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Article

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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Social Identity Transition in Academic Retirement

Anca M. Miron,[1] Nyla R. Branscombe,[2] Thomas C. Ball,[2] Susan H. McFadden,[1] and Catherine Haslam[3]

1. Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Oshkosh, USA.
2. Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA.
3. School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

ABSTRACT

One of the most serious challenges inherent in retirement transition is coping with social identity changes. We investigated social identity processes and the role of social engagement during retirement transition by examining the life narratives of recently retired university faculty (14 males and 5 females) from 12 different academic areas. The interviews were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results revealed one overarching theme—the centrality and importance of academic identity—and 3 identity transition processes with their associated goals: identity continuity, identity change, and identity conservation. Four additional themes captured the manifestations of these identity processes as they play out in the lived experiences of identity transition among these recent academic retirees: awareness of negative aspects in academia and perceived lack of fit between self and academia; social disidentification with academic identity; identity discovery and seeking old and new identities; and embracing old and new identities, including hobby-related and place-anchored activities. Maintaining and transforming parts of their former identities, as opposed to an active search for new connections, was a prevalent strategy among the participants. We discuss implications for designing strategies to better prepare recent academic retirees and academics who are considering retirement to enable a smoother identity transition and improved well-being.

Retirement is a fuzzy and complex concept that generally refers to "withdrawal of older workers from paid working life" (Denton & Spencer, 2009, p. 65). Across occupations, retirement can negatively impact an individual's well-being as it brings about change and a sense of uncertainty (Haslam et al. 2018; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2004). However, retirement can also offer multiple opportunities for transitioning to new fulfilling identities and for "continued productivity and learning" (Freedman, 2013, p. 40; Kim & Feldman, 2000). Faced with enormous financial pressures, many colleges and universities have instituted phased retirement or buyout policies to persuade senior academics to retire (Clark & Hammond, 2000; Fernandez Campbell, 2016). This cultural change provides us with a unique opportunity to investigate its influence on the identity experiences of academics who chose to retire under these circumstances.

In this article, we focus on the decisions of academics (i.e., university professors) to retire by accepting a retirement incentive or phasing their retirement across 3 years. As such, in this study, we define retirement as a gradual process of withdrawal from academic life, coupled with a reduction in income (Denton & Spencer, 2009). The gradual and self-determined aspects of academic retirement offer a unique opportunity to examine in depth the social identity processes underlying academics' retirement transition experiences. Moreover, retirement no longer means just the cessation of work (Beehr & Bennett, 2015), but rather is best conceptualized as a complex category that includes, among others, paid and unpaid bridge employment, continued education, and second careers (Wang & Schultz, 2010). This fuzzy aspect of retirement makes the systematic study of work identity during retirement transition even more important, given the multitude of identities that operate within the personal and social life context of a recent academic retiree. Using a qualitative approach, the current study investigated these identity transition processes by considering both the lived experiences of older university professors retiring in 2019 as well as the role of underlying personal, work, and societal factors that are associated with academic retirement transition within that Zeitgeist (Elder, 1998; Wang & Shi, 2014; Wang & Shultz, 2010).

Across occupations, work identity is an important and central identity (Brown, 2015; Silver, Pang, & Williams, 2015) that has many functions and benefits (Baldwin, Belin, & Say, 2018). Particularly for academics, work identity "defines their status, establishes a social network, provides an area in which competence can be demonstrated and

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anca Miron, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, 800 Algoma Blvd., Oshkosh, WI 54904. E-mail: mirona@uwosh.edu
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praised, offers specific goals to be attained, and provides structure and meaning to a person's day" (Onyura et al. 2015, pp. 794–795). When retirement diminishes these benefits, it can threaten an individual's identity and well-being (Onyura et al. 2015). When academics retire, they often lose the academic roles and relationships that define "who they are," give them a sense of purpose, and structure their time and activities (Baldwin et al. 2018). One of the most serious challenges inherent in the retirement transition is coping with these identity changes (Davies & Jenkins, 2013; Onyura et al. 2015; Silver et al. 2015; Williamson et al. 2010). Given that centrality and strength of academics' work identity differentiate them from other professionals (Onuyra et al. 2015), this occupational group constitutes an important test case for studying retirement identity transition processes.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AS RETIREMENT RESOURCES

Identity is defined as an individual's subjective sense of self, or awareness of who one is. Identity can be classified into personal and social aspects, with the former being the part of identity unique to that person (e.g., traits and personal tastes), and the latter referring to social roles and group memberships (e.g., Turner, 1982). Social groups include voluntary group memberships (e.g., as a member of the Association for Psychological Science) and involuntary ones (e.g., racial/ethnic ancestry), some of which are ascribed from birth and others that become self-defining later in life. Regardless of their origin, social groups affect how people define themselves in terms of a sense of shared social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Broadly speaking, several systematic reviews and empirical studies have identified social groups and connections as important resources influencing retirement transition and adjustment (Barbosa, Monteiro, & Murta, 2016; Beehr & Bennett, 2015; Kim & Feldman, 2000; Wang & Hesketh, 2012; Wang & Schultz, 2010; Wang et al. 2011). For instance, Wang, Henkens, and van Solinge (2011) proposed the *resource-based dynamic model of retirement adjustment,* according to which retirement adjustment is a dynamic process, with wellbeing fluctuating over time as a function of the physical, cognitive, motivational, financial, social, and emotional resources retirees have. As such, the ease of retirement adjustment is a direct result of the retiree's access to these resources (Wang, 2007). As these resources change, wellbeing during retirement can fluctuate. Importantly, a decrease in social resources (i.e., social networks and social support) can reduce wellbeing during retirement, whereas an increase in these resources can improve wellbeing (Kim & Feldman, 2000; Wang et al. 2011).

The retirement transition and adjustment framework (RTAF; Hesketh, Griffin, & Loh, 2011; Hesketh et al. 2015) proposes that the level of fit between an individual and his or her environment predicts coping performance and adjustment, satisfaction, and positive aging during retirement. Processes that are used to adjust to a lack of fit include proactive adjustment behaviors such as seeking help and engaging in postretirement work and recreation but also reactive behaviors, such as reducing activity and modifying expectations with regard to level and type of activity. RTAF emphasizes the importance of personal characteristics but also social engagement during retirement transition by proposing that social processes shape a retiree's group memberships by informing their attitudes, goals, and self-perceptions. Similarly, researchers drawing on role theory (Ashforth, 2001) and continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) conceptualize retirement as an adjustment process and, more specifically, as an opportunity to maintain and continue social relationships, including those inherent in work roles and family and community roles, into the retirement (Wang & Schultz, 2010; e.g., Kim & Feldman, 2000; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Taylor et al. 2008).

While many of these conceptual models recognize that social engagement is important for retirement transition and adjustment, only *the social identity model of identity change* (SIMIC; Haslam et al. 2018, 2019) outlines the specific motivational mechanisms and pathways by which social engagement influences coping with life changes due to retirement (for a more extensive discussion of this point, see Haslam et al. 2021). According to this model, because social identity is associated with a sense of connection to others, it facilitates understanding and coping in the face of challenges during life transitions (Haslam et al. 2009; Iyer et al. 2009; Muldoon et al. 2017). Specifically, the SIMIC model (Haslam et al. 2018, 2019, 2021) proposes that, whereas life transitions (such as retirement) can compromise well-being due to the uncertainty they create, group memberships play an important role in countering any negative effects of these transitions. Specifically, belonging to multiple groups prior to undergoing life transition is important because it provides the basis for both maintaining some of those prior group memberships over the course of the transition (*the social identity continuity/maintenance pathway*) as well as forming new group memberships after the transition (*the social identity gain pathway*). Indeed, many prior studies point to the importance of identification with meaningful social groups to which we belong (family, friendship, work, community, and hobby groups) (Gleibs et al. 2011; Haslam et al. 2010; Haslam, Cruwys, & Haslam, 2014; Jetten et al. 2015; Steffens et al. 2016).

There are several ways in which group memberships facilitate the adjustment of individuals undergoing life transitions and support individual well-being and health. Social group memberships provide an important and distinctive basis for self-understanding ("us, golfers") because they furnish people with a sense of themselves as part of a larger collective, inform their values and influence their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Haslam et al. 2014). A sense of shared identity provides a meaningful basis to give, receive, and benefit from various forms of social support (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and/or material; Haslam et al. 2009). As such, social identities improve well-being because they satisfy basic psychological needs, specifically, the need to belong, the need for self-esteem, the need for control, and the need for meaningful existence (Greenaway et al. 2016). Across three studies, Greenaway and colleagues (2016) found that losing an important social identity undermines the satisfaction of these basic needs and, as a result, has negative consequences for well-being, whereas gaining an important social identity fulfils these needs and thereby protects well-being in both the short term and long term.

RETIREMENT AND IDENTITY TRANSITION

Tests of the SIMIC model have shown the unique theoretical value of social engagement in predicting retirement outcomes. However, all prior work testing the SIMIC in retirement transition has used a quantitative approach and, with one exception (Haslam et al. 2018; Study 2), all of the studies employed samples of nonacademic retirees. For instance, Steffens and colleagues (2016) found that retirees who had multiple social identities reported being more satisfied with

retirement, in better health, and more satisfied with life in general. Moreover, the path from having multiple social identities to greater satisfaction with retirement and better health was explained by greater provision, rather than greater receipt, of social support to others (see also Thomas, 2010). These findings suggest that multiple group membership postretirement provides retirees with increased opportunities to give meaningful support to others.

Finally, across three studies, Haslam et al. (2018) measured retiree identification ("I see myself as a retiree"; "I identity with other retirees") but also multiple group memberships (e.g., "I belong to lots of different social groups") and new group memberships (e.g., "Since retirement, I have developed strong ties with one or more new groups"). Collectively, the studies found that, across professions, including retired academics (Study 2), joining new groups (the identity gain pathway) and developing a stronger sense of identification as a retiree predicted greater life satisfaction, but that only retiree identification (and thus disidentification with former work identity) predicted better retirement adjustment.

Few studies have examined academic identity processes during retirement transition using a phenomenological approach. None of these qualitative studies have investigated the role of group identities during this identity transition, which was the goal of the current study. One study by Onyura et al. (2015) used focus groups and thematic analysis to examine how identity threat influences academic physicians' decisions about retirement. The authors uncovered four primary themes: centrality of occupational identity, experiences of identity threat, experiences of aging in an indifferent system, and coping with late-career transitions. Identity threats were manifested in concerns about loss of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and competence after retirement as well as in fear of losing connection to the medical community. These identity challenges influenced academic physicians' late-career decisions on whether to retire. Academic retirees coped with these late-career transitions by attempts to reimagine and revalue various aspects of the self by participating in new activities and making time for old activities (e.g., spending time with family).

Silver et al. (2015) found that work tended to dominate academic physicians' lives, citing it as a primary source of respect, social interaction, and personal identity. The combination of the perceived importance of career for self-worth and lack of time for activities outside their career contributed to physicians' fear of retirement, negative feelings toward retirement, and concerns about losing a fundamental part of their identity. Many participants saw retirement as a transition. Retirement was portrayed as a challenge to be managed with timing and reprioritization of goals. One participant suggested that academic physicians should reduce their participation and responsibilities in stages, purging less enjoyable activities and duties while increasing participation in favorite projects (i.e., develop new identities). Davies and Jenkins (2013) documented similar themes among academics, particularly in the experiences of reluctant retirees who were forced or pressured to retire through mandatory retirement age and who experienced retirement as an identity threat. These individuals attempted to recreate their academic role by taking on new teaching roles or developing associations with other institutions but had limited involvement in social activities outside academia.

Finally, a study by Nuttman-Shwartz (2004) provided a phenomenological description of the pre- and postretirement experience and adjustment of 56 Israeli men in industrial jobs. The study supported the view that retirement was a life transition, characterized by a preretirement period of enhanced anxiety due to uncertainty and crisis stemming from loss of meaningful occupation and the fear of losing meaning, control, self-value, and social connections. These negative emotions decreased after mandatory retirement among most participants. Nevertheless, over one-fourth of the participants looked forward to the change, to freedom and new opportunities, but not to the loss of their work.

CURRENT STUDY GOALS

Given the scarcity of qualitative studies exploring identity processes and the roles of social engagement and of multiple social identities in retirement transition, it is important to systematically examine these identity transition processes using a qualitative approach. Our general research goals were threefold: (a) understanding academics' lived experiences during the retirement transition in a context in which their personal and social identities develop, change, or are maintained; (b) contributing to literature on academic identity transition by using an alternative qualitative methodological approach that focused on how academics assign meaning to their early retirement experiences and made sense of their decision to retire; and (c) extending prior literature by asking detailed questions about identity development and identity change during retirement transition. To examine these questions, in the current study, we used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the life narratives of academics transitioning to retirement at a point when their university was offering a voluntary separation incentive program (e.g., taking a buyout offer or a phased retirement offer).

METHOD

Participants

Nineteen retired university faculty (5 female and 14 male) from 12 different disciplines at a large U.S. Midwestern university were individually recruited by email for a 1-hr interview concerning their decision to retire. These participants were selected from a public list of 62 university faculty retirees for the year 2019. Respondents were selected to ensure a variety of disciplines and schools across the university were represented in the sample. All retirees who the faculty interviewer knew personally were avoided, and thus 9 were removed leaving 53 in the public list. We aimed to recruit a sample of 20 interviewees, from 40 email invitations. Our goal was to collect data from 20 participants in order to be able to sample across the multitude of disciplines and schools across the university (which were represented in the original list of retirees), while at the same time being able to explore in detail the "life world" (Smith, 2004, p. 42) of each of the participants who told their stories of retirement transition. Half of those emailed either failed to respond or declined to participate, resulting in a response acceptance rate of 50%. However, the last retiree who accepted the invitation and agreed to the interview (March 2020) was cancelled as stay-at-home restrictions were imposed due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, thematic saturation was already achieved by the time the 19th person was interviewed. Indeed, consistent with prior work which found that thematic saturation is typically achieved by the 12th interview (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), in our case,

by the 15th interview, the new incoming data produced little new information to address the research question. Smith (2004; also Smith & Osborn, 2003) notes that given the detailed, nuanced analysis associated with IPA, a small sample of 5–10 is acceptable.

In the final sample of 19 participants, the proportion of women (26%) matched the proportion of women in our population of 53 retirees (24% women). Whereas all of our participants identified as Caucasian/White, this participant characteristic matches the percentage of White/Caucasian faculty at the university where the interviews were conducted (81.25% non-minority faculty were employed at the university in 2019). Also, 26% of retirees identified as women (26.7% women faculty were employed at the university in 2019 were women) and 16% identified as LBGTQ.

The majority of our interviewees (68%) retired as a result of accepting the university's public buyout offer that year, while 32% had chosen a phased retirement plan. Participants had worked at the university for an average of 32.42 years (SD = 10.57), though duration at this university varied from 11 to 48 years. Twelve out of 19 participants had retired 5 or 6 months before the interview; M = 6.79, SD = 2.87; range = 1–12 months). Almost half of the participants (47%) had been volunteering at the time of the interview and 37% had undertaken bridge employment. The demographic information is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Retiree Participant Demographics

Demographics	%	Mean (*SD*)
Months retired		6.79 (2.87)
Age		69.11 (4.36)
Years academic		35.53 (9.96)
Years at university		32.42 (10.57)
Gender		
Female	26	
Male	74	
Sexual orientation		
LBGTQ	16	
Heterosexual	84	
Race/ethnicity		
White	100	
Marital status		
Married	79	
Single	21	
Health status		
Excellent	37	
Very good	42	
Good	21	
Bridge employment		
Yes	37	
No	63	
Volunteers		
Yes	47	
No	53	
Satisfied finances		
Yes	100	

Note. Total N = 19.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were individually interviewed from September 2019 until the beginning of March 2020. The recruitment email described the faculty interviewer as a social psychologist at their institution, who was engaged in research concerning the retirement experience. The email stated that the participant was contacted because he/she was a faculty member who had recently retired from the university. The interviewer informed potential participants that, as part of a small qualitative study, she would like to interview them concerning their life now and the processes they went through in deciding to formally retire. Participants were then asked whether they would be willing to participate in a confidential interview, on the topic of retirement, and in exchange for their time, the interviewer offered them $15. The faculty interviewer did not personally know any of the recruited participants.

PROCEDURE

On the consent document, participants read that the goal of the study was to examine faculty decision making concerning retirement. Participants were informed that they would be asked about their life before retirement, the decision to retire, and their experiences since they had retired. After signing the consent document, all participants provided their approval for the interviews to be audio-recorded and used in analysis. Participants were individually interviewed by the second author, with 16 (84%) in her campus office and the remaining 3 (16%) in a private space such as a library. Each interview started with a brief introduction of the study (Supplementary Materials). The interviews were semi-structured (see the list of questions in Supplementary Materials) and pseudonyms were used to mask the identity of the participants. This interview format, which allowed the interviewer to ask participants the same questions in order but also to occasionally seek clarification, was chosen on purpose to minimize potential interviewer influence on the participants' responses. The interviewer attempted to establish a friendly rapport with the interviewee as a way of facilitating mutual comprehension and adoption of the interviewee's perspective (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996). Interviews were held for 35 min to 1 hr and 49 min, with an average interview time of 60 min.

To examine our three research questions, we created an interview protocol that was influenced by theoretical questions derived from application of the SIMIC to retirement (Haslam et al. 2018), and which focused on self and identity during retirement transition (example interview questions were: "Can you tell me a few things about yourself and about who you are?; "Can you give me one or two examples of the favorite aspects of your life before you retired?"; "What was the "high point" of your life, in general? What would you consider the low point of your life, in general? Has your view on those low and high point experiences changed since you retired?"; "Did you think about whether "who you are," or your identity, might change with retirement?"; "Do you still consider yourself an academic? Do you see yourself as a retiree, or perhaps as both?"; "Have you engaged in any new activities that you did not plan?" and "Have you joined any new groups or made new friends since you retired?"; see Supplementary Materials for a complete list of questions).

Once the interviews were completed, all participants completed a demographic questionnaire and then received $15 for their participation, which had been offered in the initial email solicitation. Some participants offered not to take the money because they wanted to talk

about their retirement for other reasons but, ultimately, they accepted this monetary incentive upon hearing that the study was funded by a grant awarded to the faculty interviewer.

DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

The study employed IPA, developed by Smith (1996, 2004), to extract and interpret themes from the interviews. The focus of IPA on understanding the lived experiences of participants fit well with our research goals and allowed us to document and understand identity processes in recent academic retirees as well as the role of multiple identities in their retirement transition. Moreover, IPA and social identity theories such as SIMIC share similar assumptions, such as, for example, that identity is situated within the social realm and is socially constructed (Smith, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

We used a constructivist approach to data analysis and the development of themes (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001), as we focused on how recent academic retirees construct and reconstruct the identity transition processes and experiences during retirement transition through acts of storytelling and sensemaking (Vough et al. 2015). Exploring in detail participants' personal lived experience and how they make sense of those experiences is the primary goal of IPA (Smith, 2004). In addition, IPA is phenomenological, as this method is not only descriptive, given its goal is to describe participants' subjective experience, but also *interpretative*, because it acknowledges the researcher's role in interpreting participants' experiences (Quinn & Clare, 2008; Smith, 2004). Because IPA proposes that there is a direct and indirect link between people's verbal responses and their underlying thoughts and feelings (Smith, 1996), using this method allowed us to identify recent academic retirees' lived retirement transition experiences and the motivational processes underlying these experiences. Indeed, because of these assumptions, this qualitative method is particularly useful in examination of issues related to self and identity (Quinn & Claire, 2008, p. 376). Moreover, Shultz and Henkens (2010) stressed the need for more in-depth qualitative studies to enhance understanding of retirement transitions.

To derive thematic accounts of participants' lived experiences, in the first step, the first and second authors independently transcribed, took detailed notes, and analyzed audio-recordings and transcripts from the interviews—a process that took 2 weeks. While transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, they independently identified and grouped themes into larger-order clusters. Following previous research, themes frequently and clearly expressed by participants were selected for further consideration (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In the second step, a separate word file was created by the first author, in which the themes and interview extracts were listed, and this file was sent to the second author who added her own themes and commented on themes that she herself identified, including additional evidence from her own file. In the third step, these two authors reviewed their notes to ensure that all themes had been identified in the second file, and the original list of themes was restructured to reflect a new organization of themes (identity transition processes and their manifestations—identity transition experiences). A model of identity transition was created at this point with input from both authors. In the third step, the first and second author independently selected additional excerpts that illustrated the general themes and model. In the fourth step, both an expert on aging (the fourth author) and an expert in retirement identity processes (the fifth author) provided in-depth feedback to check the validity of the themes and identity processes.

At all stages of analysis, consideration of the authors' backgrounds and scholarly interests was taken into consideration. With the exception of the fourth author who is an expert in aging and a retired academic, three of the authors are social psychologists and one is a clinical psychologist currently working in academia. The second author who was involved in coding and data interpretation has published extensively and is an expert in social identity theory and processes, as are the first, third, and fifth authors. In addition, the first author is an emotion/motivation researcher, who has published on motivational processes affecting social relationships with older adults. These identities and values might have influenced the analyses and interpretations of the participants' narratives. Nevertheless, the first and second authors attempted to code and interpret the participants' narratives with an open mind and by explicitly focusing on the accounts participants provided concerning their experiences (Quinn & Clare, 2008). Indeed, our analyses revealed processes and themes that SIMIC had not theorized, attesting to the importance of undertaking a bottom-top approach to participants' accounts. To get a different perspective, the model, themes, and background information were provided to the fourth author (a developmental expert on aging who retired from academia a few years ago) who offered additional feedback and comments thereby providing further validity checks on the findings. This was supplemented by the fifth author (an expert in retirement identity processes, who has conducted extensive work on SIMIC) and the third author who also provided feedback without proposing changes to the model.

RESULTS

As illustrated in Figure 1, one overarching theme—the centrality and importance of academic identity—and four additional themes captured the experiences of identity transition among these recent academic retirees (awareness of negative aspects in academia; academic disidentification; identity discovery and seeking of old and new identities; and embracing old and new identities). Finally, three identity transition processes (identity change, identity continuity, and identity conservation) emerged from the data. We discuss these themes and processes in turn.

OVERARCHING THEME: IMPORTANCE AND CENTRALITY OF ACADEMIC IDENTITY

We uncovered several commonalities across participants reflecting the importance and centrality of academia to their lives—an overarching theme present in all participants' narratives: unique/distinctive aspects of academia, love for the profession, a strong work identity, its prestige and respect, its intrinsically rewarding nature, and the large degree of freedom and autonomy enabled in professional endeavors and summertime flexibility (Table 2). Reflecting the strength of academic identity, all participants responded to the opening general question of "tell us about yourself" in terms of their academic history and identity. Thus, academic identity permeates all aspects of retirees' life and constitutes a salient backdrop influencing retirees' identity transition processes, as reflected in Figure 1. Indeed, the identity processes retirees experience (identity change, identity continuity, or identity conservation) are driven and influenced by the importance and centrality of academic identity.

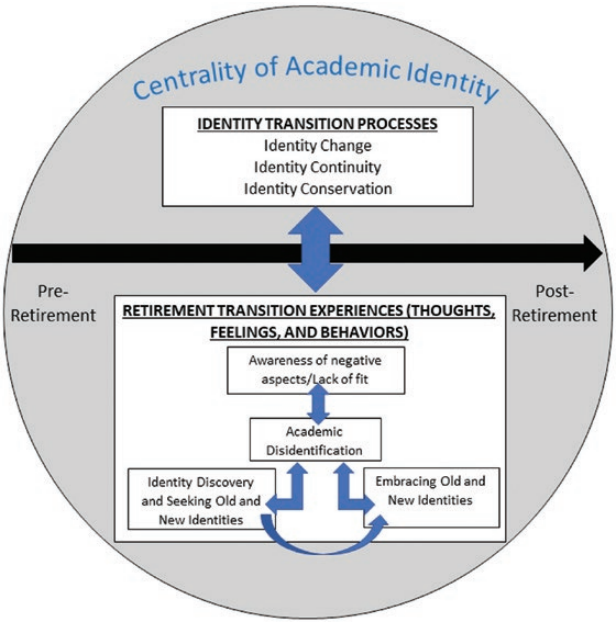

Figure 1. Model of academic identity transition. *Note*. **We identified three transition processes (identity change, identity continuity, and identity conservation) as well as four manifestations of these processes that were played out in the identity transition experiences of the recent academic retirees: awareness of negative aspects in academia, academic disidentification, identity discovery and seeking old and new identities, and embracing old and new identities. The centrality and importance of academic identity was identified as an overarching theme based on frequency and prominence of references of this self-identity across participants' narratives. Double-headed arrows indicate reciprocal relationships, whereas single-headed arrows reflect unidirectional relationships.**

Regardless of its centrality and importance, the type of academic identity varied across participants. Some participants showed strong identification with their academic program but not necessarily with the department, or strong identification with the department but not with the university. There was also variation in how academic identity was described, with participants viewing themselves as teachers, mentors, or researchers. For instance, Karen noted how she did not consider herself an academic but rather a lifelong helper. Out of 19 participants, approximately half (9) identified themselves as teachers, whereas the rest identified as researchers (8), or as administrators (2). Some of the academics who subscribed to the "researcher" identity continued engagement in research and maintained their campus office (institutionalized identity), while others continued defining themselves as "academic in spirit"—science-oriented users of scientific methodology in everyday life (context-free academic identity). On the other hand, many participants reported that a large portion of their job satisfaction had stemmed from teaching and ensuring students were provided with a good education. Finally, participants identified with different social categories—with their academic program, the department, or the university. Regardless of these social categorizations, participants described experiencing one of three identity transition processes in retirement: identity change, identity continuity, and identity conservation.

IDENTITY TRANSITION PROCESSES

We identified three identity transition processes and its associated goals (identity change, identity continuation, and identity conservation). These transition processes are higher-order conceptualizations that reflect motivational processes that are played out during the transition (Figure 1). As such, these processes provide a theoretical framework for understanding participants' lived experiences (e.g., their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) during the retirement transition. For instance, motivation to change one's identity (e.g., identity change) can explain why some academics seek and embrace new relationships early in the retirement transition, while others do not.

Identity Change

Many participants recognized that they were experiencing a transition from an academic identity to a different social identity as part of retirement. In response to the question of whether their identity would change with retirement, Peter answered:

> Absolutely. That's maybe the biggest question or the biggest concern of all. (…) If you spent 40+ years of your life becoming an expert [in his field], (…) and then you retire, I don't want to give that all up and lose it in a year or two. Because that really is my identity.

Helen admitted that she struggled with the identity change because it involved her self-esteem, sense of self, and whether she "will matter." Identification as both academic (an old identity) and retiree (a new identity) is part of the retirement transition process and reflects the operation of an identity change motive. For instance, Helen noted: "I don't consider myself a retiree with a capital R. I consider myself as having a foot in both worlds. I think I have that and created that as a way to transition myself." Many of these participants also reported increased motivation to open themselves up to new experiences and activities and embracing new identities.

Identity Continuity

Several participants mentioned that one continues to be "academic-minded" rather than "an academic" after retiring. This identity is more fluid because it is not tied to the formal role/job as a professor, nor to an institution, but rather entails maintaining an academic mindset and skillset. For instance, Ann noted finding herself asking "what is the science behind it?." Robert also noted that "who I am is so caught up with what I do and what I do continues." Similarly, Dan affirmed that he will "always be an academic in spirit" and notes, "I've been here 40 years. All were opportunities for learning and growth. My primary allegiance is to [the university]. It is where I've invested most of my life," and thus sees himself as a continuous lifelong learner in acknowledging that learning did not stop with him retiring. In his and other participant cases, this overarching academic identity is protective in the transition that involves ending one's academic institutionalized role but also a continuation of the old academic identity. Identity continuity goals also motivate retirees to maintaining existing group memberships by investing more effort and time, now that retirees have more time and resources.

Table 2. Centrality and Importance of Academic Identity Subthemes

Subthemes	Participant Excerpts
Making one unique/ distinctive	"We have the job because we have talent. We fit a niche here. What drives people to depression is recognition that they are no longer special. Suddenly, the job is gone. It is a hard thing. (….) How many people can take your job? You worked your entire life to get this job (…) you got this job because of your abilities and suddenly it doesn't matter; the fact that you were the best at that job in [town], now you are just another person getting groceries at [local grocery store] on a Friday afternoon (…) with no distinguishable characteristics that make you unique." (Jim)
Love for the profession	"The chance to make a living doing the things I love to do. (…) If somebody learns something from reading your work, fine, but if you've learned something by doing the writing, that's even better. So that's what I love about the studies I've been involved in" (Robert) "I loved the material that I was teaching. I loved the subject matter." (Karen)
Strong work identity	"I always defined myself by work. (…) I'm not going to be Dr. [Name] anymore. When people ask me what I do for a living what am I going to say, 'Well I used to do this?' And I really did worry that I will not be myself anymore, and as the time got closer, I thought, 'No, I'm going to be okay.'" (Irene) "My work and my life, they are all one. (…) Bottom line: I'm very happy to have been able to combine my public and private pleasures." (Robert) "To a great extent, my identity is about what I do. Who are you if you aren't working—I don't know the answer to that question yet." (Karen)
Prestige and respect	"I felt I got a lot of respect because of my job." (Irene) "I feel like you lose a certain amount of respect in retirement." (William)
Highly rewarding	"(….) the travelling that the professorship enabled me. A lot of doors opened to me." (Robert). "Mostly I liked teaching, working with students. (…) I had a lot of satisfaction working with graduate students. I think at one point I had 50 students who had published books. I didn't have a lot to do with all of them, but a lot of them. So that was satisfying working with students and seeing them have success. I had a lot of Honors students and that was really rewarding. I've maintained relationships with some of them; I still do. That was probably the most rewarding." (Charles)
Freedom and autonomy	"We were very unsupervised; (…) not having someone counting beans for me … having freedom" (Stephen) "Yeah. I like the autonomy and control over your life. I've been blessed in that regard." (Dan)

Identity Conservation

A few retirees appeared to want to conserve whatever identity they still retained after retirement, but unlike participants experiencing identity continuity or identity change, they lacked the motivation to maintain or transform their identity. These participants did not know what to do at this point in their lives and did not have any retirement plans. Irv called it "the bland" phase and had difficulty letting go of his identity as an academic when faced with the mounting challenge of attempting to purge his house and office of physical traces of his academic identity (books, documents, and articles). Participants experiencing identity conservation had difficulty seeking and embracing alternative identities. For some respondents, the loss of their previous life structure (e.g., class schedule), lack of social relationships (e.g., not having a life partner), and struggle to find meaningful activities and connections in retirement, produced a process of identity conservation, activating goals of hanging on to what they knew despite it no longer providing the same rewards.

ACADEMIC IDENTITY TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 3, we identified four additional themes from participants' description of their academic identity transition. These themes are not stages of identity transition, but rather experiences that emerged as participants transitioned from preretirement to postretirement. We conceptualized these experiences as manifestations (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) of the three processes of identity change, identity continuity, and identity conservation. Nevertheless, the links between identity processes and experiences are reciprocal, as opposed to experiences uniquely stemming from identity transition processes. For instance, feeling out of place (a component of Theme 1) may be a manifestation of a motivation to change one's identity, as identity change goals may direct early retirees' attention to negative aspects of academia and their perceived lack of fit, but also perceived lack of fit may in turn affect identity change motivation, increasing desire for identity change. Seeking (Theme 3) and embracing (Theme 4) old and new identities may be outcomes of recent retirees' pursuit of goals to change or enrich one's identity but may themselves also enhance or decrease motivation for further identity continuation or identity change. The reciprocal links between these processes and transition experiences during academic transition are reflected in Figure 1. Table 3 includes all four identity processes, their transition experiences, and subthemes.

Finally, as shown in Figure 1, some of the relationships among the four retirement experiences are also reciprocal. For instance, awareness of negative aspects and one's lack of fit (Theme 1) may have caused academics to disidentify with academia (Theme 2) but also disidentification may create a vigilant search for negative aspects. Moreover, disidentification may result both in a self-discovery and a search for new and old identities (Theme 3) as well as embracing new

Table 3. Academic Identity Transition Experiences

Transition Experiences	Subthemes
1. Awareness of negative aspects and perceived lack of fit	a. Feeling out of place
	b. Feeling socially disconnected from colleagues
	c. Feeling disconnected from students
	d. Other negative aspects
2. Academic disidentification	a. Concerns about losing identity
	b. Difficulty of academic disidentification
	c. Disidentification as separation
3. Identity discovery and seeking new and old identities	
4. Embracing new and old identities	a. Hobby-related identities
	b. Place-related identities

identities (Theme 4). Searching for new and old identities and particularly embracing new identities may induce further disidentification. Finally, searching for new identities (Theme 3) may lead retirees to embracing these new identities (Theme 4).

AWARENESS OF NEGATIVE ASPECTS AND PERCEIVED LACK OF FIT

This theme involves becoming aware of the negative aspects of academia coupled with experiencing feelings of disconnection from the students, colleagues, the department/university, and the profession in general. This awareness occurred when participants were still employed.

Feeling Out of Place

This feeling took different forms, but one prominent version involved the perceived growing lack of fit between oneself and the job. For instance, when Ann returned to the university, after a period of sabbatical leave, 3 years before retiring, she realized that: "I'm not of this place." Jack had a similar feeling when interacting with university administrators who were new and did not have an institutional memory, so he had to remind them who everyone was and their roles. William reminisced about the great past intellectual life at the university that was being replaced by bureaucracy, established rules and regulations, and the writing of reports. The feeling of being out of place also stemmed in part from realizing that one is "old school" in terms of teaching technologies and practices, and that what one was good at (e.g., in-person teaching) was being devalued in favor of online teaching. Finally, many participants mentioned feeling a lack of fit with the job because of the administration's actions and type of work demanded of them by the administration.

Feeling Socially Disconnected From Colleagues

Charles noted that interacting with his colleagues used to be one of his favorite things about academic life. When he started his academic career, these were people older than him who were hired in the late 1960s and early 1970s and who were his mentors and friends, but who all retired 4 or 5 years prior to his retirement. After they had retired, he realized he did not know the new faculty very well and found it difficult interacting with them. Similar feelings were shared by other participants who noted that they felt the younger faculty wanted them to go.

Feeling Disconnected From the Students

Robert noted that by the time he turned 70 (3 years before the interview), he began to think he was not having as much fun anymore with the students:

> I became more impatient with the students. I became more interested in pursuing my own interests. (…). I became more impatient with office hours, advising, grading papers. (…) I wondered if I'm losing my edge. You stand there in front of the class and wonder is this going as well as it could be? I always prided myself on extemporizing.

Many other participants described similar experiences. For instance, Irene noted, "I knew when I stopped loving [teaching students] or even liking that, when I felt it just like a chore, I thought it was time to check out." Jack realized that students no longer knew the movies he was referring to in class or that the honors students were no longer asking questions in class, which he perceived as a lack of student interest and curiosity. Several participants noticed a decline in the ability of students to understand what they are reading and what they are writing, while others like Charles thought that students were "having a completely different relationship with the written word," which made them enjoy teaching less. A feeling of disconnect prompted decreased job satisfaction and perceptions of the relationship with the profession, students, and colleagues as less rewarding.

Other Negative Aspects

Thoughts about retirement and planning to exit were triggered by the increasing number of department and university policies and procedures; not feeling valued and appreciated by students and other faculty members in the department; lack of good pay; feeling burned out; department, college, or university politics; feeling that one's work is not valued or does not accomplish anything any longer. Also, given that most of the participants chose to retire when they did, as a result of the university's buyout offer, this financial incentive seemed to serve as catalyst for academic identity transition.

ACADEMIC DISIDENTIFICATION

For some participants, feeling disconnected and lack of perceived self-job fit gradually led to disidentification with the institution and role as a professor, but not necessarily to disidentification with the social

category of scientist or scholar. Disidentification came in the form of reductions in investments of time, motivation, and resources in academic identity. For instance, some participants started hating grading or committee work but still maintained an academic identity, "I'm a former academic. (…) I still see myself as an academic (…) I'm academically minded" (Ann). Under these conditions, academic disidentification likely instigated an identity change process and related motivational goals that pushed some retirees to search for different identities, even though the new identities were intrinsically connected to the old identity (e.g., continuing being academically minded). We uncovered three distinct subthemes: concerns about losing identity, difficulty of disidentification, and disidentification as separation.

Concerns About Losing Identity

Postretirement finances were the most frequently mentioned factor in retirement-decision making. All but two participants mentioned financial considerations either as a reason against retiring (e.g., not getting a monthly paycheck, not having medical insurance, or not having enough money saved) or as part of advice they would give to faculty considering retirement, whom they urged to consider financial planning before retiring. However, for most, consideration of finances was an inherent part of planning for retirement as opposed to worries or concerns. In contrast, many participants did report worrying about identity loss after retirement. For instance, when contemplating the prospect of her imminent retirement, Irene recounted that "I felt like I won't be myself anymore." Jim was concerned about losing his unique identity as a professor: "What gets people depressed and drives them to distraction is the recognition that they are no longer special. (…) It's a tough thing for people to handle …I hope I will handle it." Worries about identity loss were often tied to anxiety and uncertainty about how to deal with unstructured time after following a structured academic schedule for many decades. John worried about "the idea of not knowing what day it is. I always like the 5-day work week (…) you get up on Saturday morning and know you are free," whereas Stephen was concerned that while he knew the routine would change, he did not really know what it would entail. Similarly, many participants worried about losing their energy and interest in things. For instance, Ann worried about "flailing" in retirement, while Irv was concerned about losing "some of the vibrancy, energy." In the case of most participants, worries about identity loss activated identity continuation and identity change goals, but for a few participants, these concerns led to increased motivation to conserve whatever was left of the old identity.

Difficulty of Academic Disidentification

The process of disidentification took place over a period of time, starting before retirement and continuing several months into retirement. Sometimes a key event prompted a rethinking of life priorities and disidentification. For instance, Mary realized while she was out of the country that she did not want to return to [the university] and "do all the stuff day to day." Most interviewees admitted that the process of "letting go" or disidentification was difficult, stifling the activation and/or operation of identity change goals, and instead stimulating goals associated with identity conservation (e.g., to conserve what one still has, identity-wise). Irv, for instance, 2 months into his retirement, was having a hard time letting go of his academic identity. He kept many boxes with old academic documents at home and had a hard time discarding some documents that were " so good (…) cool stuff we did (…) that was a fun time, we were on the cutting edge."

Some participants started the disidentification before retirement, while others did so right after. For instance, Irene, right after she retired, when asked for her opinion on something related to work on one of the committees she used to chair, she admitted that she should try to let go [of that role] and let someone else do it, even though she thought nobody could do it better than her. Some participants started the process of disidentification by first disengaging from the department's ongoing activities such as responding to emails, as noted by Charles who stopped following "the minutes of things."

Disidentification as Separation

For some participants, transition from a professor identity to a retiree identity resembles a process of grieving through separation and loss. While for all of our participants the separation was voluntary, many participants were concerned about losing parts of their identity by retiring. Three months before her retirement, Irene mentioned that when she realized retirement was approaching, she cried and thought she had made a mistake: "It was like a grieving process." A friend of hers who was a retired university professor told her to "look at this [retirement] like a little death." By that she meant death of her identity as a professor but also the birth of a personal identity as she advised Irene to introduce herself as Irene, when people ask her what she does for a living (instead of "university professor"). Singular events such as one's own retirement receptions or turning in office keys sometimes mark a clear psychological demarcation in the identity transition process. Ann, at her retirement reception, realized, "Here is my life work. Now I'm done."

IDENTITY DISCOVERY AND SEEKING NEW AND OLD IDENTITIES

Postretirement, some retirees appeared to be working through their feelings of identity loss by focusing on positive aspects of academia, making external attributions for the negative aspects of the academia, looking at the larger picture, and feeling grateful for the life and opportunities they had had. These cognitive strategies were most likely motivated by identity continuation goals. For instance, Jack noted that, "change is good, moving [transition] is hell," whereas Jim described how despite the challenges and difficulties he and his wife had experienced during their first 20 years in their program, he felt those efforts were needed in order for them to help create a strong program and leave a legacy behind. Other participants engaged in face-saving and justifications of their academic life/performance to explain why they did not achieve the goals set by themselves or the department. However, most participants expressed pride in their academic achievements, whether in the service of students, science/arts/humanities, or the department/university.

In contrast, efforts to reposition oneself after retirement appeared to be tied to an identity change process and its related goals that get translated into self-discovery efforts and a search for new personal and social identities. Self-discovery involved conscious efforts to find out who one is as a person, outside one's strong identity as an academic. Frank asked, "How can you be something new? (…) I'm trying to reinvent myself." For him, one way to reinvent himself was through participation in church, which he joined several years before

the interview. Jack advised academics who considered retirement to find out who they truly are ("what makes your heart sing"), their own arena (life domain) and what activities make them comfortable. Similarly, Stephen noted that "it is important to recognize who you are. (…) Figure out what kind of person you are and what you are likely to do with your time."

Self-discovery also involves making a conscious effort to let go of the former identity. For instance, Jim noted the importance of "being honest with yourself about how necessary you are in your work [in your field and your department]" and of not overestimating one's self-worth. Embracing aging is also a part of the identity rediscovery process. After reading a book about aging, John became more relaxed and started to perceive aging in a less negative light and concluded that people should act their own age.

EMBRACING NEW AND OLD IDENTITIES

The search for alternative identities, which was motivated by identity change goals, sometimes resulted in finding new identities and/or rediscovering old identities that participants now embrace. For them, these identities become sources of pride and enhanced self-esteem and are primarily focused on hobbies and places. Indeed, Ann admits, "I'm so looking forward to what's coming!" and Jack perceives the next phase of his life as an adventure by exclaiming, "On, to new adventures!" Supporting our model and the proposed pathways (Figure 1), at the time of the interview, after having engaged in searching for old and new identities and embracing these identities, some participants no longer saw themselves as academics (thus having experienced academic disidentification) but rather as farmers or conservationists or grandparents. In contrast, participants undergoing identity conservation do not appear to seek nor to embrace old or new identities, as illustrated by Irv's experience, "I just had no idea what to do."

Hobby-Related Identities

When new identities were developed, these tended to be associated with hobbies and activities rather than with new social connections per se: farmer/animal lover; fitness-conscious hiker; traveler and book reader; traveler and writer; writer; painter and piano player; golf player; or chef. Gregory, for example, is prototypical of a person with multiple identities based on his hobbies, which revolve around sports. He also has his "car guys," with whom he talked about sports and car repairs and was meeting new people all the time through the foundation he created.

There were retirees who had not yet started engaging in new activities or hobbies because they were still finishing up academic projects. Many participants made a conscious effort to maintain the same rhythm and do similar activities as the ones done before retirement, as reflected in Dan's narrative:

> Interestingly we haven't done much travelling. That was intentional on my part. I'm trying not to get too far out of sync of my rhythm I've maintained for 40 years. I still come to my office four or five times a week, early on Saturday and Sunday mornings. I have found I have plenty to do. Keeping myself intellectually into what I've done over the years, with the thought that if they need someone to teach some of the classes I enjoyed teaching, I might do it.

Other participants reported engaging in expertise-related activities in retirement: continuing advising PhD students, staying up to date with information and research findings, participating in activism and justice-related activities, working for a literary magazine, or volunteering for conservation work. Other activities were unrelated to participants' academic skills and expertise: helping with Meals on Wheels, church activities, political campaigns, or creating a foundation for disadvantaged children. These activities allowed participants to rediscover themselves and develop new identities. In addition, participants often referred to these activities as being rewarding in themselves, which made these activities (and identities) good substitutes for academic identity from which participants had derived self-esteem.

Place-Related Identities

Emerging identities were also associated with new places such as a farm or a new area/condo. In Jack's case, "the farm" is a place he associated with his post-academic identity: "I didn't have an idea of what retirement would be like until I saw this farm. Then the idea became more of a reality." Taking care of one's property is another way of reasserting one's personal identity as well as contributing to the community. In Stephen's case, restoring the prairie and woodland on his property and sharing it with people for research purposes are manifestations of an identity continuity process, as this activity and place were contexts in which he could reenact his academic expertise and skills. In general, the place that some retirees' identity now inhabited was a "happy place," which allowed the person to feel relaxed and at home. Jack, for instance, described his frequent walks through his land ("a very social promenade") with his animals as a high point of his current life and the happiness he derives from that ritual.

In contrast, one's former identity as a professor/academic can be tied to the university office as a place in which that self still resides. Reflecting the operation of both identity change and identity continuation processes, John talked about keeping his two offices (university office and part-time work office) and therefore remains attached to symbols of his prior identity as a university professor because he loves "being" in these two offices. In contrast, Robert recognized the power of spaces as places in which new identities develop and old identities remained anchored or trapped:

> Don't maintain too close contact with the campus. (…) Find a new environment. (…) If retirement is to have new adventures, learning, and acquaintances, staying tied to the campus isn't the best way to go. (…) As the years go by, being so tied to academia can be a limitation. (…) Find some way of detaching somehow from campus.

New and Old Social Identities

Joining new groups did not appear to be a form of identity gain among our participants perhaps because they had just retired and needed some time to define who they were now, postretirement. Maintaining and transforming parts of their former identity (being an academic in spirit), which were motivated by identity continuation goals, as opposed to an active search for new connections, was more common among these recent retirees. There were some exceptions. Some described discovering new cousins through the Family Free DNA

website, getting to know better the people living in their new apartment building, or making new friends at their new workplace. However, of all these examples, only one person was making a conscious effort to seek new connections.

Indeed, maintaining or renewing old connections was a more common route for these recent retirees. For instance, Jim reconnected with classmates and college roommate after 45 years, Ann was reconnecting with her extended family, and multiple retirees talked about maintaining breakfast or coffee groups that met regularly. When people are deeply embedded in a network of friends and acquaintances, they may put forth more effort to maintain that network. Moreover, friends motivated the retiree to engage socially, as noted by Stephen, "Friends that are retired and say, let's go to this event or field tour or something out of town for a few days, and I've said, yeah sure. It's allowed me to do things I wouldn't normally do, particularly if they occur during the week. I've been pulled in by other people." Ian notes that his social circle is wider now that he is retired as he interacts with multiple people through church, volunteering, shared hobbies, former students, or other retired faculty. While most of these connections were developed through shared hobbies and activities, other social connections were from work (either the academic department or part-time work done before and/or after retirement).

The most important and frequently mentioned social group for our participants was their immediate family, as illustrated by Helen's account: "I'm married to the woman I have been with for 22 years so that part of my life is very fulfilling. We're active and we have fun, (…) and we have a granddaughter" and Karen's account: "Our first grandchild was born in August. I consider her to be the highlight of my life." Transition from a work identity that is focused on self-achievement to a social identity as a member of a family is illustrated by the change in pronouns used by the participants from a preretirement "I" to a postretirement "we," and as illustrated by Charles' narrative: "We would like to join some kind of fitness club or Parks & Rec[reation]. Maybe volunteering in other ways; that's something we're thinking about doing."

MODEL OF IDENTITY TRANSITION AND DEFINING EXPERIENCES

In this section, we highlight the defining experience(s) for each of the three identity processes (Table 4). The defining experiences of the retirees undergoing an identity change process are their identity discovery efforts and search for alternative identities as well as their embracing of these alternative identities. Indeed, as we have shown, after having engaged in searching for old and new identities and embracing these identities, some participants no longer saw themselves as academics but rather as farmers or conservationists or grandparents.

An identity continuation process is particularly manifested in some retirees' expanding and embracing academic identity as a more comprehensive identity. Some participants identify themselves as "academic-minded" rather than "an academic" after retiring, suggesting both maintenance but also transformation of the "academic" identity. This identity becomes more fluid because it is not tied to the formal role as a professor but rather entails maintaining an academic mindset and skillset. However, identity continuation also involves maintaining and embracing other existing group memberships by investing effort and time, now that retirees have those available.

Finally, identity conservation is best characterized by retirees disidentifying from their academic identities. However, whereas for most of the other participants, academic disidentification activated goals of expanding existing identities (as a life-long "academic") or search and adoption of alternative identities (as grandparents or travelers), those experiencing identity conservation do not search for other identities nor embrace other identities, due to reduced motivation to transform and maintain the old identity and reduced motivation to seek new identities.

DISCUSSION

Given the centrality and importance of work identity, retirement can entail potential threats to identity in academics (Cahill et al. 2019; Onyura et al. 2015; Silver et al. 2015). The current study contributes to prior work by proposing a model of identity transition stipulating that, to cope with these identity threats, recent retirees experience one of three identity transition processes (identity change, identity continuity, or identity conservation), which have distinct goals to change, transform and maintain, or conserve academic identity. These distinct identity transition processes and their four manifestations in retirees' experiences echo prior findings that suggest that people transition into full retirement through different pathways (Beehr & Bennett, 2015) and experience different retirement transition and adjustment patterns (Wang, 2007). The identity change and identity continuity processes match Haslam et al. (2018, 2019) SIMIC processes of identity gain and identity maintenance. Indeed, we found that some participants maintained their academic identity even after retirement, as they finished up research projects, mentored students, and continued learning and practicing in their area of expertise. Moreover, several participants continued to be "academics in spirit," a transformed academic identity. This echoes other studies that found similarly fluid academic identities in postretirement (e.g., "continuing scholars," Davies & Jenkins, 2013; see also Williamson et al. 2010) and provides further support for the

Table 4. Identity Transition Processes and Their Defining Experiences

Identity Transition Processes	Definition	Defining Experiences
1. Identity change	The retiree transitions from an academic identity to emphasize a different social identity	Search for alternative identities and embracing alternative identities
2. Identity continuity	The retiree maintains and broadens their academic and other existing identities	Embracing and expanding existing identities (e.g., academic-minded)
3. Identity conservation	The retiree lacks the motivation and/or resources to transform academic identity or to change identity	Academic disidentification

use of the identity maintenance pathway by retirees (SIMIC; Haslam et al. 2018).

Extending on SIMIC's processes, we have also documented a new process of identity conservation, which is characterized by a goal to conserve whatever was left from the academic identity, lack of resources for identity transition, and what appears to be poorer adjustment, at least in the early stages of retirement in which participants were interviewed. Specifically, we found that an identity conservation process occurred when retirees found it difficult to let go of the academic identity while at the same time as being unable, or perhaps not open yet, to developing a new identity for themselves. Indeed, the apparent poorer adjustment of those experiencing identity conservation was due to reduced motivation to transform and maintain the old identity as other participants reported doing (being academically minded) *and* reduced motivation to seek new identities. This highlights the importance of recognizing a factor that undermines engagement with the positive adjustment processes at the heart of SIMIC involving identity maintenance and gain.

In the current study, we found that centrality and importance of academic identity was an overarching theme that permeated recent academic retirees' lives and their retirement identity transition. As other work has documented, the centrality of academic identity to academics stems in particular from their love for the profession, for teaching, and mentoring (Williamson et al. 2010; Yakoboski, 2015) and strong work identity (Onuyra et al. 2015). Participants reported experiencing marked challenges transitioning from an academic identity to a different identity. Some preparation for this transition appeared to occur for many participants prior to their formal departure and through construction of justifications for gradually disidentifying with their academic identity so that they can become open to adopting new identities that define and guide their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors postretirement. Perhaps the most notable finding in our study was participants' awareness of a lack of fit and feeling disconnected from students, colleagues, the department/university, and their profession. Many participants decided to retire when they started enjoying teaching less and when they felt their skills and contributions were no longer a good fit with the changing demands of the profession. Perceived lack of fit between one's own abilities, needs, and values on one hand and the work environment on the other hand is an important antecedent of retirement adjustment and satisfaction (Hesketh et al. 2015), suggesting that perceived lack of fit may be a first indicator of motivation to retire early. Shultz, Morton, and Weckerle (1998) and Wang (2007) have shown that forced retirement is one of the clear reasons for lower satisfaction in retirement. These pathways are reflected in our model (Figure 1): feeling out of place gave rise to a vigilant focus on other negative aspects of academia such as changes in the upper administration and initiated the process of disidentification with academic identity and a search for other identities. Moreover, the search for and embracing of other identities fueled further disidentification from the academic identity.

Given the importance and centrality of academic identity, academic disidentification was difficult for some participants. Among these participants, some worked through their emotions and started engaging in self-discovery and embracing of old or new identities (either as part of identity change or identity continuity processes). Others were in a "bland phase," or stagnant phase of their lives, lacking motivation and resources for identity transition. These different types of processes match prior classifications of transitioning academics (Davies & Jenkins, 2013), such as Clean Breakers, who view retirement as a welcome release from work, Opportunists and Continuing Scholars, who use retirement to re-negotiate their relationship with work, the Reluctant who consider retirement as a loss of a valued source of identity, and the Avoiders who lack retirement plans. However, unlike prior research (Davies & Jenkins, 2013; Firmin & Craycraft, 2009), we found these identity processes were not typologies of individuals, but rather operated in a more fluid way affecting all retirees at different times, depending on contextual factors (e.g., availability of social networks).

ROLE OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Most of our participants experienced a period of self-discovery, which is consistent with prior work documenting late-career academic physicians coping with identity threats by searching for new identities in the form of reimagining and revaluing various aspects of the self (Onyura et al. 2015). Similarly, Nuttman-Shwartz (2004) found that recent retirees (non-academics) who were dissatisfied with their retirement experience were those who had not managed to "find a meaningful framework" for themselves (p. 234). Many of these attempts to embrace old and new identities have a social component.

Whereas prior work has found that adjustment to retirement is improved by maintaining valued existing groups and developing new group memberships or connections (Haslam et al. 2018), in our study of early retirees, we found that the identity gain strategy was not frequently used during this early phase of retirement. In contrast, academic retirees put forth effort and resources to maintain existing groups (identity maintenance strategy). In addition, our work revealed the importance of hobby-related identities and place-anchored identities. Whereas place-anchored identities tend to involve individual engagement (taking care of one's property), hobby-related identities involve engagement in activities with others and developing new social identities (being a member of a seniors basketball league). It is possible that an identity maintenance strategy is used right after retirement while recent retirees are still engaged in the process of identity rediscovery. Once they learn more about themselves, they can engage in activities to develop new group identities. Family-related identities were the most frequently mentioned by participants who were married or in a relationship, consistent with work showing that these relationships are important for protecting mental health and preventing psychological distress (e.g., Christakis & Allison, 2006; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Most of our participants reported embracing old and new identities by reviving old connections and/or making new connections via social activities and hobbies that they engaged in and that were already valued. Indeed, past work found that social connectedness predicts postretirement well-being better than having money; financial security was beneficial for retirees' well-being because it enabled them to stay socially connected (Cruwys et al. 2019; Haslam et al. 2018). Moreover, many participants reported participating in volunteer groups and engaging in activities that were related to their academic expertise as well as unrelated activities. This social engagement, which in some cases, may be initiated before retirement, may have made the process of disidentification from academic identity easier due to the fulfilling and rewarding aspects of volunteering. Research has shown

that maintaining social identity by volunteering is associated with more positive affect and moderates the negative effect of having more major role-identity absences on respondents' feelings of purpose in life (Greenfield & Marks, 2004).

For many of our participants, postretirement identity was anchored in a meaningful place, be that the retiree's house, land, or farm. As Dixon and Durrheim (2000) note, "who we are" is often intimately related to "where we are." A person's relationship to the environment not only calls for and facilitates certain forms of behavior but also becomes part of the person and is incorporated into self-concept (Krupat, 1983; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). This is in part because people are motivated to seek out or create environments that are compatible with their sense of who they are (Dixon & Durheim, 2000). Proshansky and colleagues (1983) theorized place as an external memory of our identity. This place/context memory contributes to the content and continuity of identity (Lengen, Timm, & Kistemann, 2019) and recent work has highlighted the benefits of maintaining a sense of continuity and attachment to the place (Fong et al. 2021; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). Because places can become significant arenas of collective identity and belonging (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000), for some of our participants, being anchored to "the university office"—a place strongly associated with institutionalized academic identity—may make identity transition during retirement challenging, particularly if retirees do not find a new place-identity. Nevertheless, "the university office" may function as a transitional place, between old and new identities. Interestingly, academic identity may reside not only in a physical place or environment, but also in academic books, papers, and documents. Letting go of a formal academic identity may involve letting go of academic documents one has accumulated over years and some of our participants did so before retiring.

LIMITATIONS

As we noted, our participants were from a single university and retired under special circumstances (i.e., taking a buyout offer or a phased retirement plan), which might have had a unique influence on their perceptions about retirement. Women were also underrepresented in our study, although the proportion of women in our sample (26%) matched the proportion of women in our population of 53 retirees (24% women). Moreover, women's interview responses did not differ from those of men. Because the process of adjustment to an anticipated life event involves a reconstruction of one's past (Whitbourne, 1985), it is possible that the preretirement experiences participants reported were reconstructed in view of their postretirement experiences. However, given that our findings are consistent with those from studies in which participants were interviewed before and right after retirement (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2004), we are confident that the preretirement experiences participants recalled in our study were not completely reconstructed. Nuttman-Shwartz (2004) found that participants' pre- and postretirement experiences were consistent: participants who perceived their retirement as a period of uncertainty and crisis feared retirement, whereas those who perceived it as opportunity welcomed it. Another limitation of the study is that no participant checks were conducted after the themes and model were developed, aside from getting feedback on the model from an expert on aging and an expert in SIMIC. Nevertheless, the themes and processes we derived from the participants' lived experiences are consistent with prior work using different qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and data interpretation (Davies & Jenkins, 2013; Onyura et al. 2015; Silver et al. 2015; Williamson et al. 2010).

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The three identity transition processes we documented can be viewed through the broader theoretical lens of Atchley (1989) continuity theory. According to this theory, older adults "attempt to preserve and maintain existing structures … and prefer to accomplish this objective by using continuity, applying familiar strategies in familiar arenas of life" (Atchley, 1989, p. 183). Atchley (1989) argues that the lack of structure retirees cope with after retirement from an emotionally involving or fast-paced job is stressful. As a result, retirees attempt to maintain continuity in structure by both participating in valued activities (e.g., bridge employment, see Kim & Feldman, 2000) and by sustaining social contacts. This is particularly applicable for retirees who have a strong academic identity and derive a sense of worth from their professional accomplishments. It is possible that a strong work identity coupled with available resources (e.g., material, psychological, and social) can facilitate engagement in processes of identity continuity or identity change, whereas a strong work identity in the absence of these resources, particularly social resources, can lead to identity conservation. While the important role of resources in retirement has been documented in academic (e.g., Kim & Feldman, 2000) and non-academic samples (e.g., Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Wang, 2007), the effects of the interaction between strength of work identity and availability of resources on retirement transition and adjustment have not yet been explored systematically. Moreover, future work is needed to examine the antecedents of identity conservation and explore solutions for motivating retirees with strong work identities to engage socially and professionally (see proposed strategies by Hesketh et al. 2011, 2015; Wang et al. 2011; Wang & Shi, 2014, p. 220).

One potential strategy is exploring the role of bridge employment—continuing to work after retirement— as well as the roles of leisure and volunteer work in facilitating the maintenance and development of central and important professional and social identities (Beehr, & Bennett, 2015; Kim & Feldman, 2000; Wang & Shultz, 2010). In our study, 37% of the respondents stated that they had taken on bridge employment (working outside the university, typically part-time, and utilizing their relevant professional skills; e.g., working in a law firm or for a magazine), and it is noteworthy that none of the retirees who experienced identity conservation were engaged in bridge employment, leisure, or volunteer activities. However, it should also be noted that postretirement work is not consistently predictive of retirement adjustment (Reitzer & Mutran, 2004; Wang et al. 2008), suggesting that perhaps social engagement (i.e., having multiple social identities, relationships, and social support) embedded in postretirement work, rather than continuation of work role and/or structure or financial motivation per se, may better explain postretirement adjustment. Moreover, a study on U.S. professors taking an early retirement incentive offer (Kim & Feldman, 2000) found that participation in bridge employment outside and inside the university and participation in volunteer work and leisure activities were negatively correlated with each other. However, participation in all three activities was uniquely and positively correlated with retirement satisfaction and life satisfaction, underscoring the distinctive and unique importance of these activities in facilitating wellbeing in retirement.

Other qualitative studies have uncovered similar themes with regard to the roles of social relationships and new activities in retirement adaptation (e.g., Záhorcová et al. 2021). However, our findings should be understood in the context of U.S. academic professionals, including their socioeconomic background and the uniqueness of their role. Indeed, a unique feature of this study is the focus on aging professors—who are members of an elite-status group and who, as a result, possess a strong work identity that is central to their self-definition. This characteristic may augment the intensity of the three identity transition processes we identified because loss of such an important role can lead to a decrease in wellbeing in retirement (Ashforth, 2001; Wang, 2007). Moreover, compared to other countries, individuals in the United States can choose to retire when they can afford. However, the effects of retirement incentives in the form of buyouts and phased retirement incentives could have further influenced perceptions of choice in deciding to retire, and thus may have influenced identity transition processes in our sample. Future work should examine whether the three processes of identity transition and their four manifestations we identified occur in retirees in other industries and jobs, beyond academia. For instance, the findings of the current study should be tested among members of occupational groups for which well-established routines and the social identity benefits conferred by the professional role made work identity central and important for self-definition (e.g., police officers; Bullock, Garland, & Coupar, 2019; managers and executives; Vough et al. 2015). More generally, future work should investigate how these transition processes play out in highly committed employees (Luchak, Pohler, & Gellatly, 2008) as well as in individuals for which retirement involves a change in social status (Wetzel, Huxhold, & Tesch-Römer, 2016). Indeed, our identity transition processes with their corresponding manifestations echo identity processes identified in retirees from other occupations (e.g., Canadian CEOs) such as identity maintaining, identity enhancing, identity protecting, and identity restructuring as well as the retirees' narratives about the ending of their careers (e.g., feeling discarded, becoming disillusioned, identifying windows for transitioning from lifelong career to retirement) (Vough et al. 2015).

Whereas most university support for people nearing retirement focuses solely on financial planning, that is not enough for successful retirement planning (Haslam et al. 2018; Steffens et al. 2016) and more is needed to support academic transitions. Based on the findings of the study, an important strategy is teaching retirees about the importance of multiple identities, including hobby-related and place-anchored identities. Recent work from the SIMIC tradition (Fong et al. 2021) is the first to document the importance of "third-places," such as suburban neighborhood bridge clubs or more generally community spaces for supporting positive social identities (as bridge players, club members, locals), and for operating as potential connectors to the wider community, thereby facilitating well-being. Finally, recognition of identity concerns posed by retirement should guide institutional policies (Baldwin et al. 2018) and also promote a change in perception of retirement from a period of identity stagnation to capitalizing on retirement as an opportunity for self-discovery and self-development via friendship and community networks. Phased retirement plans coupled with community outreach programs allow university faculty time and resources to disengage from an academic identity and to embrace multiple identities as they transition into retirement. One such proposed program is G4H:R (Group 4 Health: Retirement Project; Haslam et al. 2018), which is currently being piloted in the context of retirement transition. This program is an online intervention derived from social identity theory whose goal is to give people concrete resources (knowledge, skills, and strategies) to help them join new groups and to maximize their engagement with these groups.

As our study revealed, the retirement transition can bring major identity threats to academic retirees. However, it is also a critical period for implementing strategies aimed to help retirees navigate this transition, because as we have shown, retirees frequently engage in identity discovery endeavors aimed at capitalizing on their values, preferences, and their place in the postretirement world.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary data are available at *Work, Aging, and Retirement* online.

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