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WORK TRANSITION TO RETIREMENT AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT - ANALYSIS OF EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE ADJUSTMENT

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Abstract

The thesis addresses the challenges of work-to-retirement transition, the influence of work-related identity, and the Human Resource Management role. Underpinned by qualitative research, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted where identity loss, emotional adjustments, and post-retirement engagement were examined. The findings suggest that individuals with a strong work-related identity struggled in retirement and experienced liminality. Workers with fluid identities embrace retirement as an opportunity for self-development. Human Resource Management policies such as gradual retirement, counseling, and identity-related support enhance transition experiences and promote retirees' well-being.

Keywords**:** Human Resource Management, Work-Related Identity, Personal Identity, Organizational Behavior, Retirement.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the transition from working life to retirement has become increasingly important as the "baby boomer" generation approaches retirement (Bolz, Peters, Kintscher, 2023). This shift presents challenges for organizations in replacing experienced workers and has broader societal implications, especially for those whose identities are tied to their professional roles (Ibarra, 2023). Additionally, rising retirement numbers put pressure on social security systems, especially in countries like Portugal, Italy, and Greece. By 2050, 16% of the global population will be over 65, presenting significant challenges for economic and healthcare systems (United Nations, 2019). Additionally, retirement is now seen as a flexible phase, with individuals pursuing work or leisure based on personal needs, reflecting the broader concept of active aging. This shift requires understanding the personal experiences and psychological adjustments tied to retirement. As Ashforth (2001) notes, retirement is a liminal phase marked by loss of professional roles and uncertainty about new identities. Despite existing research, there is a gap in understanding how Human Resource Management (in the following referred to as HRM) strategies can address emotional and identity-related challenges during this transition. This study explores how work-related identities influence the psychological and social challenges of retirement, offering insights to help organizations design flexible programs for their workforce.

This study, based on 15 semi-structured interviews, explores retirees' fears, doubts, and reflections. Chapter 2 reviews research on how work-related identities impact the psychological and social aspects of retirement. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including participant selection, sampling methods, and data analysis. Chapter 4 analyzes and discusses the psychological changes and challenges of retirement, connecting findings from the interviews to existing theories and research. Chapter 5 provides practical implications for HRM, offers strategies for smoother transitions, and highlights limitations and areas for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with key findings and the final result.

2. Current state of literature

The origin of the concept of *identity* and the *self* can be referred to Plato and was later developed by philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Nietzsche. Today, identity is seen as "a critical cornerstone" (Cerulo 1997, 385) in contemporary sociological and social psychological theory (Elliot 2001; Gleason 1983), as there are diverse perspectives on the topic. For sociologists, identity often serves as “a type of interface or conceptual bridge” between the individual and society (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1338; Webb 2006, 10), whereas for social psychologists, it is more connected to the need for social affirmation and individuation (Brewer 1991, 477).

The workplace is a major source of social identity. Theories such as *Social identity theory* (Tajfel and Turner 1979) explains how retirement impacts identity as individuals restructure social groups and roles. Distinctions between social, personal, and role-based identities influence retirees' adaptation, particularly for those deeply connected to their work roles (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2013). Furthermore, distinctions are made between *social identities* (e.g., gender, nationality), *personal identities* (e.g., values, hobbies), and *role identities* (e.g., father, engineer). Some distinguish between identities we assign ourselves and those given by others, seeing the self as a balance between chosen and attributed labels (Snow and Anderson 1987). The idea of *work identity* refers to the efforts to maintain or revise one's identity, which becomes crucial during retirement. The transition to retirement often entails adjusting to dealing with the loss of work-based validation, something that is tough for those who have taken pride in their professional identity and used it as a primary means of elevating and socializing themselves (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014). *Intersectionality* also shapes retirement experiences, influenced by factors like gender, culture, and education. With the increasing importance of identities, the concept of *identity work* has also developed. As defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), involves efforts to maintain or revise one's self-concept, which becomes crucial during the transition to retirement. Furthermore, it has been established that identities and identity work significantly impact individuals and groups. At the personal level, identities shape decisions within organizations (Alvesson and Willmott 2002) and career paths (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). *Narrative theory* helps explain how retirees make sense of transitions by crafting stories that connect their professional past with post-retirement life (McAdams 1993; Ricoeur 1984). Through storytelling, retirees reconcile old roles while embracing new ones. *(Work) role transitions* are central to retirement, requiring psychological and social adjustments (Ashforth 2001; Ebaugh 1988). This transition implies profound psychological and social changes that retirees need to go through to redefine themselves outside of their work identity. It can be a harsher challenge on some individuals than others, depending on how flexible their identity is. Those with a strong *work identity* may struggle more, facing identity conflict (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014), while those with a *flexible identity* often view retirement as an opportunity for new roles outside work and have less of what could be called, an identity crisis potentially associated with this stage. Carstensen's (2006) *future time perspective* suggests that as individuals become aware of their limited time, they prioritize personal and spiritual pursuits.

A strong sense of purpose beyond professional roles is essential for well-being in retirement (Ryff and Singer 2008). New retirees often experience a phase of **liminality,** as they move into the "in-between" state, out of full-time employment but not quite settled in this new post-working identity (Beech 2011). This period often leads to rediscovering family, hobbies, or community service. Gender differences shape retirement experiences: men often struggle to detach from work-based identities, while women, having balanced career and family roles, typically find it easier to engage in non-professional activities (Sargent and Lee 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). These gender differences can influence retirement satisfaction and post-retirement activities, highlighting the importance of understanding identity transitions in retirement (Moen 2001; Adams and Rau 2011).

3. Method

3.1. Research Design and Context

This study adopts a **qualitative research** design based on a narrative inquiry (Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk 2007, 459) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 1) to explore how workers aged between **55 to 70 years old** navigate the transition from work to retirement. It focuses on the evolution of **work-related identity**, defined as self-concepts tied to work roles (Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar 2010). The inductive approach, based on interviews, highlights emotional, psychological, and social adaptations during retirement.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Method

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) was employed to select **15 participants**, both men and women, aged **55-70**, with diverse job profiles.

The sample included both retired (4 participants, retired 1-10 years) and working individuals (11 participants, with retirement expected in 1-10 years). Interviews took place between August 19th and September 13th, 2024. Participamts were categorized by **gender** (male/female); **age** (exact age); **job title** (e.g., CEO, high school teacher, or IT director) and if **retired**.

3.3. Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants were interviewed online using an interview script consisting of **semi-structured questions,** to provide interviewees with more flexibility in their responses (Kvale 1996). Interviews **lasted between 40 and 90 minutes** and were recorded and transcribed with participant consent, resulting in 113 pages of transcriptions[1].

The interview script (Appendix A) aimed to explore participants' professional identities, views on retirement, and post-retirement plans, including their feelings about retirement, potential

[1] Access to the interview's full transcription upon request.

fears, and changes in personal identity as they stepped down from full-time work. The questions encouraged participants to share their experiences navigating the retirement transition.

3.4. Anonymity and Confidentiality

To ensure the anonymity of participants, all interviews took place in a highly confidential way. Participants were told that the interviews were anonymous, therefore this paper only presents the demographic details of the participants (gender, age, job title, and retirement status, including length of retirement from last association job) (Smith and Dougherty 2012). Participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time, and gave oral consent before the interview, ensuring ethical standards were upheld (Kvale 1996; Gabriel 1995).

3.5. Data Analysis: Gioia Method and Thematic Coding

The **Gioia Method** (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) was used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews. This method (Figure 1), allowed for systematically linking participants' quotes to theoretical from existing literature, ensuring a structured and coherent analysis.

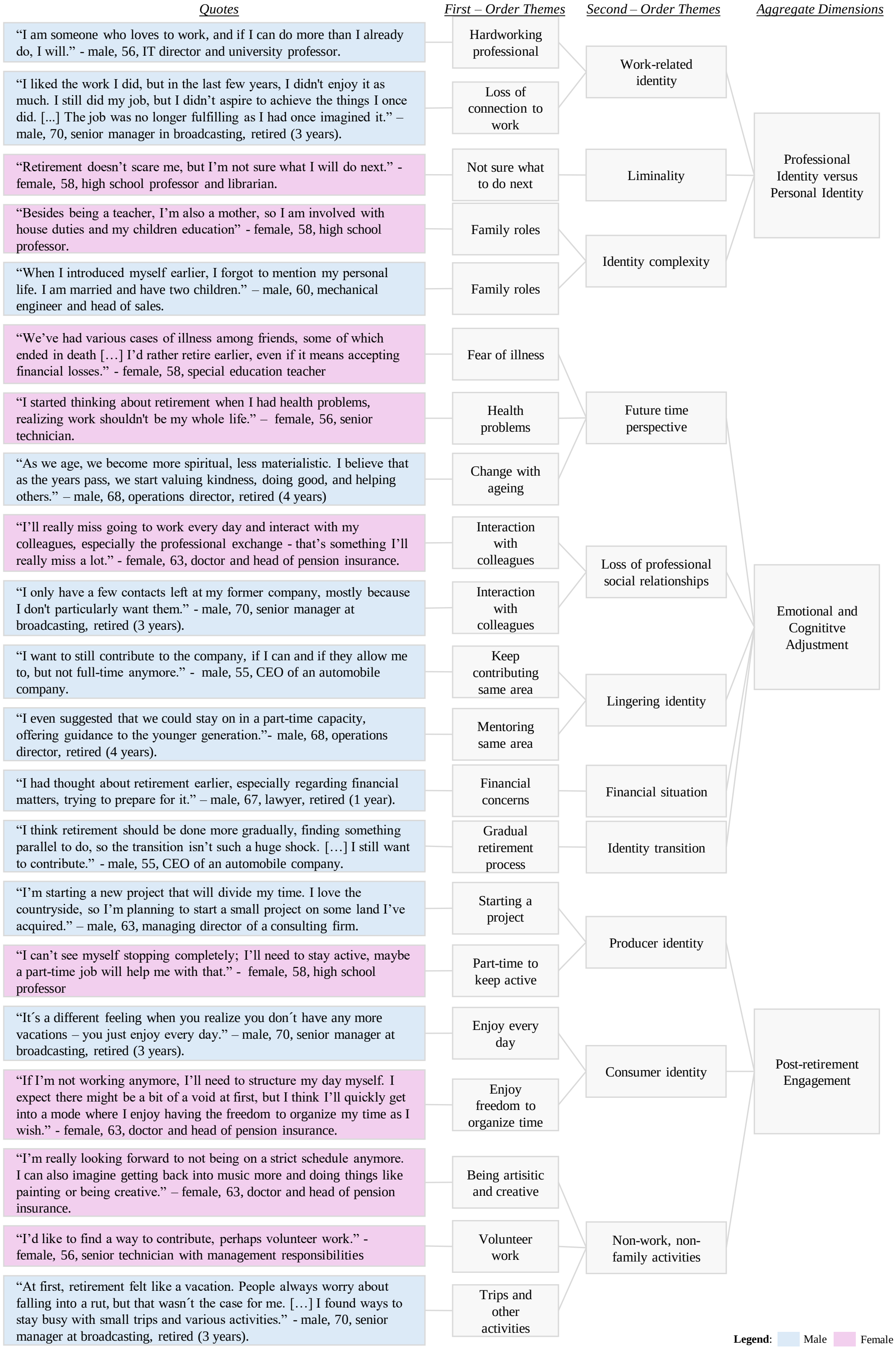

Figure 1. Data Structure. This table integrates the verified data from the interviews and the theoretical framework, reflecting the transition into retirement accurately.

In designing the Gioia table, participants' quotes were initially categorized as “first-order themes” across three columns. A “quotes” column was later added to distinguish these themes from the quotes themselves, enhancing the analysis and aligning it with qualitative research standards. Instead of using inter-rater reliability, a consensus was reached on first-order themes, ensuring unanimous definitions. Data analysis followed a three-step grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967):

Step 1: First-Order Concepts. Quotes were grouped by age (55-70) and gender (male/female) to identify first-order themes related to work identity, retirement plans, and emotional responses. Examples included concepts like *Professional Fit* and *Hardworking Professional,* which reflected a strong work-related identity. A quote like “I am someone who loves to work, and if I can do more than I already do, I will” exemplifies a *Hardworking Professional.*

Step 2: Second-Order Themes. First-order concepts were grouped into broader theoretical categories to align with existing literature. These second-order themes helped identify similarities and differences, such as distinctions between men and women in their **work-related identity**.

Step 3: Aggregate Dimensions. In this last step,s econd-order themes were further grouped into higher-order dimensions, revealing patterns, behaviors, similarities and contrasts in the participants' experiences (Gioia et al., 2013).

4. Interplay between the Aggregate Dimensions

As I analyzed the data from all participants, it became evident that there are different attitudes toward the transition to retirement and leaving the workforce among men and women. The three aggregate dimensions *Professional Identity versus Personal Identity, Emotional and Cognitive Adjustment,* and *Post-retirement Engagement* have emerged from the interviews.

A model emerged from these dimensions, illustrating the complex interplay between them and how they shape retirees' experiences.

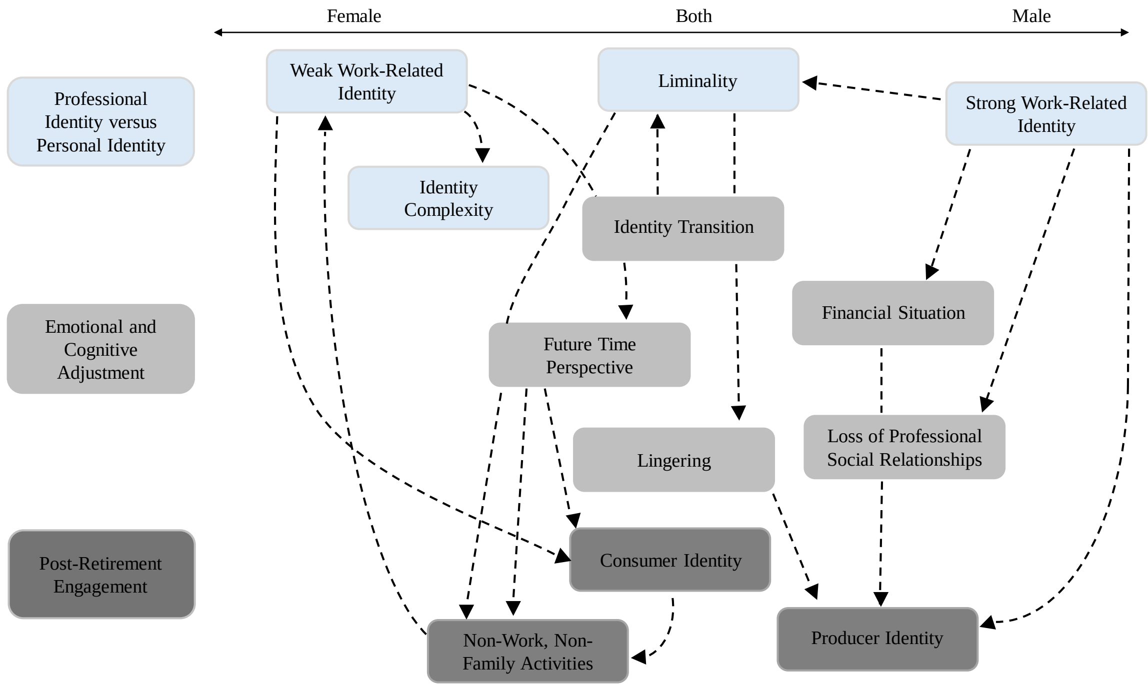

Figure 2. Retirement Transition Dynamics. This figure shows the interplay between Professional and Personal Identity, Emotional and Cognitive Adjustment, and Post-Retirement Engagement, including their related second-order themes.

4.2. Emotional and Cognitive Adjustment

After examining the aggregate dimension of *Professional Identity versus Personal Identity* in detail, this section will now focus on the study´s second key finding: *Emotional and Cognitive Adjustment*. As participants approached the later stages of their careers, they reflected on their health, work-life balance, and priorities beyond work. marking a shift from a work-focused to a life-oriented perspective as professional goals evolved into personal pursuits. Five interconnected second-order themes emerged within this dimension: **Future Time Perspective, Loss of Professional Social Relationships, Lingering Identity, Financial Situation,** and **Identity Transition.**

4.2.1 Results

A key theme that emerges from the interviews within this dimension is **future time perspective**, a concept which examines how individuals perceive and navigate their remaining time, particularly as they approach retirement. This concept was first broadly defined by Lewin (1951, 75) as "the totality of an individual's views of their psychological future and past at a given time." Carstensen (2006) later refined it as a flexible, cognitive-motivational construct shaped by life experience, emphasizing individuals' awareness of life's finitude and its influence on achieving personal goals. In addition, research highlights that *future time perspective* is multidimensional, influencing behavioral outcomes and well-being across various life domains (Lu et al. 2018; Düzel et al. 2018). Consequently, *future time perspective* serves as a critical framework for understanding how individuals adjust their performance, well-being, health, and retirement planning in response to this awareness of limited time. The interview results provide clear examples of how **future time perspective** manifests in participants' reflections and decisions. Many begin prioritizing their personal well-being and consider early retirement as a potential option to avoid further health issues or emotional exhaustion (see Figure 1). For instance, one participant, a 58-year-old female special education teacher, explains, *"We've had various cases of illness among friends, some of which ended in death. I don't want to push myself through another five years of this strain. I'd rather retire earlier, even if it means accepting financial losses."* Similarly, a 56-year-old female senior technician, realizes that her health problems have led to a change of perspective: *"I started thinking about retirement when I had health problems, realizing work shouldn't be my whole life."* Furthermore, a 60-year-old male mechanical engineer and head of sales describes the moment of realization that leads him to reconsider his long-term work plans, due to fear of illness: "*You realize you're reaching your limits [...] at some point, you realize that you've worked for many years in your life, and you can't keep going until you're dead."* This statement emphasizes the cognitive awareness of physical limitations and the awareness of adapting emotionally to the reality of aging, which clearly illustrates *future time perspective theory.* Participants become increasingly aware of their finite time and shift their focus toward well-being and meaningful activities beyond work. A 70-year-old retired male senior manager at broadcasting expresses this change with aging by stating: *"I liked the work I did, but in the last few years, I didn't enjoy it as much. I still delivered results, but the drive I once had - ambition and career goals - is gone."* Similarly, a 68-year-old retired male operations director also expresses this feeling: *“As we age, we become more spiritual, less materialistic. I believe that as the years pass, we start valuing kindness, doing good, and helping others more."* The realization associated with aging is most likely to occur during retirement, as both of the last two participants were retired.

In addition to the *Emotional and Cognitive Adjustment* associated with the realization of limited time, many participants also find themselves burdened by financial concerns as they approach or enter retirement. These individuals express anxiety over whether their savings and retirement plans will be sufficient to maintain their lifestyle. A 63-year-old male account manager confesses: *“I fear my savings won’t be enough to retire comfortably.”* This reflects the **financial situation** second-order theme, where participants are unsure if they can sustain their financial needs, according to their situation (see Figure 1). A 55-year-old male CEO of an automobile company also voices concerns about his financial situation due to complications with contributions to social security systems: *“Coming to work in Brazil and stopping to contribute to social security in Portugal has left me with many doubts regarding my financial situation during retirement.”* This uncertainty underscores the challenges some participants face in ensuring a smooth financial transition into retirement. Consequently, concerns about one’s financial situation may lead to a postponement of the decision to retire.

In addition to financial concerns, another significant second-order theme that emerges was **identity transition**. This theme describes how participants redefine their self-image as they approach retirement. The process of identity transition can be understood as a dynamic, multi-stage journey as it involves not only the exit from a long-term experienced role but also the negotiation of the transition itself and the associated **liminality**. It encompasses the entry into a new role, one that is less tied to professional life and more connected to personal goals and values (Ashforth 2001). This transition often forces individuals to reimagine their sense of purpose and self-worth beyond the boundaries of their careers. A 70-year-old retired male senior manager in broadcasting reflects on his transition to retirement towards the end of his career, demonstrating that retirement is a gradual process: *"[To fully adjust to retirement], it took about a year and a half. It's a different feeling when you realize you don't have any more vacations - you just enjoy every day. […] I haven't missed the office for a single day."* Furthermore, studies on *role identity transitions* have highlighted that leaving valued roles and embracing new role identities can often be challenging (Ashforth 2001; Ebaugh 1988). Reflecting on the challenges of adjusting to retirement, a 55-year-old male CEO of an automobile company suggests, *"I think retirement should be done more gradually, maybe finding something parallel to keep doing, so the transition from work to retirement isn't such a huge shock. […] I still want to contribute."* Additionally, a 68-year-old retired male operations director shares his first experiences after retirement: *"The first months were tough. It's crucial to manage these aspects well both during your career and in retirement. […] Neglecting this balance makes the shift into retirement much harsher."* Moreover, a recurring theme in the transition from an active working lifestyle to retirement is the fact that this transition should be done *gradually* with a process for a *planned* retirement, and not an immediate one-time activity. This sentiment is demonstrated by a statement from a 67-year-old retired male lawyer: *"I practically halved my working hours. For me, it was important that there wasn't a sudden transition. I think everyone expected that I wouldn't just go from full-time to nothing, but that it would be a gradual transition."*

Building on the concept of identity transition, another significant theme that emerges is **lingering identity.** While some participants navigate the process of redefining their self-image as they retire, others find it challenging to detach from their professional roles (see Figure 1). Rather than fully embracing the shift to retirement, these individuals express a continued desire to stay connected to their work identity, reflecting a sense of attachment that persists even after leaving the workforce (Wittman 2018). A 67-year-old retired male lawyer states his intention to *keep contributing to the same area* as he was before retirement: *"I'll continue working at least until the end of the year, and I'll probably go beyond that, though likely with a reduced workload. I'll keep working in some capacity, I can't imagine fully retiring."* Similarly, a 55-year-old male CEO of an automobile company reveals his intention to remain professionally active in some capacity, saying: *"I'll probably still do something, maybe accompany a project that is happening in the company, and they need my help."* This desire to continue contributing professionally, even in a reduced capacity or through advisory and mentoring roles within the same area, reflects the challenge some individuals face in fully letting go of their professional identities. Likewise, a 58-year-old female special education teacher states: *"Maybe I'll even consider something like a senior university course. It would be nice to keep learning and stay engaged. […] I can imagine giving guest lectures and staying updated in my field."* As evidenced by the statement, even after officially retiring, their professional identity remains an integral part of how they perceive themselves and choose to engage with their surroundings. Additionally, this theme can also be found when interviewees express the amount of free time, they portray that they will have in retirement since they do not hold a full-time job anymore. This need to have something compensating for the time that they would be working is demonstrated in the following quote from a 60-year-old male mechanical engineer and head of sales: *"I think the loss of identity [when leaving the workforce] can be an issue. I enjoy what I´m doing, and when that´s gone, I´ll need something to compensate for that."*

In contrast, participants who hold a more flexible sense of identity during retirement still encounter significant challenges in adapting to this life transition. One of the most pronounced difficulties reported by many is the **loss of professional social relationships**, a theme that is often deeply tied to one's career (Price 2000; Sargent et al. 2013). Despite varying levels of attachment to their work identity, many participants express that what they miss most, or expect to miss, are the daily interactions with colleagues and the social networks they had built up during their careers. These professional connections often become an integral part of their sense of belonging. The loss of these relationships often becomes the final hurdle in the *Emotional and Cognitive Adjustment* to retirement. It's not just the absence of work, but the difficulty of establishing new social connections and redefining one's sense of belonging in this next chapter of life. One participant, a 63-year-old female doctor and head of pension insurance, expresses*, "What I'll really miss is going to work every day and interacting with my colleagues, especially the professional exchange - that's something I'll really miss a lot, I think."* In addition, a 67-year-old recently retired male lawyer expresses a comparable view: *"Maybe I'll miss the sense that people turn to me when they have a problem because they know they can rely on me. [...] I think that the professional exchange and problem-solving interactions with others might be something I'd miss."* These thoughts underline the importance of professional relationships, not just as social connections, but as an integral part of a person's sense of purpose and fulfillment. The loss of these daily interactions often leaves a void that can be difficult to fill, even for those who have made a successful transition to retirement in other ways.

Nevertheless, there are also a few exceptions who do not miss the daily interaction with their colleagues. For some, such as a 70-year-old retired male senior manager in broadcasting the connection to former colleagues fades over time: *"I only have a few contacts with my former company, mainly because I don't really want to have them. [In the last position] I had a pretty* *difficult boss (like always), and I don't get along with bosses very well [...]. Despite the fact that people say they value openness, the reality is often the opposite. Much of it is driven by personal interests, and you only learn about it once you understand the personal dynamics and relationships within the organization."* This shows that for some individuals, disengaging from work may be easier, especially if they are willing to let go of the social aspects of their professional lives. In these cases, detachment from colleagues can be a conscious choice, often influenced by negative workplace experiences or strained relationships. Feeling misunderstood or noticing discrepancies between stated values and actual behavior can affect well-being and increase the desire to separate from both the job and its social environment. Therefore, for some retirees, leaving work is not a loss but rather a relief from the tensions that once defined their daily interactions.

4.2.2 Discussion

This section explores key theories on emotional and cognitive adjustments during retirement, analyzing participants' diverse perspectives on transitioning out of the workforce. *Figure 2* highlights how aggregate dimensions interconnect, offering a comprehensive understanding of retirement adjustments.

Understanding these adjustments highlights how people redefine their goals, priorities, and self-perception as they move from a work-centered life to retirement. This process of transformation is linked to the concept of **identity transition**, which serves as an overarching framework for understanding the second-order themes discussed earlier in the context of retirement. These transitions often unfold during liminal periods of one's life, marked by uncertainty and change. To avoid being stuck in a permanent state of **liminality**, such as long-term unemployment (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016), it is crucial to consider retirement as the beginning of a new phase of life tied to identity growth (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep 2006; Caza, Vough, and Puranik

2018). As a result, a successful transition requires a willingness to allow and accept change, embrace new routines, and cultivate new values and relationships.

Furthermore, a common characteristic that emerged, regardless of gender, was that all respondents expressed a desire to remain active in relation to their **future time perspective**. During retirement, some envision themselves more involved in personal projects such as gardening, volunteering, traveling, or learning something new, while others hope to spend more time on hobbies they already enjoyed but have limited time for during their working years. Others shared intentions to stay engaged in activities related to their previous profession. The analysis revealed that those with a **weaker work-related identity** tend to define themselves more by their personal characteristics than by their professional roles, viewing the post-retirement phase as an opportunity for growth and fulfillment. This outlook corresponds to the second-order theme of **non-work, non-family activities** identified in the aggregate dimension of *Post-retirement Engagement* (see Figure 2). It highlights the desire of many participants to develop facets of their identity independent of both work and family. Engaging in such activities plays a pivotal role in helping individuals redefine their sense of self, thereby supporting the process of identity transition during retirement. This process connects to the concept of **identity complexity**, as participants navigate the interplay between letting go of former work roles and embracing new, multifaceted dimensions of their identity. For many, this transition involves adopting a consumer-oriented lifestyle, often developing a **consumer identity** (see Figure 2) centered on personal enjoyment and self-expression. Some interviewees even compared retirement to an extended holiday, highlighting the shift from a work-centric focus to one centered around leisure and personal satisfaction. This stage of life enables individuals to pursue unfulfilled passions, discover new interests, and deepen social relationships, fostering opportunities for personal growth and transformation (Ibarra 2023).

Furthermore, the interviews show that the *fear of illness*, the *change due to aging* or *health problems*, can serve as a wake-up call to raise individuals' awareness of their health and motivate them to pursue unfulfilled life goals. Notably, this observation was consistent across participants, regardless of the strength of their **work-related identity**. To elaborate further, even participants whose primary focus had been their work and professional careers adjusted their personal goals, such as traveling, in response to their **future time perspective**. Research by Carstensen (1995), Crotty (2008), Zhang et al. (2019), and others shows that *future time perspective* influences key outcomes like job performance, proactive behavior, mental health, physical activity, and risk behaviors. Similarly, Liao and Carstensen (2018) propose that as individuals approach later stages of life, they prioritize emotional satisfaction and meaningful relationships, leading to goal-directed behavior that aligns with their values.

In complete contrast, participants with a **stronger work-related identity** face a more challenging adjustment to retirement due to their deeper emotional attachment to their professional roles. They tend to view retirement more negatively, expressing greater doubts and fears about the transition. This adjustment can be especially challenging for those who derive an intense sense of identity and purpose from their work, particularly those who embody a **producer identity** or maintain a producer-oriented lifestyle. *Self-determination theory* (Deci and Ryan, 2000) suggests that the loss of autonomy and competence linked to work can exacerbate these challenges, as individuals may struggle to find new avenues for self-expression and fulfillment in retirement. Furthermore, *identity continuity theories*, such as those explored by Bluck and Alea (2008), suggest that maintaining a connection to one's previous professional or personal identity during change can significantly ease the psychological, cognitive, and emotional challenges of transition.

Moreover, the concept of **lingering identity** plays a significant role here. Even after retirement, many individuals with a strong **work-related identity** continue to define themselves through their previous professional roles, struggling to fully disengage from that part of their identity. This persistence of the lingering work identity reflects their difficulty in shifting away from a work-centered self-concept and adjusting to new life roles. These participants, often characterized by a more **fixed identity**, resist change and struggle to envision life beyond work, since they tend to have a more rigid self-concept that is strongly intertwined with their professional roles, leaving little room for alternative identities. The interviews highlighted how deeply entrenched these identities are, with participants emphasizing their fear of losing status, fulfillment, and societal contribution. It can therefore be assumed that senior executives find it challenging to let go of the work environment, as they have developed an elevated sense of self-worth over many years of success. This prolonged success has afforded them both recognition and authority in their roles (Hentze et al. 2005; Simon 2006; Ulich 2005).

Additionally, participants' concerns extend beyond the loss of daily work routines - they are especially affected by **losing professional social relationships** tied to their work. For some, work was a primary source of social engagement and self-worth, with interactions and accomplishments integral to their identity. Retirees often lose the social network once provided by their colleagues. This disruption can undermine a sense of belonging, as these long-standing relationships are a key part of one's self-concept (Roccas and Brewer 2002). However, it is important to mention here that this "loss" is only seen negatively when interviewees felt comfortable in their working environment and maintained positive relationships with colleagues and superiors.

On the contrary, as became clear with one retired participant, leaving a toxic work environment can inspire a sense of optimism and anticipation for the next chapter of life. Accordingly, he said that he did not miss contact with most of his colleagues. This shift aligns with the *social identity theory*, which explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, including the emotional value attached to these associations.

When leaving a toxic work environment, an individual's identity, shaped by their professional roles and relationships, can evolve. The individual may experience freedom from the stress and negativity that once defined their social connections, leading to a renewed sense of self and a more positive outlook on the future (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

At this point, it should be highlighted that Respondents mainly felt sadness over missing daily colleague interactions but did not fear social isolation, remaining optimistic about external relationships. Instead of viewing this as an actual "loss", participants framed it more as a sense of "missing colleagues", emphasizing the emotional void left by the absence of daily work relationships.

Participants often resisted fully embracing retirement due to lingering attachment to their work identity, concerns about losing professional relationships, and financial uncertainties. These challenges reflect the complex interplay between material needs, such as income for basic necessities, and psychological needs, including security and self-worth. The shift from regular salaries to pensions often felt unsettling, particularly for those whose financial stability and identity were closely tied to their professional roles (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016).

However, some participants expressed a preference for early retirement despite the recognition of potential financial losses. This decision was primarily driven by dissatisfaction with an unpredictable and demanding work environment, characterized by excessive workloads and "burnout". For these individuals, mental health considerations outweighed financial concerns.

Retirement preferences varied significantly among participants. While some with clear post-retirement plans, such as travel, hobbies, or family time, favored an immediate transition, the majority preferred a gradual, phased approach. This allowed them to adjust step by step to lifestyle changes and ensure a smoother transition into retirement. This reflects the experience of one retiree, who noted that his own **identity transition** took approximately a year and a half, as he adjusted to the freedom and flexibility of retirement. This underscores how the process of identity transition and adjustment to retirement is highly personal and often lengthy.

Notably, the interviews revealed some interesting contradictions in participants' experiences. One retiree, a 70-year-old former senior manager, is content with retirement but waits for his wife to finalize her plans before pursuing his own travel goals, showing that fulfillment is tied to sharing experiences with his spouse. Similarly, a 60-year-old mechanical engineer and head of sales plans to align his retirement with his wife's, despite feeling ambivalent about losing his work identity. While focusing on family and personal goals, he anticipates difficulty in letting go of his professional role. These examples highlight the tension between personal fulfillment, shared life goals, and work identity. The first participant's retirement satisfaction is influenced by his partner, while the second struggles to embrace retirement due to his strong attachment to work. Both participants' retirement plans are shaped by their spouses, illustrating how partner involvement plays a significant role in retirement planning.

A retired 67-year-old lawyer provides a notable example of a gradual retirement transition, working 20 hours per week out of personal interest, not financial need. Although he feels ready for full retirement, he continues working for the emotional engagement and stimulation his job offers. This aligns with identity theory, which suggests emotional attachment is linked to personal fulfillment rather than the job itself. While maintaining a sense of personal engagement, he also begins exploring new non-professional interests, indicating an evolving identity outside of work. His continued work helps ease financial concerns and provides structure during a significant life change.

This case shows that retirement is often a gradual, personal journey rather than a one-time event. HRM strategies should support this transition with structured support, helping employees redefine their purpose and identity, and ensuring a smoother shift from work to retirement.

5. Practical Implications

5.1 Recommendations for HRM Strategies

The study’s findings highlight the need for HRM strategies to support employees' psychological and social adjustment to retirement, tailored to **work-related identity** strength and gender differences. Our framework suggests that HRM departments should offer structured, **individualized** support to benefit both organizations and employees, preserving institutional knowledge while easing this major life transition.

Pre-retirement counseling can help employees prepare for financial, health, and lifestyle changes. To support future retirees effectively, employers should create a **pre-retirement plan** that considers the psychological and social challenges mentioned previously. Through advisory one-on-one sessions, HRM can provide guidance and cover these essential topics. **Targeted financial training sessions** can help employees prepare for retirement by addressing concerns about **income stability** and guiding early retirement decisions. Companies like Intel offer these pre-retirement sessions, providing employees with critical insights. Counseling also addresses identity-related concerns by encouraging retirees to explore meaningful activities outside work. Therefore, it’s also crucial to conduct **assessments of each person’s strengths and interests** to identify meaningful retirement activities. Such planning can ease worries about losing purpose, helping employees visualize their retirement life in more detail and enhancing confidence in the transition. HRM departments can support employees by introducing **identity-focused transition training programs** that address the psychological challenges of retirement, helping employees redefine their self-concept outside of work. For example, sessions on “Post-retirement Identity” and “Life Planning” have been implemented in organizations like HSBC, providing employees with resources to explore and cultivate new life roles, such as volunteering, learning new skills, or engaging in community projects. Employers should also promote health initiatives, emphasizing exercise and balanced nutrition to support mental and physical well-being in retirement. These programs equip employees for a healthy and fulfilling post-work life.

Additionally, HRM should prioritize **thoughtful job design** to reduce stress and foster autonomy. **Phased retirement models** for **gradual transition** which provide a bridge between full-time work and complete retirement, are particularly effective for employees with strong work-related identities. This can include creating roles that are less demanding yet still meaningful, such as **part-time consulting**, **mentoring**, or **project-based work.** For example, BMW's "senior experts" program engages retired employees as part-time allowing them to retain a sense of purpose while sharing their expertise. Younger employees also benefit from these insights. Moreover, by implementing **formal knowledge transfer programs**, HRM can create structured opportunities for retirees to pass on critical expertise, fostering collaboration and continous learning. Experienced employees can mentor younger colleagues, maintaining professional engagement while transitioning gradually into retirement. Additionally, **job sharing** is another effectice strategy, where two employees share a single full-time role, enabling retirees to work part-time alongside a younger colleague. Companies such as Unilever have adopted this model, allowing senior executives nearing retirement to share roles with successors (Unilever 2023). In addition, **flexible work model** further support personalized transitions by offering **reduced** hours or **hybrid** arrangements, helping employees balance new roles, such as family or community involvement. **Remote** work options allow digitally adept retirees to stay professionally engaged with reduced commitments.

Furthermore, **social activities and peer support networks** are crucial for helping retirees avoid isolation and maintain mental well-being. In the interviews conducted, most participants, especially those with strong work-related identities, expressed their concern about the loss of daily interaction with colleagues. HRM can address this by fostering **peer networks and mentorship programs,** such as alumni groups like those at Microsoft, which offer retirees social engagement, continued access to resources, and professional connections. These networks ease the workforce transition by reducing isolation and fostering a continued sense of belonging to their former employers (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study has five key limitations, which highlight important areas for future research that address several key areas for improvement and exploration.

First, the one-shot interview approach captures only a snapshot, missing changes in participants' perspectives over time. To address this limitation, future research could benefit from follow-up interviews or longitudinal studies to track how participants' future perspectives and retirement plans have changed over time or how they reflect on their views retrospectively. Secondly, all participants in the study had at least a bachelor's degree, limiting the findings to a more privileged group with higher education, stable income, and concrete retirement plans. Future research should include participants from diverse backgrounds, such as craftsmen or those in technical fields, who may have different experiences with retirement transitions. By broadening the sample to include various subgroups (e.g., age, gender, profession), future studies could help HRM tailor support to a more diverse workforce. Thirdly, while the participants represent a variety of professional groups from both the public sector (e.g. lawyers, teachers, doctors, and librarians) and the private sector (e.g. consultants, CEOs in the automotive industry, engineers, and IT managers), the study lacks differentiation between professions such as creative, technical, and social roles. Future research could explore how career histories, particularly those who frequently change jobs, influence retirement transitions. Fourthly, the analysis is limited to the social systems and pension structures of Germany and Portugal. Future research could explore differences across countries with varying social systems and pension frameworks, as well as the impact of generational gaps and the digital age, particularly in relation to younger, tech-savvy generations, to better understand how retirement transitions may evolve. Lastly, with only 15 participants (4 retired), the small sample size and subjective perceptions limit statistical significance. Therefore, expanding the sample would enhance the generalizability of the results, counteracting individual biases and improving both internal and external validity by incorporating more diverse perspectives and experiences.

6. Conclusion

The transition from work to retirement is a significant and complex journey impacting both individuals and society. This study shows that identity, shaped by both personal and professional factors, undergoes emotional and cognitive adjustments during retirement. Key aspects such as financial security, a sense of belonging, and workplace roles influence individual's self-esteem and attitudes toward retirement. Gender differences reveal distinct approaches to identity redefinition in retirement, influenced by personal and professional roles. From this perspective, tailored HRM strategies are crucial in supporting employees through the transition by offering structured and flexible programs that address emotional, social, and financial needs. By integrating these approaches, HRM can help employees navigate the liminal state between work and retirement that benefits both employees and the organization. By emphasizing psychological and social support, HRM can also ensure that retirement is not a sudden break, but a gradual, fulfilling transition that aligns with each employee's unique self-concept and life goals, and consequently contributes positively to individual well-being. Despite methodological limitations, such as the small, country-specific sample and the focus on academics, the results of this study provide valuable guidance for organizations aiming to support their workforce effectively. By leveraging these findings, HRM can help preserve institutional knowledge but also foster long-term positive relationships that strengthen employee identity beyond retirement.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A - Interview Guidelines[2]

1. **1.** How would you describe yourself, both as a person and as a professional?
    a. You said that [specific quality] is something that determines who you are as a person. Could you tell me how does that quality of yours play out in your professional life?
2. **2.** How would you describe your career since the beginning?
    a. Could you share with me what led you to choose this career path? Were there any influences or events that happened in your life that guided you in this direction?
    b. You mentioned that you went from job A to job B, what made you go ahead with this change? How was this transitioning experience like? Where there any challenges that you had to overcome with this change?
3. **3.** Looking back, what were the most significant moments in your career and why? How do you think these significant moments contributed to your career and the person you are today?
    a. Why was this project/challenge/achievement so meaningful to you?
    b. You mention event x was a turning point for you, how did it change that way you approach your career goals?
4. **4.** **(4,5 and 6, if the person is not retired)** What does retirement mean to you. Will you consider retiring when eligible to retire?
5. **5.** When have you started thinking about retirement? And what triggered these thoughts?

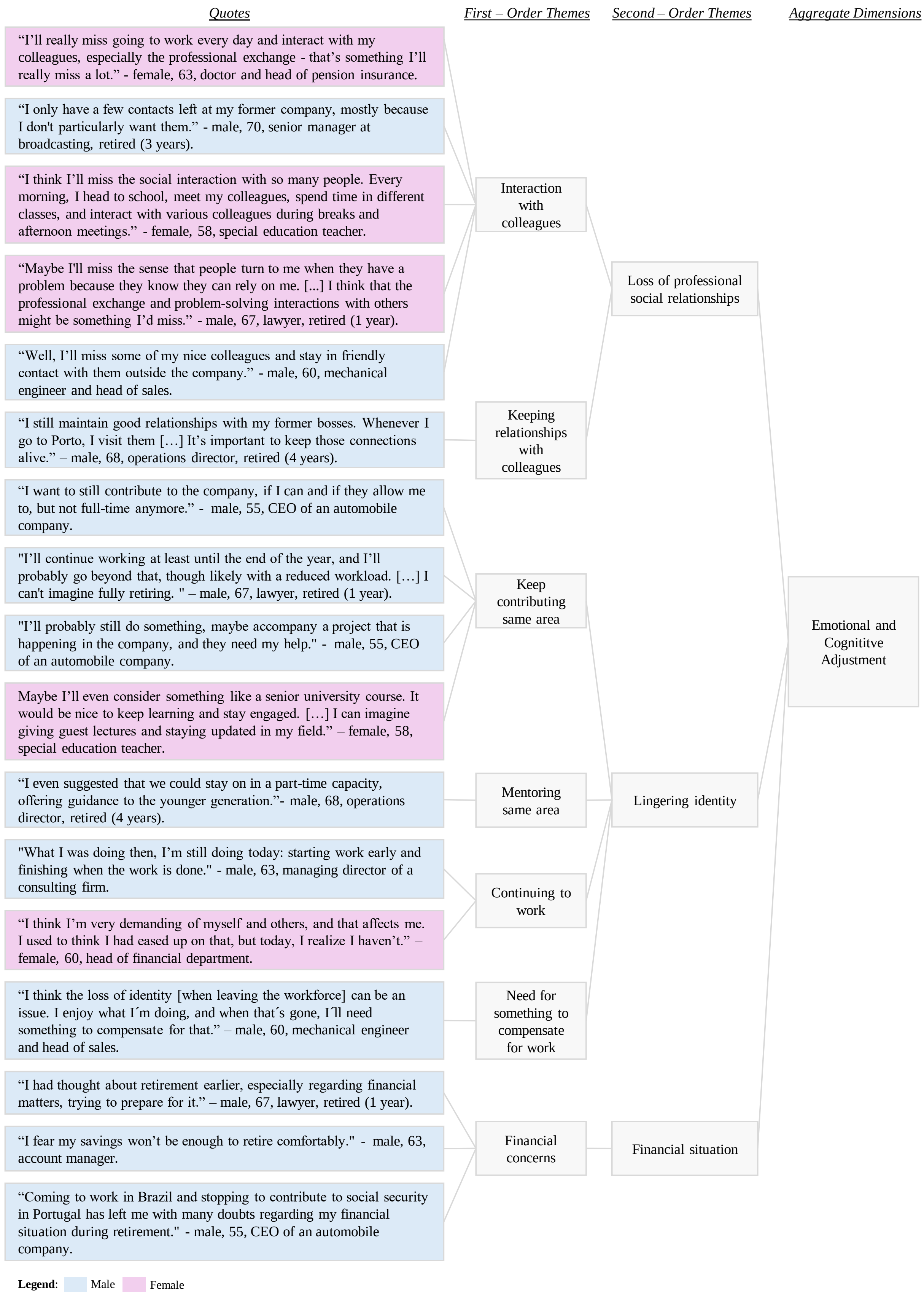
[2] All interview transcriptions are available upon request.

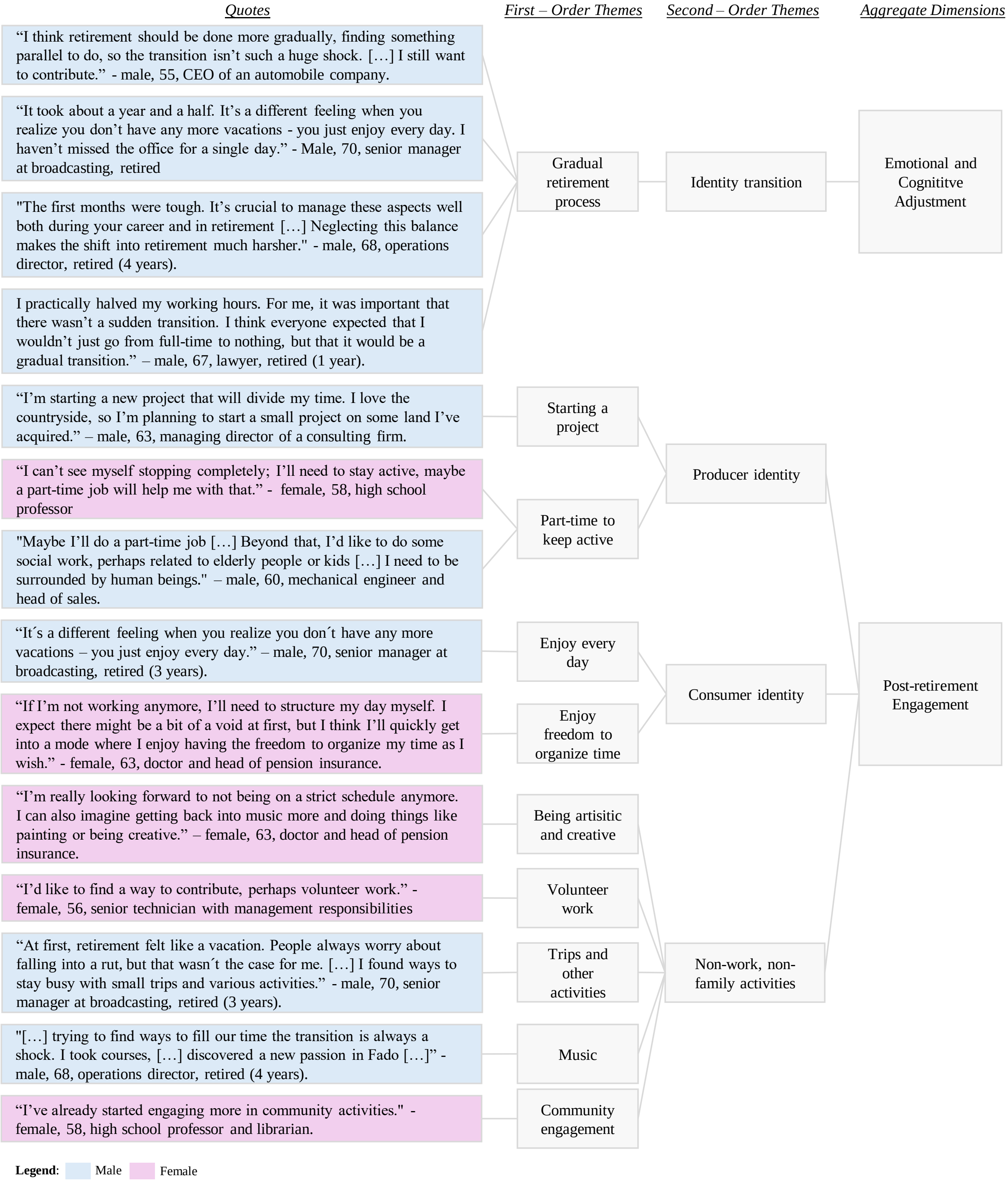
6. Have you thought about how you will transition into retirement? Do you have a specific plan in mind for this transition, or is it something you haven’t thought much about?
7. **(If the person is retired)** Do you consider yourself different from who you were prior to retirement?
8. As you approach retirement, do you have any ideas on how you’d like to spend your free time during retirement? Are there activities, projects, or passions you’re looking forward to dedicating yourself to?
9. How is your routine today? (exercise, social interactions, hobbies, family)
10. How do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years from today. What do you hope the next 5 to 10 years will bring? What things would you like to explore or achieve during that time?

Appendix B - Gioia Method Table

Quotes	*First – Order Themes*	*Second – Order Themes*	*Aggregate Dimensions*
“I am someone who loves to work, and if I can do more than I already do, I will.” - male, 56, IT director and university professor.	Hardworking professional	Work-related identity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
"I would describe myself as a hardworking professional." - male, 56, IT director and university professor	Hardworking professional	Work-related identity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
"I still enjoy my job and feel that I have found the right profession." – male, 60, mechanical engineer and head of sales.	Professional fit	Work-related identity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
"The students suffer when I’m no longer able to give my best. I’ve seen it happen, and it leads to dissatisfaction and unfairness, which I want to avoid." - female, 58, special education teacher.	Identification with work	Work-related identity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
"It’s hard for me to ‘switch off,’ I don’t know what I'll do without work." - male, 55, CEO of an automobile company.	Not sure what to do next	Work-related identity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“I liked the work I did, but in the last few years, I didn't enjoy it as much. I still did my job, but I didn’t aspire to achieve the things I once did. [...] The job was no longer fulfilling as I had once imagined it.” – male, 70, senior manager in broadcasting, retired (3 years).	Loss of connection to work	Work-related identity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“Retirement doesn’t scare me, but I’m not sure what I will do next.” - female, 58, high school professor and librarian.	Not sure what to do next	Liminality	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“I think retirement should be done more gradually, maybe finding something parallel to keep doing so the transition from work to retirement isn’t such a huge shock.” - male, 55, CEO of an automobile company.	Struggle to let go of the professional identity	Liminality	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“Besides being a teacher, I’m also a mother, so I am involved with house duties and my children education” - female, 58, high school professor.	Family roles	Identity complexity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“When I introduced myself earlier, I forgot to mention my personal life. I am married and have two children.” – male, 60, mechanical engineer and head of sales.	Family roles	Identity complexity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“Personally, I am a mother, a daughter, and a wife... I'm very concerned about my family." - female, 56, senior technician	Family roles	Identity complexity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“My work is important, but my family always comes first." – female, 56, senior technician with management responsibilities.	Family roles	Identity complexity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“I’d like to have grandchildren in the near future so that I could take care of them” - female, 56, senior technician with management responsibilities.	Family care	Identity complexity	Professional Identity versus Personal Identity
“We’ve had various cases of illness among friends, some of which ended in death […] I’d rather retire earlier, even if it means accepting financial losses.” - female, 58, special education teacher	Fear of illness	Future time perspective	Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment
“You realize you’re reaching your limits [...] at some point, you realize that you’ve worked for many years in your life, and you can’t keep going until you’re dead.” - male, 60, mechanical engineer and head of sales.	Fear of illness	Future time perspective	Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment
“I started thinking about retirement when I had health problems, realizing work shouldn't be my whole life.” – female, 56, senior technician.	Health problems	Future time perspective	Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment
“As we age, we become more spiritual, less materialistic. I believe that as the years pass, we start valuing kindness, doing good, and helping others.” – male, 68, operations director, retired (4 years)	Change with ageing	Future time perspective	Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment
"I liked the work I did, but in the last few years, I didn't enjoy it as much. I still delivered results, but the drive I once had—ambition and career goals—was gone." – male, 70, senior manager at broadcasting, retired (3 years).	Change with ageing	Future time perspective	Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment

Legend: Male Female


Quotes
First – Order Themes
Second – Order Themes
Aggregate Dimensions
“I’ll really miss going to work every day and interact with my colleagues, especially the professional exchange - that’s something I’ll really miss a lot.” - female, 63, doctor and head of pension insurance.
“I only have a few contacts left at my former company, mostly because I don't particularly want them.” - male, 70, senior manager at broadcasting, retired (3 years).
“I think I’ll miss the social interaction with so many people. Every morning, I head to school, meet my colleagues, spend time in different classes, and interact with various colleagues during breaks and afternoon meetings.” - female, 58, special education teacher.
“Maybe I'll miss the sense that people turn to me when they have a problem because they know they can rely on me. [...] I think that the professional exchange and problem-solving interactions with others might be something I’d miss.” - male, 67, lawyer, retired (1 year).
“Well, I’ll miss some of my nice colleagues and stay in friendly contact with them outside the company.” - male, 60, mechanical engineer and head of sales.
“I still maintain good relationships with my former bosses. Whenever I go to Porto, I visit them […] It’s important to keep those connections alive.” – male, 68, operations director, retired (4 years).
“I want to still contribute to the company, if I can and if they allow me to, but not full-time anymore.” - male, 55, CEO of an automobile company.
"I’ll continue working at least until the end of the year, and I’ll probably go beyond that, though likely with a reduced workload. […] I can't imagine fully retiring. " – male, 67, lawyer, retired (1 year).
"I’ll probably still do something, maybe accompany a project that is happening in the company, and they need my help." - male, 55, CEO of an automobile company.
Maybe I’ll even consider something like a senior university course. It would be nice to keep learning and stay engaged. […] I can imagine giving guest lectures and staying updated in my field.” – female, 58, special education teacher.
“I even suggested that we could stay on in a part-time capacity, offering guidance to the younger generation.”- male, 68, operations director, retired (4 years).
"What I was doing then, I’m still doing today: starting work early and finishing when the work is done." - male, 63, managing director of a consulting firm.
“I think I’m very demanding of myself and others, and that affects me. I used to think I had eased up on that, but today, I realize I haven’t.” – female, 60, head of financial department.
“I think the loss of identity [when leaving the workforce] can be an issue. I enjoy what I´m doing, and when that´s gone, I´ll need something to compensate for that.” – male, 60, mechanical engineer and head of sales.
“I had thought about retirement earlier, especially regarding financial matters, trying to prepare for it.” – male, 67, lawyer, retired (1 year).
“I fear my savings won’t be enough to retire comfortably." - male, 63, account manager.
“Coming to work in Brazil and stopping to contribute to social security in Portugal has left me with many doubts regarding my financial situation during retirement." - male, 55, CEO of an automobile company.
Interaction with colleagues
Keeping relationships with colleagues
Keep contributing same area
Mentoring same area
Continuing to work
Need for something to compensate for work
Financial concerns
Loss of professional social relationships
Lingering identity
Financial situation
Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment
Legend: Male Female


Quotes
First – Order Themes
Second – Order Themes
Aggregate Dimensions
“I think retirement should be done more gradually, finding something parallel to do, so the transition isn’t such a huge shock. […] I still want to contribute.” - male, 55, CEO of an automobile company.
“It took about a year and a half. It’s a different feeling when you realize you don’t have any more vacations - you just enjoy every day. I haven’t missed the office for a single day.” - Male, 70, senior manager at broadcasting, retired
"The first months were tough. It’s crucial to manage these aspects well both during your career and in retirement […] Neglecting this balance makes the shift into retirement much harsher." - male, 68, operations director, retired (4 years).
I practically halved my working hours. For me, it was important that there wasn’t a sudden transition. I think everyone expected that I wouldn’t just go from full-time to nothing, but that it would be a gradual transition.” – male, 67, lawyer, retired (1 year).
Gradual retirement process
Identity transition
Emotional and Cognititve Adjustment
“I’m starting a new project that will divide my time. I love the countryside, so I’m planning to start a small project on some land I’ve acquired.” – male, 63, managing director of a consulting firm.
“I can’t see myself stopping completely; I’ll need to stay active, maybe a part-time job will help me with that.” - female, 58, high school professor
"Maybe I’ll do a part-time job […] Beyond that, I’d like to do some social work, perhaps related to elderly people or kids […] I need to be surrounded by human beings." – male, 60, mechanical engineer and head of sales.
Starting a project
Part-time to keep active
Producer identity
“It´s a different feeling when you realize you don´t have any more vacations – you just enjoy every day.” – male, 70, senior manager at broadcasting, retired (3 years).
“If I’m not working anymore, I’ll need to structure my day myself. I expect there might be a bit of a void at first, but I think I’ll quickly get into a mode where I enjoy having the freedom to organize my time as I wish.” - female, 63, doctor and head of pension insurance.
Enjoy every day
Enjoy freedom to organize time
Consumer identity
Post-retirement Engagement
“I’m really looking forward to not being on a strict schedule anymore. I can also imagine getting back into music more and doing things like painting or being creative.” – female, 63, doctor and head of pension insurance.
“I’d like to find a way to contribute, perhaps volunteer work.” - female, 56, senior technician with management responsibilities
“At first, retirement felt like a vacation. People always worry about falling into a rut, but that wasn´t the case for me. […] I found ways to stay busy with small trips and various activities.” - male, 70, senior manager at broadcasting, retired (3 years).
"[…] trying to find ways to fill our time the transition is always a shock. I took courses, […] discovered a new passion in Fado […]” - male, 68, operations director, retired (4 years).
“I’ve already started engaging more in community activities." - female, 58, high school professor and librarian.
Being artisitic and creative
Volunteer work
Trips and other activities
Music
Community engagement
Non-work, non-family activities
Legend: Male Female