**Baby Boomers at the Cusp of their Academic Career: *Storming ahead, Hanging on, or Calling it a day***

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to find out what academics do when approaching retirement, and why; as well as to reflect on the process and consequences of reaching a retirement decision – for themselves, the university system, and the wider community. Our study concentrates on baby boomers, as this large cohort starts to retire or become eligible to do so. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm, data collection took place during 2017-2018 using semi-structured interviews with 45 Social Science Business School academics who have worked in Anglo-Saxon and Latin European universities (the USA, the UK, Spain and France). The findings suggest four core clusters of late career trajectories, with the majority wishing, and planning, to continue work. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed and suggestions for further research outlined.

**Keywords**: Academe; retirement; business schools; higher education; baby boomers

**Introduction**

Contemporary career studies point to an increasingly dynamic and volatile environment in both the private and public sectors (De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans 2018). Higher life expectancy, coupled with a lower birth rate in developed economies, creates a worrying deficit of high-skilled talent, fueled by rapid technological and demographic changes (Baruch and Rousseau 2019). In tandem, market forces, changing organisational needs and individualisation of career systems (Hall 2004) affect labour markets, leading to differentiated forms of employment (Lepak and Snell 2002). In some sectors, this reality may necessitate a careful tuning of the demand and supply sides of labour. That could also be the case for academia, particularly in Western developed economies.

Baby-boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are the largest age cohort to have shaped higher education in the developed economies over the past four decades. This important cohort has now begun to reach retirement age, a fact with wide-ranging implications for the persons concerned and society at large (Boveda and Metz 2016; Boyd and Smith 2016). Yet, knowledge about this age cohort as far as Academe as an institution is concerned is very limited; as is our know-how on academics’ plans and aspirations as they are approaching the end of their careers.

Like other age cohorts in the sciences, the baby-boomers’ era bears some unique characteristics (Stephan and Levin 1992). Baby boomers’ careers unfolded during unprecedented institutional expansion in the 1960s with the numerous opportunities that period ushered in (Thelin 2011); as well as during economic contraction and work productivity intensification, in both teaching (Gilliot, Overlaet, and Verdin 2002) and research (Hermanowicz 2016). At the same time, baby boomers have experienced a steady increase in life expectancy. From the time the older cohort of baby boomers started their careers in the mid-1960s to the first wave of retirees in the early 2010s, worldwide life expectancy was significantly extended. A retiree in developed economies may expect to live on average 20 years longer than their prescribed retirement age (World Health Organisation -WHO 2017).

Longer life expectancy 'complicates' retirement decisions to an extent not experienced by former generations (Baruch, Sayce, and Gregoriou 2014). Indeed, ‘sandwiched’ (Schwartz 1979) between their children’s generation who increasingly require financial support (Ingersoll-Dayton, Neal, and Hammer 2001); and their ageing parents, in need of care (Burke 2017), baby boomers have unprecedented demands imposed on them. These circumstances may well dictate a unique set of late career characteristics. And, with extended life expectancy, changes in the actuarial aspects of pensions become necessary, with options for self-funding pensions and investment management that were not available before. That further complicates retirement decisions (Feldman and Beehr 2011). In the USA, over a 30-year period (1977-2007) the number of employed individuals past retirement age has doubled (Lytle, Clancy, Foley, and Cotter 2015).

From an institutional perspective, the anticipated departure of a dominant age cohort poses significant staffing challenges. First, there is growing evidence of employment continuation beyond retirement age (Boveda and Metz 2016) which may affect the availability of vacant posts. Second, the new cohorts of academics are more limited in numbers, due to a lower birth rate in developed economies, but also because the academic career has lost much of its lustre (Beck and Young 2005; Gilliot et al. 2002; Hay et al. 2013; Kallio, Kallio, Tienari, and Hyvonen 2016). Understanding how baby boomers are viewing and weighing their options of departure from active professional engagement will aid universities in developing relevant retention and recruitment strategies and may serve as a blueprint in handling future generations’ retirements.

Little is known on late careers in general (Arnold and Clark 2016) and very little on academics’ late careers (Brown, Ogilvie, Stork, and Woodilla 2014). Given the paucity of knowledge, in this paper we wish to shed light on academic baby boomers pre- and post- retirement, by understanding their exit strategies as well as their professional and personal plans and related concerns. In particular, we would like to understand what motivational factors drive which choices and why, by digging deeper, using a qualitative inductive approach (as recommended by Boveda and Metz 2016).

The study offers a contribution principally to the fields of career studies (Gunz and Peiperl 2007) and Strategic Human Resource Management (Wright, Snell, and Dyer 2005); but also to the study of professions (Liu 2018) and indeed ageing (Schaie and Willis 2010). This study also provides a baseline for future research by generating hitherto unavailable data.

*The study context*

The baby boomers’ generation entered the labour market at a time of economic stability and accelerated growth when the traditional, hierarchical and linear views of careers (Wilensky 1961) were prevalent. For academics that meant moving up the tenure track to a Full Professor (for some, Distinguished Professor), or moving up the administration ladder to Dean and beyond. Employment relationships were based on an assumption of commitment and loyalty of the employee, in exchange for an implicit promise of job security (Baruch and Rousseau 2019; Herriot and Pemberton 1995). For academic baby boomers, job mobility was uncommon and engagement in extra-university activities, minimal.

The 1980s and 1990s ushered in a new era of careers in a rapidly shifting labour market context. The traditional tenure system in academia shielded actors from the upheaval endured by other sectors of the economy. Yet, increasingly new types of staff deployment started to emerge, alongside this traditional path. Outsourcing academic activities became the norm, such as teaching by adjuncts or engaging researchers as freelance providers, and variants to the standard work contract have become normative (part time, flexi-time, fixed term). However, research in establishing the extent and implications of these and related developments is still in its infancy (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, and Roper 2012; Rodrigues, Guest, and Budjanovcanin 2016) and changes in the academic contractual market remain understudied.

Retirement is but another element in this shifting careers system. Retirement no longer heralds an end to work engagement – in stark contrast to the experience of the so-named ‘traditionalists’, the generation preceding the baby boomers (Sullivan 1999). Recent years evinced the flexibilisation of retirement arrangements in developed economies, adding an array of retirement combinations and options. Consequently, decisions about retirement have become more intricate (Feldman and Beehr 2011). No less important, when a significant segment of a given labour market has options about continuous career engagement or disengagement, relevant stakeholders are better able to understand of their motivation and anticipated behaviour.

Retirement age in academia varies from country to country. Whilst not compulsory in the UK and the USA for permanent (UK) or tenured (USA) appointments, there are reduced financial returns in the UK for not activating one’s professional pension entitlements. In the USA there are no such impediments. Nevertheless, there is an implicit bias – *ageism*, against academics of an advanced age, resulting sometimes in pressure (though unlawful) to retire when they reach their late 60s (Earl et al. 2017).

In France the maximal retirement age of academic post-holders in universities is 68 for full professors and 65 for associate professors. In Spain it is 70 for both. In the two countries, academic post holders are civil servants, unlike in the UK and the USA where they are employees of their institutions, whether public or private. The distinction means that university academics cannot, in effect, be dismissed in Spain and France; whereas their employment in the UK and the USA may be terminated for a host of reasons (although not *withou*t reason).

**Theoretical underpinning**

FollowingBeehr (1986), retirement is viewed herein as an individually directed choice behaviour, in line with *approach avoidance motivation* *theory* (Elliot 1999): a positive anticipation drives one towards engagement, whereas negative anticipation instigates avoidance and withdrawal. Choice is also shaped by institutional determinants, such as financial well-being, employment (legal) contracts, and the regulatory environment surrounding retirement. Amongst the different contemporary retirement scripts, one finds *delayed retirement* (continuing with present career at the same workplace past retirement age); *phased retirement* (gradual decrease of work in same or similar workplace); and *bridge employment* (transition from full-time to part-time work in the same career at a different workplace or in a new career).

At the same time retirement may be viewed as a longitudinal developmental process, or indeed a late-career development stage (Wang and Shultz 2010; Wang, Olson, and Shultz 2013), thereby positioning retirement within a *career eco-system* framework (Baruch 2015). Eco-systems comprise multiple actors, interactions and interdependencies. Individuals communicate, act, react, engage, and adapt; at the same time they evaluate and re-evaluate their psychological and legal contracts (Baruch and Rousseau 2019), thereby enacting career-related decisions (e.g., staying put, moving on, changing course). Therefore, careers are the product of mutual 'deal making' – explicit or implicit – among individuals, organisations and the environments in which they nestle.

We follow Lyons, Schweitzer, Urick and Kuron (2019) who propose a model of generational identity in the workplace as an individual-level phenomenon that is shaped by concentric levels of influencing factors, ranging from proximal (i.e. the work environment) to distal (i.e. society). As a generational cohort of a specific professional grouping (such as academics), they come to embrace distinctive attitudinal and behavioural characteristics (Lyons et al. 2019). In this paper we set out to find what these are in relation to retirement-related decisions.

***Research questions***

We pose the following research questions.

*RQ1: What do baby boomers approaching retirement (or having retired) plan to do? How detailed, weighted and realistic are these plans?*

*RQ2 Why do baby boomers opt for those choices – for what reasons; which are the driving factors?*

*RQ3 What are the benefits and possible pitfalls of making a retirement or non-retirement decision at each level of analysis – individual, institutional and societal?*

**Methodology**

We wish to present a wide snapshot of both male and female academics across business and management disciplines with a disciplinary grounding in the social sciences and humanities, working in a range of institutions (old and new), in two major academic clusters: Anglo-Saxon (the USA and the UK) and Latin European (Spain and France) universities. Our sample comes from various types of university – research-oriented and teaching-oriented, public and private, large and small, representing a broad institutional diversity (Huisman, Meek, and Wood 2007). Given the remarkable similarity of the academic profession over time and across geographies (Meyer et al. 2007; Musselin 2009) and its overall convergence propensity (Kwiek 2015) our study should yield insights beyond the particular countries and institutions investigated.

**Sample and data gathering**

We opted for an inductive qualitative inquiry (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016), suitable for a topic that is under-researched, asking basic ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions with the aim to generate reflexivity (Jemielniak and Ciesielska 2018) within a rich contextual framework (Clegg and Stevenson 2013). We wanted to understand relevant aspects pre- and post-retirement such as family commitments, financial set-up, health issues, professional identity, and stress at work – the composite of drivers and inhibitors on an academic’s path to retirement. Following informal discussions with colleagues, a set of questions was piloted on a relevant sample in the four countries (eight individuals altogether, representing both gender and age range) to ensure that we account for institutional and national ‘contrasts and similarities’ (Hartley 2004: 326).

 This sample was thoroughly debriefed, and the resultant final set of questions guided the interviews’ semi-structured protocol (see Appendix for the questionnaire protocol). Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with 45 social science business and management academic baby boomers in two age bands (with an adequate age spread) and representative gender distribution. We included those born between 1946 and 1955 (now retired or about to retire) and those born between 1956 and 1965 (about to retire or actively planning to). The study was conducted over nine months in 2017-2018, primarily face-to-face (in five cases we used Skype and Zoom technologies for interviews). The interviews were held at the interviewees’ workplace offices or, in a few cases, at their home).

We chose a purposive sample through snowballing (Patton 2002; Saunders et al. 2016) in the different categories: two age cohorts and four country-of-origin. All interviewees held tenured positions at the rank of either associate professor or full professor except for six retirees, four of whom held the title ‘emeritus’ (‘emerita’). None of our interviewees could be labelled ‘elite’, none have worked in ivy-league or other top universities, but neither has any worked at bottom-league institutions. They were chosen on the basis of theirs being mid-league institutions, where the vast majority of mainstream academics work. All hold (held) standard academic jobs, incorporating teaching, research and administration (service). All are (were) research-active, and most were reasonably well published (H index ranging from 2-35). Mindful of gender-specific issues in academic work (Acker and Armenti 2004; Riordan and Louw-Potgieter 2011) we have both males and females in our sample. Potential interviewees were approached by the authors who explained the study objectives and requested their participation in the study. At a second stage, those who successfully participated in the study were asked to direct us to relevant contacts with the desired characteristics, through their professional networks (Punch 2013). All who were approached agreed to participate, apart from one. The interviews lasted between 35 and 80 minutes. Notes were taken during the interview with the express permission of the interviewee and further comments (verbal and non-verbal communication) were noted immediately after the interview. Permission was sought to approach interviewees via email communication for further clarifications. Table 1 details the demographics of our sample.

*[Table 1 Near Here]*

We followed information and in-process saturation principles for each sub-group (Charmaz 2014; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Hensel and Glinka 2018; Strauss and Corbin 1990), as recommended for qualitative studies (Corbin and Strauss 2008). We employed iterative sampling leading to category saturation which is “one of the primary means of verification in grounded theory” (Suddaby 2006), conducting interviews to the point where no new knowledge was gained. The overall number of 45 interviewees is well above the norm for strong qualitative academic studies (Saunders and Townsend 2016).

**Analytical Procedure**

Each interview was manually content-analysed (Kirppendorff 2004) in line with the data analytic schemes recommended by Glaser (2002) and Birks and Mills (2015) following on from Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) principles of Grounded Theory. We employed a qualitative approach anchored in an interpretive paradigm to let the phenomenon reveal itself so as to avoid possible initial pre-set framing bias. This approach is widely used in career-related issues (McMahon, Watson, and Bimrose 2012).

We undertook an inductive, open-ended thematic analysis for the identification of themes and patterns in the data (Locke 2001). Our analysis aimed to recognise patterns (*what* and *how* questions) and obtain explanations (*why* questions) employing a two-stage analytical process (Saldaña 2012) of first- and second-coding cycles that yielded first-order concepts and second-order themes leading to aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al. 2013) (see Figure 1).

**Findings**

In line with an inductive thematic saturation approach (Saunders et al. 2018), four clusters were identified, representing distinct trajectories that we label ‘late career tracks’. The ontology of four tracks is a derivative of our analytical approach (thematic analysis) and further coding was not feasible (Fusch and Ness 2015).

***The four tracks***

“*I love this job. I like teaching. I like research. I have nice colleagues, some are my former students. I like to learn new things. It’s the only job in the world I know of that you are paid to learn new things… Will continue till I drop - that is, as long as I am physically and mentally capable”* (male, 74). [late career track # 1]

*“I find it difficult not to have a research project to work on… It’s hard giving up what you’ve been doing all your life”* (male, 71, retired five years ago). [late career track # 2]

*“I still teach five weeks a year and coach/mentor but I’m slowing down… Writing poetry. Doing craft, working with wood. Volunteering in my local community. Lots of family time; going with the whole extended family on vacations”* (female, 62, retired two years ago). [late career track # 3]

*“I will fully retire when I reach the eligible age for retirement. I don’t expect to continue*

*with academic activities after I retire”* (male, 58). [late career track # 4]

The above quotes frame our overall findings. The analysis of the data gathered clearly identifies four distinctive late career tracks among our sample – irrespective of country-of-origin or gender. Each represents a different track, where saturation was reached in each category. Figure 1 manifests visually the logic that has led to the identification of these four distinct tracks. Those were not evenly distributed, with categories 1 and 2 (45% and 27%, respectively) markedly higher than categories 3 and 4 (19% and 9%, respectively).

**Late career track # 1**: Those who plan to continue, or continue (if already past formal retirement age) the thrust of their career - on a par with present/past engagement (e.g., personal commitment, volume of work, standard of publications).

**Late career track # 2**: Those who are reducing (or reduced, if retired) their work commitment, or are shifting their attention to other similar engagements (‘career bridge employment’: Wang and Shultz (2010)).

**Late career track # 3**: Those who plan to exit the profession, either to retire from work or change direction to different (paid and unpaid) domains (‘non-career bridge employment’: Wang and Shultz (2010)).

**Late career track # 4**: Those who plan to completely retire and disengage from their academic career (see Figure 1).

*[Figure 1 Near Here]*

**Late Career Track # 1: carrying on**

Those planning to continue their career thrust or are already doing that, having past formal retirement age, display a strong attachment to their professional identity. They love their work and are reinforced with positive feedback from peers and students. People in this category find it difficult to disengage from their academic identity: it defines them. They are also noted for the absence of competing interests, such as time-consuming hobbies or ‘passions’. A 64-year-old male, planning for his retirement, expects to continue work - “formally or informally” after official retirement. He has “no time for hobbies. I have too many important (work) interests to follow”.

Another driver in this category is emphasis on security, notably financial. That may be resultant to family commitments and/or concern over financial uncertainties. A male in his late 50s says: “I am postponing my retirement for five years and maybe longer, as I don’t want to face having to live on a small pension”. Continuing with remunerated work is thus perceived to mitigate these concerns. However, no one in this category positioned financial rewards as an overriding motivation (and see Ebert (2010) for general findings on the disassociation of monetary motivation).

*Dealing with ageing and health issues*

The following remark was representative: “I have been dyeing my hair for the past 15 years…nobody at the university knows my real age” (female, 71). This defensive position is common to track # 1, because one of the key issues highlighted by respondents in this category is the need for impression management (Giacalone and Rosenfeld 1991) of physical appearance (Goffman 1959). Unsurprisingly, people in this category generally pronounced themselves fit. “I feel the same as when I was 20 years younger” (male, 65) is a representative response for those in this track as well as in track #2.

**Late Career Track # 2: Reduced engagement, with emphasis on work**

A number of drivers characterise those participants who opt for reduced engagement – that is, partial retirement – yet continue engagement with their workplace or a similar work environment. They are likely to be financially comfortable and may be attracted to the promise of being retired: free time; slower pace; time for family and friends. Those are proactive drivers with the overall aim of changing work/life-balance from previous full employment to partial employment. Nevertheless, their intent is to continue and be professionally active and their core professional identity remains intact: “Once an academic, always an academic” said one.

Identified reactive drivers include responses to imposed changes in external circumstances, such as health issues or perceived lowered self-efficacy. “I realised that I am tiring more easily” disclosed a former Dean “and that I no longer like thinking about what’s on my agenda for tomorrow”.

*Dealing with ageing and health issues*

“I’d like to continue… still enjoy the occasional limelight, giving the odd lecture or being keynote in a conference, but I am invited less and less” (male, 83).

**Late Career Track # 3: Reduced engagement, with emphasis on non (academic) work**

This grouping is characterised by a high level of self-control mindfulness (Saari 2018). Similar to late career track # 2, their aim is continuing work with reduced engagement, perhaps due to perceived lower self-efficacy or an autonomous life stand (“I am clear in my mind what I am able to do and what I can’t”), but with an emphasis on non-work. Continued professional engagement is less desirable than pursuing new ventures, perhaps indulging in passions that require considerable time and energy. The intent is to gradually disengage from academic work. A male in his mid-50s aiming to retire at the minimal eligible retirement age states: “I see great advantages to an early retirement; time to enjoy family and hobbies, the freedom to start a new career, better health, more vitality, and stress free.”

*Dealing with ageing and health issues*

Awareness of the consequences of ageing seems to feature prominently in the minds of people in this category, mostly in a negative connotation. The following account is typical: “I am scared of retirement because that means I have to accept that I am old and what springs to my mind is lack of freedom, dependency, loss, changes, not enough active engagement… However I keep repeating to myself that the freedom from work and financial strain will give me choices to do maybe voluntary work, attend activities, and enjoy my life” (male, 65).

**Late Career Track # 4: Calling it a day**

In this track ‘traditional’ retirement is to be found; that is, full disengagement from work and work-related activities. Significantly, none among our older age cohort – those who retired or are close to retirement, was in that fourth category of full retirement. The four who stated their intention at a high level of confidence (80%-100%) – two men aged 53, a third man aged 58, and a woman aged 57 – also indicated a high level of stress (although no major health concerns) and difficulty in coping with a heavy teaching workload. In two of the cases disillusionment with the internal politics of their department/university was also mentioned. Of the four, only the woman is sufficiently near the minimum allowable age to retire in her system (60): single, no dependents, and financially secure. As to drivers, in addition to the ‘push’ factors of a heavy teaching load and dissatisfaction with university affairs, there were also ‘pull’ factors: spending time with spouse and family (in two cases) and a life passion for long-distance running, in a third case, requiring a significant investment of time and effort.

*Dealing with ageing and health issues*

Stress at work was typically listed as high and most interviewees linked it to changes in their work context, particularly teaching and administration loads. Although we did not enquire explicitly about subjects’ perceptions of their psychological contract, clearly these changes amounted to a breach (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, and Bravo 2007) and were directly implicated in the decision to retire. In reply to the question “what would you miss least when you retire”, lack of recognition (including discrimination), lack of respect, a heavy teaching load and ‘red tape’ were mentioned. Lack of stress featured highly as an imagined feature of retirement, that was much desired too.

**Discussion**

Retirement decision is one of the last decisions, if not the very last decision, made in one’s career. Extant practice provides for a degree of flexibility that permits taking early retirement or delaying retirement, as well as opting for phased or partial retirement. This fits with the view of retirement as a longitudinal developmental process that can be considered a late-career development stage (Wang et al. 2013; Wang and Shultz 2010). Appreciating such decision in all its complexity calls for a holistic view, taking into account the multi-level interaction of actors and institutions, as proposed by career ecosystem theory (Baruch 2015; Baruch and Altman 2016).

We identified four ‘tracks’ or career retirement trajectories: # 1: Carrying on; # 2: Reduced engagement, with emphasis on work; # 3: Reduced engagement, with emphasis on non (academic) work, and # 4: Complete retirement (*Calling it a day*). Our data differentiate these tracks with distinctive associated drivers and motivations. In addition to extending our knowledge in an under-researched area, we thereby offer practical pointers for institutional management of retiring academics. Our findings will also be of interest to career scholars in general, given the paucity of knowledge about late careers and since academic careers have long been proposed as a model for other professional careers (Baruch, 2013; Baruch and Hall 2004; Caplow and McGee 1958) as well as the ‘dark-side’ of careers (Baruch and Vardi, 2016) in the context of the global portability of knowledge (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, and Michaels 1998).

Traditional views of career may suggest that delayed retirement also implies the delay of gratification given the pressure and effort associated with work, and the resultant sacrifice of leisure. Therefore choosing to delay retirement without financial requisite would be related to being strongly attached to and enjoying work; and a high commitment to one’s academic career as well as having no overpowering leisure pursuits or interests. In a nutshell, that is what we found. While challenging and indeed stressful, for the majority of the people in our sample, the benefits of continuing work appear to outweigh the merits of retirement. Financial considerations play a role but are not a decisive factor for most.

The ‘What’, ‘Why’ and ‘Which’ of Retirement Decisions

In answer to the first research question we posed, *What do baby boomers plan to do? How realistic are their plans?,* this study identified four distinctive clusters (options) presented above, whereby the majority prefer to continue working, either full time or part time. Probing into their financial situation, family commitments, interests and state of health, among other issues, we conclude that fulfilment of these plans seems highly probable. Whilst prior attention has been accorded to the impact of young families in the early career stage (Hardy et al. 2018), the findings here provide further evidence for the impact of dependents on late-career decisions.

To answer the second question as to '*why*' do baby boomers opt for retirement or non-retirement options and for ‘*which drivers*?’ we specifically asked: "*What will you miss most if you will retire*." The responses, in order of importance, were first, the mental stimulation, such as intellectual challenges particularly related to research; second, the collegiality of and collaboration with other academics in own institution and elsewhere and third, the joy and responsibility (mission) of nurturing young colleagues and educating the future generation of scholars as well as professionals. Academia, we surmise from our respondents, provides plenty of opportunities for maintaining self-esteem, thus acting as a powerful reinforcement to not retire.

Nevertheless, opting for continuous engagement may also be a self-delusional driver – an attempt to escape the inescapable: our mortality. And it may explain ageism too which our respondents from the older age cohort found to be rife, even though compulsory retirement in the USA was abolished in 1974 and age discrimination is illegal in the European Union (EU). Terror Management Theory suggests that the unconscious fear of mortality drives age prejudice (Greenberg, Schimel, and Martens 2002; Nelson 2005) and, since it is unconscious, it is difficult to combat. That same motive also drives our quest for self-esteem, which poses a buffer against death anxiety (Burke, Martens, and Faucher 2010) thereby becoming a motivator for continuous engagement and productivity. Those preferring to fully retire – and they are the minority – are less attached to their work; and/or report a host of reasons (typically: health, spending time with family, hobbies) that drive their decision.

*What are the benefits and possible pitfalls of making a retirement or non-retirement decision?* was the third question we posed.Our findings are derived from the overall views expressed by interviewees, and suggest that continuation of work offers a win-win outcome to the academics, to their employers, and to the wider community (e.g., national education system). The individual continues to be a productive member of society, their knowledge remains current, and their experience is being utilised, and they often move to more developmental roles. At the national level, bearing in mind the difficulties of maintaining a viable pension system, this may also help to reduce the financial risks of pension costs in the longer term (Baruch et al. 2014). At the institutional level, however, building on and benefiting from the talent pool of experienced and motivated senior academics has many benefits. Not only do they continue and deliver research and teaching, many also mentor early-career academics into future roles, undertake senior administrative roles, and impart expert knowledge. Some, though, offered observations of evidencing ‘deadwood’ (Tierney 1997) in the tenured system (USA) or life-long positions as civil servants (France, Spain).

I do therefore I am?

We noted that financial considerations only represent a subsidiary factor in the majority’s wish to continue in academic roles of teaching and research within an academic framework, in line with previous findings in the general population (Boveda and Metz 2016; Ebert 2010; Ulrich and Brott 2005). We wonder whether this overwhelming desire to continue being involved in the production of knowledge within an institutional setting does not mark a significant change in academic identity: recall that maintaining professional identity stands out as the lead driver in continuing engagement (late career track #1). The co-existence of institutional and professional identities is also made manifest in track #2). Conversely, tracks #3 and #4 represent a marked change in engagement identity (cf. Kim and Feldman 2000), where in track #3 the focus shifts to non-academic work and non-work-related activities and track #4 is characterised by withdrawal from productive activities.

The desire of continuous attachment to an academic institution may express a need that is a more recent issue. In the past, scholarship was not dependent on an institutional framework, due to its self-contained, ‘inwardness’ quality (Bernstein 2000). The shift in universities’ practice from imparting broad knowledge to modularised skills acquisition (Beck and Young 2005) may well have changed academic professional identity in a fundamental way that amounts to a shift in *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977). That is; we may have become entrenched in disassembling our work into the routinised bits of a ‘to-do’ list (Jackson 1996); for example, teaching on its various segments or research on its different components; with an emphasis on accountability, monitoring and performativity (Knights and Clarke 2014). One wonders whether the academic community has moved from the Cartesian position of ‘I think therefore I am’ to ‘I do therefore I am’. And ‘to do’, the frame of an institution is called for. This cultural shift associated with the entrenchment of managerialism (Goransson 2011; Winter 2009) as the established mode of university management – but not confined to Anglo-Saxon academia (Boitier and Riviere 2013; Murphy and Sage 2014) – may account for the emphasis we found on continued institutional engagement.

*The spirit of altruism?*

Or is it? Because we also found that among those who wish to opt for a career bridge employment (late career track #2) some express a preference for working outside institutional frameworks in the future. In fact, two of our retirees – both of them women in their early 70s, nearly a decade into their retirement – spend respectively 80% and 50% of their average week in continuous work engagements such as research, publications, teaching and mentoring/coaching, almost entirely without financial compensation and operating outside established institutional frameworks. Perhaps they respond to the call for altruism in management education or possibly we evince a manifestation of the spirit of “inner dedication” which, Bernstein (2000) notes, is at the heart of the academic profession. Indeed, many of our interviewees envisage educational volunteering as a prime engagement in retirement.

A distinct possibility that emerges from our data is that the increasing emphasis on ‘short-termism’ in social science business and management disciplines (Beck and Young 2005) – whether due to fixed-term funding of research projects or the limited lifespan of taught courses – may dictate an academic temporality that does not differ starkly from retirement; and may well inform the decision process leading to actual retirement. In other words, the disruptive temporality of contemporary academic careers (Smith 2015), manifesting in uncertainties about contractual employment or work conditions, or forced or voluntary change in specialisation, may dictate a reality that qualitatively is not very different from what retirement is imagined to be.

The testimonies from our interviewees indicate a high level of intrinsic career satisfaction (Ng and Feldman 2014; Ng Eby, Sorensen, and Feldman 2005), although a dark side was identified too, in particular dealing with office politics and the hurdles of promotion. Our interviewees’ imagined futures in retirement were of a stress--free (or stress-less) day-to-day life stage, as compared to the present; but otherwise, with the exception of those with a clearly demarcated pastime passion, retirement is imagined as qualitatively not very different from their academic day-to-day life – the odd lecture, mentoring/coaching activities, research project engagement, a conviction confirmed by our retired interviewees.

**Practical Implications: *The importance of our findings for the future of higher education***

The implications of our findings are of relevance to leaders and HR managers in the Higher Education sector, as well as for individual scholars. Practices such as pre-retirement preparation that have a long tradition of use in HRM (Thompson 1958) should be revisited. Given a significant number of individuals who can and wish to continue working into the formal retirement age, pre-retirement preparations may need reforming. The people we interviewed lost neither their competence nor their enthusiasm to continue to engage and contribute. Following the well-established examples of judges and politicians, who normatively retire at their own volition, academics may well be adopting *de-facto* a similar trajectory. We may be seeing the beginnings of a trend that will encompass an increasing number of professions, in particular in the knowledge-intensive fields.

Due to seniority and time of service, the tendency not to retire, coupled with job security implied from tenure (Baruch and Hall 2004) means that high earners continue to collect salaries rather than draw pensions. That may have negative financial implications for universities although positive outcomes for pension funds. In terms of career systems management, universities with a limited number of professors’ positions may need to be aware of the implications on mid-career academics whose progress may be impeded. A generational competition for positions may also exacerbate negative age stereotyping of older academics (Zacher and Bal 2012) acting as generational fault line (Lau and Murninghan 1998; Lyons et al. 2019).

**Limitations and future research agenda**

Ours is a qualitative study, necessarily with a limited number of interviewees, albeit significantly above the norm for qualitative studies (Saunders and Townsend 2016). Having attained the required saturation (Suddaby 2006) we found four core late-career trajectories. Given the paucity of research on the topic, we propose to consider the insights we gained and the data presented as a baseline on which future studies could draw. Future qualitative, quantitative and preferably mixed methods studies may validate our findings, as well as probe deeper into the relationship among the different late-career drivers we unveiled. A more comprehensive study will also draw on a wider sample, including those considered 'deadwood' (Tierney 1997) and those considered ‘elites’ (Hermanowicz 2016) who may well have very different positions on late career trajectories in the context of retirement planning and retirement decisions. The same applies to non-Western, non-OECD countries, which may well demonstrate different characteristics altogether. Our research design did not allow for testing personality variables. Future studies should take account of personality characteristics and related variables such as self-efficacy and self-regulation (Rietzschel, Zacher, and Stroebe 2016) in particular as these differentially affect motivation and life goals, such as the Big Five (Costa and McCrae 1992; Goldberg 1990; Zare and Flinchbaugh 2018).

**Final note**

In the concluding commentary to their seminal compendium, Frost and Taylor (1996: 485) state that being an academic, "is a privileged life, but also a challenging one." Our findings suggest that both statements hold true for the baby boomers’ generation, as reflected in the late career choices of our protagonists. Theirs has been a privileged life and, by and large, they wish to prolong it for their own benefit as well as the benefit of the scholarly community and society at large.

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**Appendix: Interview protocol**

*Demographics:*

Current age – just before/after retirement

Employer: …………….

Status:…………….

Family – ; hobby –

Major financial commitments ?

*Career: Descriptive past, present and future projection*

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Career … how successful, (career success – subjective/intrinsic) Did you achieve your career aspirations?

Considers it as …………………………………..

Expect: to

(1) Fully retire

(2) Continue as Emeritus Full

(3) Continue as Emeritus P/T

(4) Other

Until … a couple of years/about 70/as long as I live

How realistic/anticipated % of fulfilment?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

(If already retired – any advice for someone close to retirement?)

Reasons …………………………………………………………………………………….

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Career orientation:

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Stress: …………………………………………………………………………………………………

What was the best (high point) and the worst (low point) in career:

Best …………………………………………………………………………………………………

Worst …………………………………………………………………………………………………

5. Current state of health

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

6. What do/did you expect from your employer (institutional career planning, retirement programme preparations…) from your pension funds?

From employer ……………………………………………………………………………………………

From pension ……………………………………………………………………………………

Pension plan

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Any religion - belief in after-life? Subject to level of religiosity – does it help?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

What are/were the most appealing elements for you during your academic career?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Dark side:

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Bright side:

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Alternative:

What would you miss most: intellectual stimulation, companionship, doing, contributing, achieving (career anchors)?

**Table 1**. Sample demographics. N= 45.

**Geography Age bands Gender Rank**

Latin Europe 1946-1955 M 8 (2 retired) 3f/p, 3a/p, 1em.

 F 2 2a/p

 1956-1965 M 11 4f/p, 7a/p

 F 6 1f/p, 5a/p

Anglo Saxon 1946-1955 M 7 (3 retired) 3f/p, 1a/p, 2em.

 F 5 (2 retired) 2f/p, 1a/p

 1956-1965 M 4 3f/p, 1a/p

 F 2 1f/p, 1a/p

**Legend:** M = male

 F = female

 f/p = full professor

 a/p = associate professor

 em.= emeritus/emerita

**Figure 1.** Data analysis map.

 Late career tracks First-order issues Second-order themes