

On leaving work as a calling: retirement as an existential imperative

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that we will reach a deepened understanding of what the retirement process means for individuals if existential meaning is the centre of attention. The data consist of qualitative interviews conducted in Sweden. A selected type of employee – whose work we define as a “calling” – is examined to analyse the existential meaning of work and how it is formed and challenged in relation to the retirement process. Before their retirement, the interviewees had developed three main strategies for handling the process of de-calling: developing a “calling on standby,” exploring self-improvement activities and listening to callings from other social spheres. After their retirement, three main strategies arose for dealing with being de-called: conserving the calling, learning to become a self-oriented subject and redefining the calling. In the case of conserving the calling, we show how this may result in experiences of economic exploitation and existential frustration.

Keywords: calling, economic exploitation, existential imperative, existential vacuum, individualisation, retirement, Sweden.

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Introduction

The importance of retirement in people's lives is a highly discussed issue. Research on retirement as an adjustment process often studies outcomes in terms of health, well-being and economic and psychological adjustment, doing so through statistical analysis techniques (cf. Muratore & Earl 2015; Van Solinge & Henkens 2008). In this article, we do not intend to statistically measure the antecedents and outcomes of the retirement transition and the post-retirement trajectory, but rather to gain a qualitative understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of the retirement process from the standpoint of the individual. Taking our departure in existential sociology and existential anthropology, we argue that a deepened understanding of what retirement means for individuals can be reached if *existential meaning* and the *transitional phase* of retirement are put at the centre of attention.

Existential issues refer to the meaning of life and its finitude, and to one's own and others' life deeds (Jackson 2005, 2013). Existential meaning can be interpreted as the human quest to reach beyond oneself and understand existence in a larger context of meaning (Frankl 1969/1988). For some, this human quest is achieved through paid work, which constitutes a fundamental source of existential meaning. However, this is an area within the meaning of work literature that is somewhat underresearched (Rosso et al. 2010).

In analysing the existential meaning of work, we will use the concept of "calling" (Bellah et al. 1985; Duffy & Dik 2013; Weber 1919/1994). As presented below, for a person whose work is a calling, the institution of retirement may be experienced as an external force that "de-calls" one's mission. Thus, we analyse how retirement as an external force induces an "existential imperative" (Jackson 2005, 2013, 2015). This occurs in transitional situations in life when existential questions are most imperative to us, such as family loss, having children, entering the labour market or, as the case is here, retiring (Flisbäck 2014). To make visible how the existential meaning of work is challenged in the retirement process, we illustrate this with two rounds of interviews with six individuals for whom work has taken the shape of a "calling."

The aim of this article is threefold: first, to analyse how, for persons whose work is a calling, the retirement process makes visible the existential meaning of work; second, to analyse strategies applied for handling the de-calling process before retirement and strategies and forms of meaning-making that are developed afterwards; and third, to explore social inequality aspects of the retirement process for persons whose work is a calling.

Background: the Swedish case

Sweden, where our study is situated, has a system of mandatory retirement, for example, compared with the United States where this was abolished in the 1980s (with some occupational exceptions). Sweden previously had a fixed retirement age of 65, but a more flexible system was implemented in the new century: the minimum age of pension withdrawal is 61, and the maximum is 67 (Andersson & Öberg 2012; Johansson et al. 2014). This means that at this 67-year limit, the employee will have to let go of his or her status as permanently employed, which is the case for four interviewees in this article. A person may be temporarily hired beyond this limit, depending on the person's physical and mental health or employer demand. As the pension received is based on the life-income principle and, thus, is largely dependent on the number of years and hours in gainful employment from age 16 and onward, this means that the more hours in employment, the higher the pension. Thus, early pension withdrawal, as well as an irregular employment history, may have a major impact on the retiree's financial situation.

Theory and research

Situating our research

Following increased mobility in working life, the flexibility and heterogeneity of exit routes from the labour market appear to have increased, for example, as seen in Sweden. This is also related to the crumbling institutionalisation of a stable life course and the erosion of strict boundaries

regarding employment and retirement (Kohli 1987). Some researchers emphasise that current heterogeneous exit patterns mean that retirement no longer represents a drastic break or entry into old age (Hyde et al. 2004; Sargent et al. 2013). Longitudinal studies show that an individual's well-being before and after retirement seldom changes, but mainly depends on the individual's social resource position in his or her previous life (Ekerdt 2001; Halleröd et al. 2013; Hyde et al. 2004; Tornstam 2005). There are, however, researchers who underline that regardless of when and in what way people retire, the process is still an important life phase. Some emphasise the use of progressive statistical models and analysis techniques to "unpack" the complexities of the retirement process by measuring its outcomes in terms of covariance among variables (cf. Muratore & Earl 2015). Others underline qualitative approaches that study the "complex, unfolding process" of retirement (Jonsson 2000: 464) and that illuminate experiences of retirement as "situated within individual histories and cultural contexts" (Luborsky 1994: 411). In line with the latter approach, we regard the retirement process as a qualitative new experience giving rise to existential dilemmas that simultaneously include grief and joy, possibilities and difficulties adapting (cf. Holm 2012; Jonsson 2000).

Work as a calling

In an organisational scholarship review of the meaning of work, Rosso et al. (2010: 106–7) have emphasised that the impact of spiritual life, and thus existential questions, on the meaning of work "is often overlooked" and that there "exist many opportunities for further research." One way to explore this avenue is to use "calling" as a concept to analyse the existential meaning of work.

According to Duffy and Dik (2013: 429), three components of a calling are especially emphasised in the humanities and social sciences. The first is "an external summons." The individual experiences that he or she has been called by an external force, that is, the person experiences a sense of destiny in having been selected for the specific profession (cf. Bunderson & Thompson 2009: 37). The second component refers to the work approach aligning with a "broader sense of purpose in life" (Duffy & Dik 2013: 429).

Here we can relate to the early 20th-century German sociologist Max Weber, who referred to a calling as man living *for* his task. This should be separated from living *from* the task, whereby the drivers are personal motivators such as economic livelihood and social status. When man lives *for* his work, his tasks become a main concern – “his life” (Weber 1919/1994: 318, 353). In another source, though part of a late modern conceptualisation of calling within the work orientation literature (cf. Bellah et al. 1985: 66), calling refers to an orientation whereby work is an end in itself, that is, something beyond material benefits and advancement. This also means that a calling conceptualised as an orientation is something that is not dependent on a specific type of work (Wrzesniewski et al. 2013: 116). Thus, a calling differs from commitment to a profession, which may give rise to a strong occupational identity (Bengtsson & Flisbäck 2016; cf. Elliott 1972). Finally, the third component of a calling is that “a person’s career is prosocially oriented” (Duffy & Dik 2013: 429). This refers to serving a higher cause, one’s fellow man or the community (Bellah et al. 1985: 66).

Later in the findings, we will elaborate on these various components, or dimensions, of a calling. We will also see that defining the calling as a passion refers to the risk that the devotion to work may lead to suffering and (self-)exploitation (Bengtsson & Flisbäck 2016). In a Swedish context, in working life research and among trade unionists, the calling as a concept has mainly been used to visualise exploitative working conditions. This has particularly applied to female-dominated jobs and positions in the service sector, where an approach to work as a calling has often meant that incomes have not at all reflected the employees’ huge efforts (Greiff 2006). The impact of a similar economic exploitation for the retiree is an issue we will return to in the findings.

Retirement as an individualisation process and an existential imperative

The idea of a calling was developed within a religious context before the advent of secularised, Western types of welfare states. Therefore, it can be seen as an anomaly in relation to the institution of retirement, as it may be difficult at a given point of time to leave the existential

meaning of work. Through entitlement to state-supported pension income, an individual may legitimately abstain from the duties of paid employment without losing his or her legal status and social identity as a full adult, and without being stigmatised as dependent (Luborsky & LeBlanc 2003). However, in work-oriented societies where work is associated with virtue and honour, it could also be emphasised that retirement as a mandatory institution *excludes* older people from the labour force (Ekerdt 1986).

The emphasis of retirement is *separation*, that is, retiring *from* employment, whereas the type of existence the person is moving *into* is less certain (Atchley 1976: 54). This unpredictability can result in less socially structured ways of living and individualistic strategies for managing everyday life. As understood by Thompson, the everyday of retired people is no longer structured by common activities like work or regular education, which means “they *must* choose; responsibility for structuring their lives is uniquely their own” (1993: 685, emphasis in original). Following the life course approach of Kohli (1986: 296), this process of *individualisation* has developed through the institutionalisation of “the modern life course regime” as a core structural feature of the Western modernisation process. This means a shift of perspective: from conceptualising age as membership in an aggregate (age strata) to conceptualising it as “an individualized life line” (Kohli 1986: 273). This “life line” is now mainly organised around work activities in a chronologically standardised life course, tripartitioned into education–work–retirement.

According to Kohli, retirement is part of a life course regime whereby individuals are set free from various bonds and become “the basic units of social life” (Kohli 1986: 272). But we would also say that retirement, as a universal welfare state institution (i.e. for those citizens who have earned the right), has a direct effect on individualisation in a post-traditional order (cf. Giddens 1991). In this way, the development of highly individualised societies has its origin in the modern democratic project’s pursuit of individual rights and welfare, not least through the development of state institutions like retirement.

We might say that the institution of retirement is an example of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 11) describes in terms of “institutionalized individualism,” whereby the individual citizen is challenged to lead an

independent life. This means that financial support from the public pension scheme sets the individual free from (economic and social) dependency on social structural affiliations such as family or social class. Retiring, thus, can be regarded as a decoupling from a collective context and, as with other individualisation processes, can be interpreted as a life transition in which questions of meaning and quality of life become particularly prominent (Giddens 1991). Jackson (2005: xxii) states that similar situations imply so-called existential imperatives. This means that we, at critical moments in our lives, not only reproduce what is given but also initiate new possibilities and create “a sense that life is worth living” and, thus, “live *the* world as if it were *our own*” (Jackson 2005: xxii, emphasis in original).

In existential imperatives, we may experience a loss of control due to a feeling of being under the influence of powerful external forces, for example, the mandatory institution of retirement. But a belief may well arise that it is possible to arrange our life beyond given directives and that the future is more open than it was previously. Accordingly, these situations include both a loss of control and a *potential* for change and a redefinition of former meanings, beliefs and values.

With the concept of existential imperative, Jackson emphasises the classic anthropological question of how people handle departures from the familiar everyday on their way to something new and “not-yet.” From Jackson’s perspective, these ambiguous and transitive aspects of life are a given condition of existence, and therefore, it is important to study the active dimension of life transitions. In our case, this concerns *whether* and *how* individuals, when retiring, challenge or retain the existential meanings and values associated with work, in relation to the mandated individualisation process of the welfare state. This requires a method that examines individuals’ existential orientations both before and after retirement.

Data and method

The data analysed in this article have been collected within a sociological research project aiming to explore subjective experiences of the retirement process from several angles: a social inequality perspective, the influence of social norms and cultural meaning, the impact of occupational identity and existential questions. With the phenomenological starting point that

meaning is formed in lived experiences (Jackson 2013), we selected a qualitative longitudinal design, in which the same individuals were interviewed before and after retirement. The total data within the research project consist of semi-structured interviews with 43 individuals. These were conducted in Swedish by the authors and the project leader in 2014 and 2015. Since the project focuses on individuals' experiences of the transitional nature of the retirement process, 35 of them were interviewed in two rounds, a short time before and about 6 months after retirement.

Since there are large differences between when and to what extent workers and professionals in Sweden retire (Andersson & Öberg 2012), one important factor in the selection of interviewees was to have a spread of occupations. Reflecting a qualitative spectrum of occupations was also important as we expected that issues such as social inequality, class, gender and professional identity would matter in experiences of the retirement process. Thus, in the selection we have included women and men from different sectors and activities: 1) low-skilled, manual jobs, for example, in garbage disposal, cleaning and logistics; 2) skilled jobs in the public sector, for example, teachers and doctors; 3) occupations dealing with abstract means, for example, payroll administrators and auditors; 4) high-skilled professions mainly dealing with existential questions, for example, priests and psychologists; and 5) occupations within the creative industries, for example, actors.

The main strategies for finding appropriate interviewees consisted of contacting key players in different professions and activities, such as managers and union representatives, and asking them to distribute a letter with information on the research project – its funding, purpose, design and ethics. Those who wished to participate in the study could voluntarily contact any of the co-workers in the project and were once again informed of the project's purpose. Those who still felt comfortable with participating after this were interviewed when the opportunity arose.

The principles used for data processing and analysis are mainly in line with Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory method. Thus, the data have been analysed by exploring similarities, differences and contradictions in each person's approach to his or her profession and retirement process, as well as between the interviewees. The data were coded from empirical indicators towards higher levels of conceptual abstraction and

theory integration. Through the application of stepwise coding and memo-writing, several key categories emerged. Through continuous analysis, deeper knowledge of the specific elements of the categories was obtained. In this emergent process, we eventually moved towards an existential sociology approach, which helped us understand the existential meaning of the retirement process and of leaving a job one feels greatly attached to. The final step of analysis entailed reaching new knowledge in order to contribute to conceptual development. Thus, although our case was limited, our use of existential sociology concepts will hopefully inspire researchers to explore new avenues within the field of retirement. In other words, the concepts developed through the analysis can be applied and tested in other cases when studying the existential meaning of work, as well as when exploring the existential meaning of the retirement process. In the final discussion, we will return to this theoretical transferability.

During the coding process, among the 43 interviewees, we interpreted that about 20 persons embrace a work orientation resembling a calling (cf. "work as a calling"). To clarify the analysis exploring how individuals develop strategies for handling the retirement process when their work is a calling, we present six cases here, that is, six individuals representing typical examples of the categories developed through the data processing and analysis. This means that we will highlight examples from six people who captured the existential themes found among all of those with a dedicated approach to work and underlined the prominent place work held in their lives. The three women and three men who we will follow here were born between 1947 and 1949 and reflect a qualitative spectrum of occupations in the broader selection mentioned above. The qualitative spectrum of our sample is shown in Table 1.

Longitudinal data are useful for understanding different meaning aspects of the retirement process from a biographical perspective. Thus, the individuals' narratives exemplify the changing meaning of work during different life phases. Our analysis is inspired by sociological studies grounded in life history data and, thus, explores multifaceted, biographical experiences in individuals' professional careers as well as other life spheres (cf. Bertaux 1981).

To analyse social structures through individuals' narratives, we have used a socio-biographical method (cf. Douglas 1977/2010). This method has

Table 1. Selection of interviewees according to assigned name, profession/ title, gender, marital status, birth year, time of interview before/after retirement, and place of residence

Name	Profession/ title	Gender	Marital status	Birth year	Interviewed before/after retirement	Place of residence
George	Dustman/ union duties	Man	Married	1948	3 months/ 4 months	Large city
Gun	Assistant nurse/family consultant	Woman	Married	1947	3 months/ 8 months	Countryside
Ingmar	Organist	Man	Married	1948	2 months/ 8 months	Large city
Irene	Auditor	Woman	Single/ widowed	1947	3 months/ 7 months	Large city
Maarit	Principal	Woman	Cohabiting	1949	1 month/ 7.5 months	Middle- sized city
Åke	Priest	Man	Single/ divorced	1947	1.5 months/ 8 months	Large city

similarities to both life history interviews and the life course approach; the latter has been rather dominant in ageing and development studies (cf. Alwin 2012). An advantage with the methods applied in the life course approach is the analysis of trajectories by emphasising both contextual factors and intrapersonal development (e.g. Elder et al. 2003). However, the socio-biographical method differs in its stronger focus on meaning and existential themes. One aim of the method is that it permits us to see how “internal” differences in each interviewee are displayed over time – in transition between different social milieus. In this way, the socio-biographical method helps us focus on how *existential* orientations shift within each subject over time in various life processes (Flisbäck 2014).

The interview guide was constructed to reflect *biographical* themes on the past, present and the future, as well as to highlight *social*, *cultural* and *existential* questions about the interviewee’s financial situation, social background and family life, and her own and others’ thoughts about her occupational career, as well as social perceptions of retirement.

In analysing the interview data, however, it became increasingly clear to us that existential meaning-making tended to be part and parcel of more or less all the various experiences described by the interviewees, aspects for which this article will provide a deeper understanding.

Findings

Dimensions of a calling

To make visible how existential meaning is challenged in the retirement process, we will first point out what we have interpreted as crucial existential dimensions of work, as recounted by the respondents in relation to their professions. First, we illustrate how the profession may be interpreted as “an external summons,” that is, the respondent experiences a sense of destiny in having been selected for the specific profession (Bunderson & Thompson 2009; Duffy & Dik 2013). Ingmar, an organist, recounts that he has known since childhood that music was his destiny. He confirms this by relating his recollection of an event he attended when he was four, where he listened to an accomplished organist at the church where his father was a minister. Ingmar was very inspired by the music – it gave birth to his commitment to follow the path of being a musical artist. “I had no alternative,” Ingmar states. For Gun, a nurse, the conviction to work in health care was similarly formed during middle school when she was allowed to do an internship at a nursing home: “So the idea [to work in health care] has always existed. I don’t know why /.../ It’s always been there for some reason.” Also, Maarit, a school principal, tells us she had a conviction from an early age to commit herself to the welfare of other people and society, which she has done in her career as a teacher and as principal.

The stories of Maarit, Ingmar and Gun testify to an experience of having found the right place early in their life courses, which could be interpreted as their having been led by an external summons. They seem to have a sense of destiny or “a sense of inevitability about their discovery” (cf. Bunderson & Thompson 2009: 37).

This leads us to the second and third dimensions of a calling, whereby work entails having a “broader sense of purpose in life” and “a person’s

career is prosocially oriented" (Duffy & Dik 2013: 429). Irene, an auditor, recalls her difficulties choosing a field of education after earning her bachelor's degree, but says she felt "very confident" about choosing an industry "with skewed gender representation." Although she cannot understand where the conviction originally sprung from, it escorted her in her choice to study at a business school consisting more or less exclusively of male students. Irene, thus, recounts that her work approach aligns with a higher cause, that is, a desire to make a difference, with regard to gender equality in working life. George, a dustman, also expresses this higher purpose. The work carried out for the benefit of the city's sanitation service is depicted as important to the sustainability of society: "I can feel proud that I'm doing a job," George says, "that I've somehow served the community." Among our respondents, it can be both the community and a concrete other that they serve. Åke, a priest, describes the work as a way to help people on the margins of society, for example, through his work performed in a group that gives aid to female prostitutes.

The existential meaning and value of work shift with the distance to retirement

In order to analyse how the retirement process makes visible the existential meaning of work, it is necessary to emphasise the existential meaning the respondents ascribed to their experiences of the retirement process relative to their careers. A recurring theme was embracing metaphors of retirement as something definitive (cf. Holm 2012: 14).

An example is George, the dustman with union duties, who, before retirement, said that the situation strongly reminded him that he was "going downhill. It's finite. You're approaching it [death] with leaps and bounds." This experience of approaching the end of life is connected to what makes life meaningful, and for George this is work. Over the years, work as an existential meaning horizon has become increasingly important. But it is not only the years he accumulated in employment that gave rise to work being something fundamental in George's life; above all, the closer to retirement he came, the more important work tended to become:

Before I turned 50, let's say when I was 40, 45... When I started sensing the approach of "the 50," I thought, "When I'm 50, I'm going to work less." / ... / But then when

I turned 50 and was heading to 55, and discerned the far away “60,” then I thought, “Well, you know . . . , I’ll probably keep going for a while anyway!” And then I turned 60 and I sensed 65 approaching; “No, no! I should probably keep on keeping on.” (George, before retirement)

Here, George describes a procedural shift of perspective that he considers to be related to different phases of life, whereby daily work as a meaningful existential practice is valued in relation to the time remaining until retirement (cf. Holm 2012: 18, 28–29). Work thus gains greater importance as retirement closes in. In this way, retirement can be defined as an existential imperative, that is, life situations in which questions about the meaning of life especially emerge and are de- and redefined (Jackson 2005). The existential imperative of retirement need not be experienced by every person as a clear-cut breaking point in life, although the existential questions may become particularly prominent with the anticipation that one’s daily routines and social affiliations will soon change. Because of this, the interviewees developed strategies before retirement for handling their new everyday.

Before retirement: strategies for handling the “de-calling”

Research points to how individuals at retirement are socially recognised as having done their fair share as productive citizens (Atchley 1993: 10). Some have emphasised that this may lead to the retiree mourning the loss of his or her former roles and identities (cf. Burgess 1960; De Lange 2011) and having feelings of no longer being needed. In the latter case, one’s life project can be seen as finished, and a feeling of expendability may come to the fore (Holm 2012). For those with work as a calling, a similar expendability can become highly prominent because they are losing a specific source of meaning in life. In addition, the retirement per se constitutes a tension, because the calling as a task for life cannot be limited to a certain temporal and spatial context. From this perspective, the experienced expendability can be seen as the state de-calling one’s mission, and therefore, retirement may lead to people doubting whether they have actually succeeded in the task they were once called to. Next, we discuss three strategies used before retirement to manage what we conceptualise here as a de-calling of a person’s life mission through the mandatory institution of

retirement: “developing a calling on standby,” “learning not to listen to the calling” and “listening to callings from other social spheres.” In our presentation below, we will illustrate each strategy with two persons from our six typical cases.

Developing a calling on standby. During the first interview, George, Gun, Irene and Åke were close to 67 years of age, the upper age limit for retirement in Sweden. This external condition could be described as impossible to influence, as with George, who said he would exit working life “involuntary.” George said he “believes that one should contribute what you can to society. All the time, as long as you basically live. And that day when you cannot anymore, then you’re almost a useless man.” For George, work itself is of main importance – a dedicated approach beyond its own benefit, whereby those who can should contribute to society. George described this approach as a reason why, for over 20 years, he has delivered newspapers seven mornings a week before going to his ordinary work. Such a work orientation makes retirement a critical point in life.

George’s case reveals that a calling can be conceptualised as an orientation and, therefore, something that is not dependent on a specific type of work (Wrzesniewski et al. 2013: 116). What is essential is to regard the fruit of the work as existentially meaningful. Thus, for George, the de-calling is, ultimately, a question of human dignity as he no longer feels he is able to contribute to the community. Perhaps, this is why he has told his manager he wants to continue working after retirement, even though he will not be allowed to renew his union duties. Similarly, Åke hopes his future as a retiree would mean temporary work opportunities:

What am I supposed to do? / ... / I’ll be sitting by the telephone waiting on a call. And I don’t mean any call, but if there are calls from various congregations that need temporary work ... Temporary work for maternity leave, sick leave, yes, perhaps there’s a position in anticipation of someone new who’ll start working. (Åke, before retirement)

For both George and Åke, retirement preparations consist mainly of waiting for temporary work, which can be seen as a way of resuming their callings or developing what we define as a calling on standby.

Learning not to listen to the calling. When approaching work as a calling, the individual emphasises its utility as something beyond profit or self-development. Work is given an existential meaning by putting one's fellow man at the centre of attention. This may imply that social relations in other life spheres must be adapted to the work. However, Gun, the assistant nurse who has worked as a family consultant, said she has always prioritised her family over work, but that this does not mean her family life has been her main source of existential meaning. Before retirement, Gun said, "I have quite a lot to do, I think, but I really do like to work. /.../ I don't like just sitting and doing nothing, and just being." Being – one's existence – is related to the effort Gun made in her paid work. It was there that her unique value as a human being was formed because, as she said, "one cannot only live through children and grandchildren." In this way, the case exemplifies that the meaning spheres of work and family consist of different qualities and that the existential meaning of work is not easily redirected towards social relationships in the private sphere.

In contrast to George and Åke, Gun had not tried to find a temporary work position – even if she would have liked to stay a year or more at her job, if this had been possible. Instead, during the past two years, Gun had limited her working hours in order to "get a feeling for what it's like to be off for a day and not go to work"; working part-time can be regarded as a way of mitigating the upcoming loss of work. We interpret Gun's gradual withdrawal from working life as a strategy for growing accustomed to not listening to her calling.

When your profession is a calling, the main task is to assist your fellow man and the community. Perhaps, this conduct is easier to understand with regard to health professionals or priests. Irene, the auditor, also described a desire to make a difference by serving a higher cause, as presented earlier. But, like Gun, in her final year of employment, Irene chose to work part-time and increase her leisure activities stepwise. She wanted to ease the transition by learning not to listen to the calling to completely embrace her work. However, she also worried to some degree that this new everyday would not be as meaningful as her professional life, both its practical chores and the social relationships with her customers. With her personality as an instrument, Irene has formed social ties in which the support has become mutual.

Listening to callings from other social spheres. One problem when holding a job one regards as a calling is that the love for serving the community and one's fellow man could make it difficult to set a limit on one's workload and sacrifices. In this way, the boundaries between one's work and private life easily become arbitrary. Ingmar, the organist, has such a passion. His willingness to serve others has created recurrent feelings of insufficiency. Throughout his working life, he has tried to "perform at as high an artistic level as possible; and to do so, you need to practice." Ingmar uses a gardener metaphor. If you believe something will grow or "flower," this must be managed in the best way, even though the work can be extensive: "then one cannot think 'Now my hours here are finished'."

However, the sacrifices of the calling in terms of time and effort imply that Ingmar, unlike the others, now longs to be de-called. He yearns for a life with fewer work chores and more private space. He looks forward to "being able to live partly without a datebook," as a metaphor for avoiding the demands of the calling and, instead, to having the opportunity to listen to a calling from a private sphere. He wants to spend time with his wife, children and grandchildren.

Although Maarit did not describe her work based on performance requirements similar to how Ingmar did, she also described a feeling of being "ready." Maarit has a teacher's degree, but in recent years has held a position as principal. She immigrated to Sweden from Finland and, ever since entering Swedish working life as a factory worker at the age of 15, has thought, "Okay, now I'll keep going – it's the job that matters." As seen, for George, such a dedicated approach led to the crucial question of what value he will have as someone who has been de-consecrated from "worker" to "non-worker." Maarit, however, says she has done her fair share of work – in both school and employment – and, thus, feels rightfully rewarded with greater autonomy: "I've been away from home since I was seven years old, every morning / ... / so now, it'll be good to in some way make my own decisions."

Maarit regards retirement as a time when she deserves to do something else, such as reflecting upon the results of her work and "reaping the seeds." In Biggs' (2015: 17) terms, her reflections could be likened to a "new and age-specific existential exploration." However, she does not interpret "reaping the seeds" simply as *being*, but also as *doing* – a doing

associated with political work. It can be seen that the calling, as a long-term “will to be committed,” is being transferred from the tasks she performed as a principal to those she does in the political sphere. Ingmar’s and Maarit’s stories show that the strategy of listening to a calling from another direction may involve both private and public spheres.

Experiences and learning processes after retirement

Since retirement intensifies existential issues and, therefore, challenges values and former meanings, the approach to being de-called needs to be interpreted as an adjustment process over time. In the section below, we examine the strategies after retirement. We have found three main strategies for dealing with the process of being de-called: conserving the calling; learning to become a self-oriented subject and redefining the calling.

Conserving the calling. The first period of retirement has emerged as being nearly the opposite of the dedicated approach to work as a calling; however, the degree to which the retirees see this as positive varies. Åke’s new everyday has largely involved seeking temporary positions. Just as he predicted, he is conserving his calling, in line with his pre-retirement strategy of developing a calling on standby. Therefore, since retirement he has temporarily worked at Sunday church services, funerals, weddings, baptisms and so on.

Conserving the calling is one of three strategies we found had developed among the interviewees after retirement. One complication with the wish to continue one’s life mission, however, is that one’s social environment could question this desire. Åke says his choice is criticised by his friends and that he finds this difficult, “because you have to defend your desire to continue working.” Thus, Åke’s experience of being questioned when he chooses to work can be interpreted as an expression of the norm that as a retiree one should develop other meaningful chores in life.

Learning to become a self-oriented subject. Åke, then, has followed the strategy he developed before retirement, when it comes to managing the de-calling. On the contrary, he has also experienced a number of surprises in his new everyday. Despite some temporary work opportunities, his datebook has had more blank pages than ever before. This has forced him into a learning process to find relief between the old and new routines – a

new temporal rhythm that has formed a process that can be interpreted as a stepwise transformation into becoming a self-oriented subject. He has discovered that, although he still sees his work as “the most important thing in life,” to some extent, it is a relief to no longer be constantly forced to serve others: “I’ve had that for 38 years / . . . / being virtually constantly connected; I’ve almost not even been able to disconnect from people during the holidays.”

As the institution of retirement could be said to discontinue the work as a calling, retirement values and norms may mainly underwrite a shift of obligations to the self and induce a learning process to become a self-oriented subject (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991; Kohli 1986). For Åke, the learning process is rather complex. He sees the advantage in limiting the constant demands of the calling, but also describes the difficulties of no longer being able to serve his fellow man. Gun, to a greater extent than Åke, has detected the satisfaction in “seizing the day” and refocusing on her own needs. Even though Gun said before retirement that different activities have different qualities of meaning, her orientation differed markedly as she began a process of learning to become a self-oriented subject and thus partly giving up the meaning of the calling. The learning process Gun started before retirement – leaving space for other activities and not committing all her time to work – has continued after retirement.

As the state de-calls the individual, the feeling can arise that one has the “right” to challenge one’s dedicated approach to work. Similarly to Gun, Irene described how she is now doing activities for her own sake, but she also said she may need a period of training to slow down and “experience the present.” She describes a right to be retired in order to devote time to her own activities: “taking it easy without doing anything sensible.” This suggests that the meaning of “doing something sensible” is still regarded as doing something for others.

According to Biggs (2015: 16), contemporary working life is imbued with a “productivist ideology” whereby older people tend to avoid other experiences and values than those that spring from paid work. In this context, it is interesting that Irene experiences retirement and (at least partly) its questioning of the dedicated approach to work as positive, but must train herself to not be too active. She already experienced such

a learning process before retirement when she reduced her working time to develop other activities for her new everyday. This could be interpreted as part of a “busy ethic” for retirement, whereby leisure is esteemed as “earnest, occupied and filled with activity” (Ekerdt 1986: 239). However, her many activities during the initial phase of the retirement process made Irene feel “stressed out.” Now she has become “more moderate,” that is, reduced the frequency of her activities. Her behaviour during the initial phase can be explained as having been afraid of the openness awaiting her as a retiree. After half a year, however, she no longer experiences the “fear that it will be empty.”

For Ingmar, learning to become a self-oriented subject is positive. Before retirement he looked forward to exiting employment, since it had been an all-embracing activity. After retirement, he said he was grateful to the state for allowing him to leave his job. Although he repeated that his whole life “has been about the meaning of working as a musician,” he described the satisfaction at no longer feeling the pressure to perform on Sundays when facing the parish in church. At his farewell ceremony, he wanted to convey that he had always strived to be “like Bach – a working musician,” that is, serving others rather than striving for his own artistry. Nevertheless, as a retiree, Ingmar experiences the right to use his job instrument – the organ – more to his own joy and satisfaction. This new self-oriented approach is also supported by his wife, who helps him say no to requests to give concerts. A similar pattern was found among the other interviewees and can be interpreted as meaning that the learning process for becoming a more self-oriented subject is *socially sanctioned*. For example, Irene says her social surroundings encourage her to “take it slower.” In the case of Gun, her neighbours say “Now you have to relax!” In other words, while the will to continue one’s professional calling may be questioned, the learning process for becoming a self-oriented subject is socially sanctioned in a positive way.

Redefining the calling. In addition to underwriting a shift of obligations to the self, the retirement process creates space for accepting callings from other social spheres, for example, family or volunteer work. Before retirement, Gun described a fear that clients’ families would call her on her private phone and ask for advice, while as a retiree she would not be allowed to answer their questions. This case shows that the skills of

“called” persons may be requested after retirement. However, when one’s fellow man express dissatisfaction with the retirement, the retirees may feel guilt, even if they cannot affect the external force of the retirement process.

After her retirement, one way for Gun to check her “bad conscience” was to do volunteer work once a month, as she is a board member in an association for families in need of support. She has thus been able to continue her calling, but to a lesser degree and in a different form than before retirement. Maarit, for her part, has transferred her calling to political tasks and volunteer work. In the latter case, she works for a non-profit organisation that works to organise activities for older retirees from her country of origin. Irene performs voluntary audits to do something “sensible” and “meaningful,” whereas Åke has similar reasons for serving on the board of an international aid organisation working against prostitution. Even though they are voluntary, some of the tasks retirees do for a non-profit organisation may be quite similar to those they did earlier in their profession. For example, every other week Åke still meets with the group he led before he retired and has begun to lead a new Bible study group on a voluntary basis. Once a week, George participates in a meeting on the city’s working environment in the waste management industry.

Unlike the five other cases we present here, Ingmar did not want to engage in volunteer work. As he had planned before retiring, after retiring he devoted his time to his wife, children and grandchildren. But whether it entails volunteer work or more family time, both types of activities could be interpreted as ways of projecting the commitment of the calling onto other activities and thus redefining the calling.

Conserving work as a calling – a question of social inequality and existential frustration?

Although Åke finds relief in being de-called, having temporary work opportunities and thus having a calling on standby, as we have seen, is still his main existential orientation. This will be discussed in terms of *economic exploitation* in the next section. There is a further problem, however, exemplified in the case of George. What will happen to those who cannot embrace either the learning process for becoming a self-oriented subject

or the strategy of redefining their callings, or are not allowed or able to develop a calling on standby? A potential outcome is *existential frustration*, which in the final section of the findings will be related to conditions of economic exploitation.

Economic exploitation. At Christmas, Åke led a ceremony at his former workplace. He received many thanks from his former manager, who said, "They never would have done it without you." However, a calling may be economically exploited, a point made in working life research (see e.g. Greiff 2006); our study shows that this form of economic exploitation may be more accentuated after retirement.

As a single person, Åke cannot rely on the extra income of a working spouse, which may form a specific type of "venture capital" (Flisbäck 2014). The concerns he had before retirement about not being able to exercise his calling as a pensioner have shifted to economic concerns: "It [the financial situation] was worse than I thought and it's, to be honest, it's one of the reasons I do extra work." Paradoxically, the "economic base" has been given a prominent place for a person who has always put the spiritual/the calling first and, therefore, to some degree, has disregarded his financial situation.

Research emphasises that work as a calling is one way of legitimising social inequality on the basis of, for example, gender (Greiff 2006). The idea of a calling in different professions has thus contributed to a form of (self-)exploitation, whereby high performance requirements and a love for serving the community and one's fellow man have set limits on what a person can bear. Nonetheless, this use of the calling seems even more evident after retirement, when economic exploitation can be reinforced through economic differentiation among retirees. The person who continues to do paid work can be economically exploited when the employer wishes or demands that the task be performed, at least partly, without remuneration, as in the case of Åke. Maarit, however, can afford to carry out her deeds voluntarily due to her good financial situation. In addition, she also receives compensation from her political work. So when Maarit has participated in short courses as a teacher at the college (*Folkhögskola* in Swedish) where she had served as principal, she says, "I do it because it's fun; I wasn't even paid in full." In short, continuing to perform work assignments with the calling as the main

orientation seems to require specific venture capital, since it may be hard to express the need to be paid for the tasks.

Existential frustration. In her qualitative interview study, Holm (2012) describes how retirees who had been looking forward to leaving employment because they were unhappy in their jobs felt that retirement actually felt meaningless. In our study, we looked at the opposite type of people, those with a dedicated approach to work. Nonetheless, in the case of George, we found a similar pattern of feelings of meaninglessness, which we describe in terms of existential frustration, following Frankl (1969/1988).

In accordance with a calling as a broader sense of purpose in life, before retirement George said that the duties he performed for the benefit of the city's sanitation service were important for serving the community. After retirement, he said his motto was "If you can help anyone in any single way, you feel good about it." However, this also meant that the loss of meaning following retirement could be palpable. As a retiree, George said he is not depressed and has many things to do, for example, performing house renovations and caring for his 12 grandchildren, but feels that life really lacks proper meaning – that he is "not needed" and "as a retiree does not contribute to society." While admitting that he has a relatively good life, the meaning that once existed has ceased to exist:

Now it's not like this is externally visible that I would walk around and be depressed or the like. I don't think so. I try to enjoy every moment anyway, but it's actually, yes, really tough, you could actually say. That sounds a bit drastic, but these three, four months I've been retired, well they almost feel like the most meaningless of my life.
(George, after retirement)

The meaninglessness George felt as his interest and investment in life were shattered is hard to understand without an analysis that illuminates the aspects of the existential meaning of work. His case emphasises that various activities have different meanings and that some activities, following Biggs (2014: 100), "can lead to a meaningless state of merely existing and of mindless repetition." In the words of Jackson (2005: x), the forces that act upon George turn his everyday existence into "a struggle for being against nothingness – for whatever will make life worth living rather than hopeless, profitless and pointless." This also means that adapting to a "busy ethic" in retirement, meaning an everyday filled with

alternative activities to work (cf. Ekerdt 1986), is not analogous to the *existential meaning* of work as a calling. Even though his house needs to be renovated, George says that renovating it would only benefit his family, not the community as such. His existence is no longer meaningful because he cannot perform work he sees as important for his fellow man or the community. The calling, as understood as “a practical ideal of activity and character” that has been “morally inseparable” (Bellah et al. 1985: 66) from George’s life, has been dissolved. This means that learning to listen to callings from other social spheres has failed for him, as it has not replaced the meaning he found in his work as a calling.

Existential frustration and its relation to economic scarcity. The existential frustration experienced by George could be conceptualised as a state of “existential vacuum” (Frankl 1969/1988). This means that the value and meaning of work as a calling collides with different values and meanings attached to being a retiree, that is, a “non-worker.” It seems that George has even found it hard to adapt to a “post-calling” situation as the strategy of having a calling on standby has failed. He says he cannot return to work and drive a garbage truck due to a lack of physical strength, and he is not allowed to have trade union duties after the age of 67. We might say that the welfare state has tested his calling and, for age reasons, found it no longer appropriate for him to continue it, while a recalling from elsewhere has not occurred.

For George, the learning process – being transformed into a self-oriented subject – has also failed, at least so far. Financial independence seems to be one important aspect of learning to do away with work as a calling and instead testing self-improvement activities. In other words, the phenomenon of being made into a self-oriented subject after retirement involves to some extent spending time on experiences that demand additional economic resources. While Maarit (alongside doing paid political assignments) tests self-improvement through, for example, tourist trips to look at polar bears, she possesses the necessary financial means for such amusing activities. George’s situation, however, is different. Even if tourist travels certainly may not replace the existential meaning of work, George – before retirement – thought travelling to a warmer country in southern Europe could be a joyful consolation in the difficult situation. He said he longed to “leave the cold and the slush” in

Sweden: "Gran Canaria is amazing / .../ I do like that... Yes, I do like that... The first half year as a retiree, then it'll be winter ... Then the thought is to travel [George and his wife] down to the Canary Islands." However, after retirement, George concluded that such travelling was not economically feasible: "We [George and his wife] like that, going travelling and such things, but it's true that even that's affected. We cannot just travel, because it's expensive."

George's situation appears to resemble what Thompson (1993) found on the difficulties of resource-poor groups, for reasons of bad health or lack of resources, in creating new areas of interest after retirement (cf. Atchley 1976: 68; Muratore & Earl 2015: 2124). In our empirical case, this means that both learning to prioritise experiences for one's own pleasure – becoming a self-oriented subject – and continuing to develop existential meaning depend on the economic capital one possesses. In other words, individuals' different meaning-making in the retirement process is related to aspects of social inequality (cf. Biggs 2014).

Discussion and conclusions

This article examines experiences of the retirement process in a selected group of employees with the calling as their work orientation. In terms of an existential imperative, retirement can be regarded as a process whereby the existential meaning of work is exposed, but also transformed. The main point has been to analyse how the calling makes retirement a critical situation. Is it really possible to leave a job that has been one's mission for life? In the retirement process, then, it may become prominent that the calling as a work orientation is anachronistic. As claimed by Kohli (1986), in modern Western societies, both the organisation of work and welfare state rights (and obligations) are located to specific phases in the life course of the individual. This causes a normative regulation of *when* we should find meaning in *what* kinds of activities. We have seen that one prescribed way of adapting to this situation is learning to become a self-oriented subject. This process can be interpreted as an *individualisation process* enacted by the institution of retirement. Following this, individual welfare is based on the idea of the right to income security in old age without being dependent on others' good will (Luborsky & LeBlanc 2003).

However, this also signals the norm concerning when a person, for reasons of age, is no longer fit to continue working.

Whatever their approach to retirement, the retirees may experience social demands to embrace the future as a time when existential meaning will be found in self-development rather than working for the common good. We have interpreted similar sanctions as normative support for the meaning of retirement as an individualisation process. The interviewees, however, have various experiences of the process of becoming a self-oriented subject. While embraced by some – the experience of relief at letting go of the almost self-effacing load of the calling – others make almost hostile rejections, as existential meaning cannot simply be about taking care of one's business. In the latter case, there is a risk of ending up in an existential vacuum, because the meaningful activities of work as a calling could not be replaced (cf. Frankl 1969/1988). In this way, the article points out how the retirement process as an existential imperative makes visible the complex relationships between the welfare state, social norms and existential meaning in work and other life spheres.

With the calling as one's work orientation, retirement may be experienced as an institution in which the welfare state "de-calls" the mission. We have distinguished three strategies for handling the critical situation, when the worker is obliged to leave his or her mission: 1) conserving work as a calling with access to temporary work opportunities; 2) learning and, in some cases, embracing the process of "becoming a self-oriented subject"; and 3) "redefining" the calling by transferring the commitment to work to other activities.

However, both "conserving" and "redefining" the calling seem to entail certain risks. As the calling as a work orientation means that work is an end in itself, beyond material benefits (cf. Bellah et al. 1985), employers can exploit this in terms of offering job opportunities that more or less take the shape of volunteer work, that is, with low pay or unpaid. Additionally, this exploitation of "cheap labour" is reinforced by the economic differentiation among retirees with the calling as their work orientation. If the better-off retirees gladly perform job assignments without actually caring about the amount of financial compensation, it is more difficult for those with fewer economic resources to raise their voices for reasonable payment. In this way, both the calling as a work orientation and the economic

differentiation among retirees are a potential hindrance to articulating compensation for the fruits of one's labour in the post-retirement situation.

Based on the argument above, it seems as if the formation and transformation of existential meaning during the retirement process are a matter of social inequality. Besides this, the normative learning process for seeing self-oriented activities as meaningful is to some extent conditional on economic resources. Travelling, courses, museum visits and so on require not only time but also extra money. Therefore, the differences in economic capital seem to be particularly prominent among retired people as their everyday is no longer structured by common activities like work or regular education (cf. Thompson 1993).

In this article, we have analysed the consequences for a selected type of worker with the calling as their work orientation. However, even in a broader population of retirees, it seems fruitful to explore the process as an existential imperative, since it highlights existential questions such as: What has my contribution in life been so far, and how should life be formed in a new, post-retirement everyday? From existential sociology and existential anthropology perspectives, the search for existential meaning and a "liveable" situation is regarded as a main aspect of being human. Another main point is that these aspects of meaning could be more prominent at times when one's everyday life changes, as in the retirement process. Thus, we have focused on individuals' strategies for handling the "de-calling" and examined existential meaning-making before and after retirement. In this way, we have depicted how strategies are developed for handling shifts in the existential meaning of work, as well as how strategies may change the existential meaning of work and other spheres of life. This is especially the case when a strategy fails. For example, when the individual wants to conserve the calling but receives no job offers, a new meaning may arise in the calmer pace of the new everyday.

Our analysis offers theoretical transferability in the form of descriptions of how existential questions arise in the "forced" retirement process, as in Sweden where retirement is a mandatory institution. It is also important to emphasise that it is difficult to analyse these questions without an understanding of how they emanate from, and develop in relation to, economic capital. As we have seen, the retirement process is a question of both *social* and *cultural* as well as *existential* meaning. In this manner, an

existential approach is fruitful as it contributes to making visible the multifaceted spectra of lived experiences and meaning-making in the retirement process. It, thus, supplements existing retirement research.

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