were asked to contact the first author.

Table 2. Participants characteristics.

Name	Retirement type	Time since retirement	Retirement age	Years in HEI	Years in academia
Anne	Mandatory	20 months	65	>20	>30
Elizabeth	Mandatory	2 months	65	>20	>20
Sheila	Mandatory	11 months	65	>15	>35
Joan	Early	12 years	Undisclosed	>15	>35
Bridget	Mandatory	5 years	65	<10	>20
Fiona	Early	10 years	62	>30	>30
Kathleen	Early	2 years	62	>10	>10
Marie	Early	6 years	60	>10	>10
Angela	Mandatory	6 years	65	>20	>20
Vera	Mandatory	4 months	65	>30	>30
Margaret	Mandatory	8 years	65	>25	>30

All eleven participants were employed in the public service prior to April 1, 2004. At the time of their retirement, legislation stated that those employed in the public sector before April 1, 2004 had a compulsory retirement age of 65. Legislation introduced in December 2018 raised the retirement age for those employed in the public service prior to April 1, 2004 and after January 1, 2013 to 70 years of age- however this legislation did not apply to these eleven participants as they had all retired before December 2018.

In qualitative research methods, interviews remain a central data collection method (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Brown & Danaher, 2019). One-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author, who is a PhD candidate, and an occupational therapist with a BSc and MSc and has been employed by an HEI for over a decade in a professional role, coordinating and managing occupational therapy students practice education experiences. The first author explained the study to potential participants, using the participant information leaflet, which addressed issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were completed with participants within the HEI settings or off-site. Two interviews were conducted over the phone (at the participant's request). The second and third authors (the supervisory team) are senior academics, who each have PhDs and have been employed in HEIs for over 15 and 20 years, respectively.

Interview schedule

The interview schedule was designed by the first author, informed by an extensive review of the available literature on retirement experiences of academics and retirement generally. Feedback was elicited from peer women academics and the supervisory team. Questions related to thematic areas gleaned from the retirement literature on four broad areas: planning for retirement, the impact of retirement on daily routines, impact of retirement on relationships and the meaning of retirement to the individual (see supplementary information).

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants received a copy of the transcript for review. Two participants amended and returned the transcripts. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step thematic analysis, which involves in-depth engagement with the qualitative data where codes and themes are developed organically from the data. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its congruence with qualitative, descriptive research (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and because of its ability to uncover similarities and differences between participant's perspectives, in this case, across the participant's accounts of their experience of the retirement process and to create new unanticipated insights of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). The first author read, reread and made analytical notes on each transcript (phase 1). Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (DSQ International Pty LEF version 11, 2015), the first author initially coded the data by creating both semantic (surface meaning) and latent codes (interpretative) to ensure adequately capturing the descriptions of the participants' experiences (phase 2). The coded data were organized into potential or "candidate" themes by the first author (phase 3). Following further analysis, the first author discussed the codes and themes with the other authors, the data were then analyzed further with the data refined into four themes (phase 4). The second and third authors read through six of the eleven transcripts which assisted in examining the relevance of the themes identified in the context of this research study and ensuring that the coded extracts of participants' accounts within themes formed a coherent pattern (phases 5 and 6). The final findings were written up using the themes, the relevant analytical notes and data excerpts (phase 6). In order to ensure transferability of the findings, a rich description of the research process in terms of context, participants (being mindful of anonymity) and methodological process used in this study was provided. An audit trail of key decisions made throughout the process was maintained by the first author as well as a reflective journal documenting thoughts immediately after interview completion and reflections throughout the data analysis stages to ensure dependability.

Findings

Eleven female academics who had retired from academic roles between 4 months and nine years were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 31 and 115 minutes. Participants ranged in age from 64 to

73 years old. Participants included one professor, one associate professor, four senior lecturers and five lecturers. Participants had worked full time in academia for between 9 years and 39 years before their retirement. Four participants entered academia following careers in education, health care and the arts. Three participants, two of whom had careers in health and education before entering academia, described their roles as being focused primarily on teaching and administration responsibilities, with few research activities. The remainder described teaching, research (including supervision of doctoral-level candidates) and service responsibilities (including institutional or external committee membership or contributions to leadership activities) as central to their pre-retirement lives.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data yielded four themes: (i) Impact of retirement on identity, (ii) the freedom of retirement, (iii) Striving for health and well-being and (iv) the value of ongoing professional relationships in retirement. Each theme will be described and supported using participant quotations.

Impact of retirement on identity

Participants negotiated and renegotiated their identities in transitioning to retirement. Six of the retired female academics actively maintained their academic identities through continued working on activities related to their academic role. For these retired participants, the intertwining of their academic work and sense of self was explicit. One participant described how academic work remained central to her identity:

It was work. I've always just been working, in some ways, I am my work (Bridget)

Retirement enabled them to progress unfinished research projects and papers and plan new projects, activities which they viewed as constrained prior to retirement due to the demands of their pre-retirement academic workload. External examining and continuing research collaborations were pivotal to academics continuing to maintain their academic identity.

For two retired participants, the transition to retirement negatively impacted their sense of self and their identity as an academic. One participant, a professor, described the negative impact of mandatory retirement:

Paid work has been the essence of my being. Retirement from my point of view was an entire negative, it was depriving me of the things which gave meaning and enjoyment and which I was good at (Anne)

She described her gradual acceptance of having to retire at 65 years of age:

the meaning [of retirement] hasn't changed but my acceptance of it has changed a little and I suppose that is because I have been able to continue to publish (Anne)

Another participant described how she attempted to negotiate the identity of retiree, by disconnecting from academia following her mandatory retirement:

When you retire, you're supposed to retire. So, I tried to do what I was supposed to do (Bridget)

Experiencing boredom, she returned to academic activities linked with her former institution in a voluntary capacity initially:

People were telling me to find something I enjoyed doing and, I finally thought this is what I enjoy doing, so, why can't my volunteer work be this. And so, I started doing that and I've gotten a lot of international positions now, all consultancies (Bridget)

Three participants who retreated from academia through early retirement pathways developed their former paid work roles outside the academic arena, using skills amassed throughout their previous careers in education, health care and the arts.

One participant, primarily involved in teaching, voluntarily retired early to care for an ill family member. However, within a year of her retirement, her caring role ceased due to the death of her relative. Within months, she resumed paid work within her pre-academic career.

Two retired academics completely retreated from academia to focus their time on pursuing leisure interests:

I am interested in art and gardening and now I can actually develop this other side of me which has probably had to play second role to my work (Sheila)

The freedom of retirement

Eight participants described retirement as offering freedom from the perceived increasing pressures of the academic environment to choose how to spend their time:

Freedom from drudge. Freedom from having to go to meetings. Freedom from having to follow other people's prescriptions. Freedom to do things when I want to do them (Margaret)

Another recently retired participant described the freedom associated with retirement as follows:

Oh freedom. Freedom within the limits of human freedom, definitely, not being caught by a timetable, I mean what's a disadvantage is an advantage too. You know not being caught by timetables. Actually, really and truly it's having the freedom to organise time without the obligation (Vera)

Retirement offering freedom from the structure of work was highlighted by the following description of retirement:

Freedom, absolute freedom, it's getting your life back and spending it as you wish. You are no longer thinking what other people may or may not think about you. It's just a much more relaxed way, you are no longer standing up in front of 30 people and being critical, what are they thinking about you, it is just totally regaining your life back and being in totally in control of your life (Sheila)

The academic environment was described as a pressurized environment with few boundaries. One participant reflected on her daily pre-retirement work:

I'd sometimes wondered what am I doing, how can I be always feeling overwhelmed. I felt there was no boundary on what you can do or what you can't do. I think the boundaries are very unclear in academic life (Kathleen)

One recently retired participant described how her partner's illness had negatively impacted their envisioned retirement plans to travel. She arranged daily care for her partner to enable her to continue with desirable academic work through postgraduate research supervision and international collaborative research while caring for her partner in the evenings and weekends.

Striving for health and well-being

This theme described participant's desire to strive for health and well-being through their everyday routine, perceiving that academic life in the HEI context did not facilitate healthy aging. The majority found retirement offered more time for participation in physical activity.

For some participants, exercise had consistently become part of their daily routine. One recently retired participant described sampling exercise classes:

I am looking for a type of exercise that will suit me and that I will continue at home. I have done an exercise class that was designed particularly for just retired. The next one I'm looking at is a Pilates class and then after that I will probably try "Tai Chi" (Sheila)

Three of the four participants who retired early described fatigue and stress, while working full time, in the latter stages of their academic career:

My priority was to get my health sorted out, I knew the job was contributing to the stresses that were causing the fatigue (Vera).

Early retirement was seen as a legitimate pathway to exit from the academic role while concealing from others that stress and depleted energy levels were possibly affecting their health.

I was out on sick leave, it was during that time I started thinking if the job was creating this situation. So I started reviewing the quality of my life (Joan)

By retiring from the HEI, participants reported that their health was gradually restored and their quality of life maintained. A recent retiree described the absence of stress in retirement:

The stress is gone completely . . . with 5 days of work, you invariably have to work at weekends and evenings, as its never just 5 days (Sheila)

The value of ongoing professional relationships in retirement

A central thread in the participants' accounts of their transition and adjustment to retirement related to the professional connections that participants had cultivated while working in academia and their influence on how they enacted their post-retirement lives.

Participant's personal and professional connections within their institutions were pivotal to supervising PhD students through to completion and invitations to teach at their former institution.

For those who continued to work in both academia and other related areas, their external professional connections fostered before they retired, appeared to facilitate their desire to continue.

I was fortunate that I was involved in external activities that I could continue with, giving talks here, evaluating there, and they have opened up all sorts of avenues for me (Margaret)

This was evident for senior women academics who had built their research reputations both within and external to their institutions.

I have more work than ever. I do a good bit of work in the EU and I'm accepting more of that. I have an international reputation and as long as that comes in I'll do that (Elizabeth)

Participants described ongoing work plans with national and international partners, with whom they had already had an established work history, as occupying their continued work plan for the foreseeable future. Retirement offered the time to travel abroad to maintain and advance research projects, as well as sustain professional connections. One participant described her ability to contribute to research linked with the Erasmus program (a European Union student exchange program):

I think my new work pattern has facilitated it more than anything and, in some ways, it's helped with the Erasmus Grant as well because, I can do more of the travel that some people can't because, they're still teaching full time, so, I've been able to do that piece of it. But I also get to do it more at my own timing (Bridget).

Discussion

This study of 11 female academics explored the impact of retirement on their daily lives and their professional and personal relationships. Seven participants continued to work until age 65 years. Extensive research has supported the negative consequences for retirees physical and mental health linked with low levels of choice and personal control in the timing of retirement (Negrini et al., 2013; Quine et al., 2007; Van Solinge & Henkens, 2007). For two participants (both at professorial level), having a mandatory retirement age was perceived negatively, constraining their ability to continue to participate in all aspects of previous academic work. This finding aligns with previous research on the role that workplace regulations can play in constraining choices around retirement timing (Lassus et al., 2015). The negative consequences of mandatory retirement at age 65 years were also evident in the experiences of a senior lecturer who reported boredom as a retiree, only to "unretire" to academic consultancy work. The findings suggest that contextual constraints limited academics opportunities to choose to continue to work fully beyond retirement age, forcing them to negotiate and reconstruct

their strong academic identities. The finding may be understood through recent identity incongruence work (Froidevaux et al., 2018) which describes how older workers may disengage from the worker role while simultaneously exploring the retiree identity, as an “in-between” stage between identity continuity and identity crisis (Froidevaux et al., 2018). They suggest that identity incongruence may occur when one ascribes great importance to one’s work role before retirement or when one experiences retirement involuntarily. Identity incongruence can change across time through the process of identity negotiation (Froidevaux et al., 2018) and therefore may account for the negative experiences of the participants in relation to mandatory retirement and how they adapted over time.

The findings that the majority of the participants continued with academic work support continuity theory (Atchley, 1989, 1999a), whereby people strive to preserve and maintain patterns to gradually adapt to retirement over time. The findings also align with the majority of previous studies of academic’s retirement experiences of continuing to work in retirement (Cahill et al., 2019) due to enjoyment, commitment and satisfaction with their academic work (Chase et al., 2003; Dorfman, 2002, 2009; Firmin & Craycroft, 2009) rather than due to financial necessity.

Many of the academics in senior roles in this study began their careers in the 1980s when HEIs were dominated by men and considered masculine institutions (O’Connor, 2019) with organizational policies, procedures, and practice described as being “systemic barriers” to women’s advancement (Rauhaus & Carr, 2020). To progress to the higher echelons of academia, women faced and overcame significant challenges in progressing through the academy related to persistent gender inequality practices that have been extensively documented (O’Connor, 2014). The senior lecturers and professorial academics who continued with academic work in retirement had mainly uninterrupted career patterns, working full time in academia. Their preexisting research collaborations were pivotal in their everyday lives in retirement facilitating them to continue with their research in a meaningful, productive manner. These findings support the view that senior academics who overcame the systemic barriers of HEI environments faced by women to reach senior level, experienced career-related advantages of being in leadership positions and being more visible than other academics throughout their middle and late career, which offered advantages for continued engagement with valued, enjoyable academic activities in retirement (Rowson & Phillipson, 2020; Tizard & Owen, 2001).

While research suggests that marital histories and childrearing are important factors when examining women’s retirement experiences (Damman et al., 2015; Silver, 2016) the majority of the women in this study did not emphasize their partners, or family as central to their academic retirement timing. However, two participants discussed the impact of their caring roles on their retirement experiences. It is widely accepted that older women may leave the workforce early to care for a parent (Kridahl & Silverstein, 2020; Leopold et al., 2014) and that within couples, it is the woman who typically takes over care of the husband, if required, because usually women partners have a higher life expectancy than men, are usually younger than their partners and become disabled later in the life course (Bianchi et al., 2012). The study findings suggest that some women academics may occupy caring roles that can influence their retirement timing and experiences, a finding not previously illustrated in the academic retirement literature. Further research is required to determine if attitudes are changing regarding traditional gendered roles.

Retirement from the HEI environment was perceived as freedom for many of the participants offering opportunities for retired academics to regain control over their everyday lives. Freedom in retirement has been reported in the general retirement literature (Jonsson, 2011; Jonsson et al., 2001) and in relation to professional women’s experiences of retirement (August, 2011). In this study, retirement was perceived by eight of the eleven academics as freedom from the constraints of the academic setting and freedom to choose participation in meaningful activities and continuing with fulfilling aspects of the former academic lives. Continuing to engage in chosen academic activities highlighted their desire to continue to actively maintain their academic identity. This tied with their intrinsic desire to continue with valued activities, for example, research endeavors, including writing and publishing which they loved, enjoyed and gave them a sense of fulfillment and contribution. This finding aligns with continuity theory, where people’s self-perception and identity aims for constancy

and where individuals strive for consistency in terms of lifestyle and structures in retirement (Atchley, 1989; Wang, 2007).

Studies of unretirement, defined as when an individual reverses their retirement by returning from full retirement to recommence paid employment (Platts et al., 2019), have found that high-earning women and those who are unmarried were more likely to pursue unretirement than men (McDonald, 1997; Pleau, 2010) and those in good health are more likely to become unretired (Platts et al., 2019). This echoes the findings of the current research study. Yet, there is a dearth of unretirement literature in the academic context, which may be due to the abolishment of mandatory retirement in many countries. It is likely that unretirement may be a pathway that will be pursued by women academics, in contexts where their employment contract mandates their retirement at a specific age or where they retire early to fulfil caring roles, as was mirrored within this study.

Three of the four early retirees in this study retired early, citing fatigue and stress as central features of their experiences. The rapidly changing context of the higher education environment and its negative impact on the academic role is well documented (Mercille & Murphy, 2017). Academics experience challenges with work–life balance linked with contemporary universities working conditions, where there is an increased focus on efficiencies and audit, resulting in increased workloads with fewer support to staff (Berg et al., 2016; Hartman & Darab, 2012; Meyerhoff et al., 2011). Additionally, women academics may be subject to promotion mechanisms that reflect gender norms (Lynch et al., 2012b; O'Connor, 2014), are less likely to be cited, receive awards, receive positive student evaluations or positive reference letters than their male counterparts (Boring et al., 2016; Mengel et al., 2017). Furthermore, the boundaries between work and other spheres of life have become increasingly blurred in contemporary academia (Bozzon et al., 2017; Currie & Eveline, 2011) accentuating challenges in work–life balance. Burnout, of which fatigue is a characteristic, (Ismail et al., 2008; Leone et al., 2011; Spickard Jr et al., 2002) has been highlighted as affecting between 35% and 50% of faculty and impacting women to a greater extent than men (Alves et al., 2019; Mountz, 2016; Shanafelt et al., 2012). Therefore, the challenging environment in which the women academics worked pre-retirement may explain the decision to exit early, linked with stress and the subsequent freedom felt by the majority of retirees.

Physical activity, a key component of active and healthy aging (Hupin et al., 2015; Stenholm et al., 2016), became more frequent and central to the everyday routine for women academics in this study. The increase in physical activity echoes findings of previous studies of retired academics (Dorfman & Kolarik, 2005; Strudsholm, 2011). Studies have also found that higher occupational status and fewer chronic diseases were associated with a greater increase in physical activity during the transition to retirement (Stenholm et al., 2016).

Implications for practice

The findings are relevant to women academics (retired and approaching the retirement transition), human resource professionals, HEI administrators and retirement coaches. For women academics approaching retirement, these findings demonstrate the variety of ways in which retirement impacts women academics' experience of their daily lives and their personal and professional relationships. Collectively, these experiences may serve as a guide for women academics planning retirement by enabling them to consider, identify and strategize for participation in meaningful activities post-retirement. Through exploration of their values and identification of meaningful and satisfying occupations, preretirement courses (individual and group) could enable potential retirees to consider and design their ideal post-retirement daily lives for a successful meaningful transition to retirement.

The varying ways in which women academics experience contemporary retirement underscore the need for HEI administrators and human resource professionals to offer a choice in retirement pathways, so that academics can retire if they so wish or alternatively pursue flexible or phased retirement options to continue to contribute their knowledge and skills to academia.

Limitations of the study

The mode of communication used to identify potential participants may have resulted in the over-sampling of volunteer participants who were still connected with academia. Secondly, sampling occurred from only two HEIs in one geographical area. The small sample size enabled an in-depth exploration concerning retirement of women academics; however, the study findings reflect the experiences of white female academics (largely in line with the research to date on women's experience of academic retirement). However, the experiences of women academics of ethnic minorities have not been explored.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings illustrate that women academics' retirement pathways are heterogeneous. The majority of women academics remained connected to academia, and participated in meaningful academic activities in varying ways after retirement, while for others, mandatory retirement at a given age was an unwelcome negative experience. The study findings, when taken together, reinforce that retirement is a longitudinal process and provides a valuable insight into the importance of engaging in chosen meaningful valued activities in adjusting to the retirement transition. Continuing with valued activities and professional relationships related to their preretirement academic role as well as engaging in other continued and new meaningful activities in their post-retirement everyday lives facilitated the adjustment to retirement of women academics. The significance of this study is that it may raise awareness of the potential experiences and future possibilities for women academics approaching retirement, enabling them to consider planning for a successful adjustment to retirement.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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