

'I'd rather keep running to the end and then jump off the cliff'. Retirement Decisions: Who Decides?

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Abstract

Government in the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, is keen to encourage individuals to delay their retirement, work for longer and save more for their retirement. This article argues that much of this public discussion is based on the debatable premise that most people are actively choosing to leave work 'early'. Research on retirement decisions hitherto has concentrated on individual factors, which dispose towards early retirement and has neglected the role of the employer in determining retirement timing. New research reported here, undertaken in three organisational case studies, explores the management of retirement and how individual employees experience these processes. It employs the concepts of the 'retirement zone' and retirement scenarios to demonstrate how the interaction of individual attributes (themselves subject to change) and organisational practices (also unpredictable and variable) produces retirement outcomes. It concludes that there is considerable management discretion over the manner and timing of individual retirements. Hence, government needs to recognise that the majority of individuals may have relatively little personal discretion over their departure from work and hence concentration on urging them to work for longer and delay retiring may be missing the real target for policy change.

Introduction

Decisions about retirement – how much to save and how long to work – are some of the most important in people's lives. (DWP, 2004: 1)

So begins a recent Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policy paper presented to Parliament in February 2004. Government wants us to work for longer and save harder for retirement and has a strategy of 'activation, education and information' to help us do so. The proposed measures, along with reforms to the UK pension system:

will help to empower individuals to make their own decisions about retirement and the level of income they want in retirement. (DWP, 2004: 3)

The main concern is that as people live longer they appear to be simultaneously spending less time in paid employment, with the result that the dependency ratio

is worsening and people have insufficient pension incomes or savings to live as they had hoped to in retirement. The changing labour market participation rates among older workers (usually defined as 50 years and over) are complex and contain a number of different trends differentiated by gender, level of qualification, level of income and regional location (see, for example, Beatty and Fothergill, 2003; Phillipson, 2004), but the general point is good that far fewer men continue to work until state pension age now than was the case 30 years ago. The underlying assumption in the DWP policy paper and many discussions of these phenomena is that people are actively choosing to leave work 'early', usually defined as before their employing organisation's normal retirement age or the state pension age. In this vision, early retirement is a benign process of individuals deciding to leave work to enjoy more time in retirement. Retirement is seen as consumption good, but one often contradicted by the reality of poverty in old age.

In the period after the Second World War, retirement briefly became for some a predictable, age-patterned end to working life. Today, by contrast, retirement appears to have become a prime example of the more widespread social processes of deinstitutionalisation and individualisation. The first refers to the way in which many aspects of life are becoming less determined by chronological age markers institutionalised in policies, such as compulsory school leaving age (now most young people continue in education and training beyond 16), or state pension age (by which many have now already retired). Instead, individuals face a greater range of choices or possibilities, and hence individual or biographical characteristics appear more significant in determining the routes people take. This takes us to the widely used notion of individualisation in the post-modern or second modern era. For our purposes here, Beck–Gernsheim's definition makes the point:

Individualization is understood as a historical process that increasingly questions and tends to break up people's traditional rhythm of life . . . As a result, more people than ever before are being forced to piece together their own biographies and fit in the components they need as best they can . . . To put it bluntly, the normal life-history is giving way to the do-it-yourself life-history. (1998: 56–7)

Government pronouncements on retirement and pensions are premised on the belief that these processes have occurred at the end of working life. Hence, the new role for social policy is to encourage the development of individual responsibility and self-help to counterbalance the new rights of self-determination (Rowlingson, 2002: 622).

How realistic a view of the 'retirement process' is this? In this article, by reference to an empirical study conducted in three organisations, we investigate how individualised retirement decisions have become, and the scope and nature of choice that individuals face in the timing and manner of their retirements. The article is structured as follows. It begins with a brief review of the existing

literature on retirement decisions. Next a short introduction to the methodology employed in the study is provided. It then reports the findings of the research in relation to the organisations' policies on retirement and pensions, and the interaction of these with individuals' aspirations and choices.

What do we know about retirement decisions?

Research on retirement decisions in the United States has been dominated by labour economists and gerontologists who focus on what Feldman (1994: 286) has called individual difference variables. These studies, especially those associated with the longitudinal Health Retirement Study, model factors such as health, income, level of education and domestic circumstances to determine correlations between these factors and labour market participation or timing of retirement. This body of research typically finds that financial position and health status are the two key determinants of individual retirement timing, although the balance between these factors continues to be debated (Bazzoli, 1985; Mein *et al.*, 1998). There is a similar tradition in the British literature (see, for example, Disney *et al.*, 1997; Meghir and Whitehouse, 1997; Tanner, 1998; Bardasi *et al.*, 2000; Humphrey *et al.*, 2003). Other European social policy researchers have focused on the impact of state pension policies and other benefit regimes in encouraging or discouraging retirement (see, for example, Kohli *et al.*, 1991; Taylor and Walker, 1993: 15–24; Bonoli, 2000). None of this research has had the employing organisation as a central focus, and hence the potentially dynamic role of the employer in retirement decisions is under-researched.

An influential British study, based on two waves of the Office for National Statistics Retirement Survey, classifies reported reasons for early retirement into four categories:

- (a) Firm-instigated: for example, redundancy, dismissal, fixed retirement ages;
- (b) ill-health reasons: either the individual's own health or that of a partner;
- (c) individual instigated reasons: for example, voluntary redundancy, voluntary early retirement; and
- (d) unspecified reasons (Disney *et al.*, 1997: 55).

In the study it was found that firm-instigated reasons accounted for 14 per cent of retirements, ill health for 30 per cent and individual or voluntary reasons for 35 per cent (Disney *et al.*, 1997: 2). Looking at the four categories, it may not be easy in practice to delineate between individual and organisational causes for retirement decisions (Beehr, 1986: 44). It can be argued, for example, that in addition to firm-instigated reasons, a significant organisational role is implied in the impact of ill health on work continuation and potentially in voluntary redundancy and early retirement. In the case of ill health, although an individual variable, the effects of ill health are likely to be mediated through organisational practice, so that a specific case of ill health may lead to different consequences

depending upon the nature of the work, the organisation's attitude towards older workers, and the scope within the employing organisation for varying the amount or type of work done. The category of voluntary redundancy and early retirement may also mask considerable organisational impact; as Donovan and Street concluded in their review of the literature, 'early retirement is in large part a function of management practice and organisational culture' (2000: 31). The neglect of the employing organisation from which individuals retire as a dynamic force in retirement decisions is all the more surprising given that research suggests that most people do not choose when to retire (Campbell, 1999; Hayden *et al.*, 1999; Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000; Arthur, 2003). People leave their jobs through redundancy, early retirement or ill health.

Research by Higgs *et al.* (2003) begins to give us a much richer picture of the retirement process in their qualitative work on civil servants as part of the Whitehall II study. They identify seven ideal types of early retirement decision. Three cases are where the individual opts to continue working because they are either financially attached to their work, or because they enjoy work, or because they hold to a traditional work ethic. Four cases are where the individual chooses to leave early because they can afford to, or because they want to do things outside the work situation, because they are dissatisfied with work or through poor health. As Higgs *et al.* put it, these decision criteria can then be grouped into three further ideal types: 'Were they pushed, did they jump, or did they choose?' (2003: 774). However, as all the respondents to the Whitehall study are civil servants and subject to the same retirement policies, we do not get a sense of the dynamic role of the employer here; the employer position is given and the individual's disposition interacts with it. In our cases, as will be seen below, the interaction between management practice and individual choice is more unpredictable, pragmatic and *ad hoc*. Once again, the Higgs *et al.* study, by focusing firmly on the individual factors, ultimately neglects the role of the employer, and organisational practice remains unexplored and unexplained.

The research reported here tries to remedy this gap by firmly locating individual decisions in their organisational context. It poses the question: To what extent is retirement an individual choice or decision, and to what extent is it merely reactive and constrained by the decisions of employing organisations, the rules of occupational pension entitlement and redundancy schemes?

The research

In order to situate the retirement process in its organisational context, it was decided to undertake three case studies, in contrasting sectors, with differing workforces. This provided the opportunity for comparing the effects of different policy regimes and managerial practices. All three organisations operated occupational pension schemes.

CASE 1: LOCALGOV

Local government serves as a critical case (Bryman, 2001: 50) as the sector has a recent past history of considerable early retirement, criticised by the Audit Commission (1997, 2000). It is hypothesised that this organisation will have clear strategies on how to manage retirement.

CASE 2: TRANSPORT

The second organisation is a private sector organisation in the transport industry with a large manual and routine white-collar workforce. The organisation is in a fiercely competitive and turbulent industry, which has experienced waves of redundancy and mergers and acquisitions. It is hypothesised that this organisation will have a tactical approach to retirement driven by immediate trading pressures.

CASE 3: HEALTH PRODUCTS

The last organisation is a multinational research-based company in medicines and health products with a large highly educated professional and managerial staff. Its approach to human resource management serves as benchmark for other organisations. It is hypothesised that this organisation will have well-developed strategies towards the management of its older workers.

Figure 1. Case study organisations.

Existing work on the causes of retirement have indicated a range of individual difference variables, which serve as predictors for retirement decisions (see, for example, Disney *et al.*, 1997; Humphrey *et al.*, 2003). The task in this research was to see how these interacted with organisational practices to produce particular retirement outcomes. A qualitative research methodology was used in order to explore the variety and complexity of individual experiences. The main aims of the research were: to examine the management of older workers and the retirement process in a range of organisations; to consider whether individuals feel there is enough choice when facing decisions about retirement; to identify barriers to effective retirement planning; and to evaluate from both the employers' and individuals' viewpoints the potential merits of 'flexible retirement': that is, the ability for individuals to downshift or reduce work commitments in the run up to full retirement. In this discussion we will concentrate on the first two of these aims: management practice and individual choice.

To understand the organisational context for retirement, we interviewed human resource and pensions managers and trade union representatives and used policy documents where available. However, it is rarely the case that the espoused policy corresponds perfectly to actual managerial practice so it is very important in organisational case studies to also access the experience and views of those on the receiving end of policy and managerial practice. Hence, the main body of the research involved semi-structured interviews with 160 individuals. The sample of respondents was selected in a purposive manner in order to have people from three points in the retirement process: employees in their 40s and

TABLE 1. Gender and status of the sample.

Organisation	Women	Men				
	Employees		Close to retirement		Retired	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
LOCALGOV	38	22				
TRANSPORT	9	39				
HEALTH PRODUCTS	8	44				
LOCALGOV	7	13	4	16	11	9
TRANSPORT	14	2	9	5	16	2
HEALTH PRODUCTS	13	5	13	2	18	1
Totals	34	20	26	23	45	12

50s who had not yet seriously considered retirement; employees approaching retirement; and those who had retired from the organisation in the last five years. The sample was also constructed, as far as possible, to reflect the gender profile and the balance between managerial and non-managerial staff. In this way, by relying on multiple sources of evidence about the retirement process, it was possible to achieve a measure of data triangulation (Yin, 1994: 92). The composition of the total sample of employees and former employees is shown in Table 1.

These respondents were either interviewed at work, in their own home or at the interviewer's place of work in the period May 2002–May 2003. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted, on average, between 45 minutes and one hour. The interviews were transcribed and the data searched manually for theorised and emerging analytic themes. First, the interviews were coded for descriptive information: that is, the gender and job of the respondent, the organisation they worked for, and their pension position. Second, the interviews were coded for references to factors affecting retirement decisions: for example, health, financial position, fixed retirement ages, spouse retiring. Third, the interviews were analysed and coded interpretively with respect to issues such as retirement aspirations, pension knowledge, experience of retirement transition (on coding practice, see Miles and Huberman, 1984: 56–57). The interviews were then put into the qualitative data analysis software package NUD*IST QSRN6. In the following discussion, employee respondents are identified by their code number, organisation, gender and work status; interviews with HR and pension managers are identified by the organisation and job title. In the section of the article on individual aspirations and choices, quotes from interviews are used as examples representative of views and recurring themes expressed by a number of different respondents (on drawing conclusions from qualitative data, see Miles and Huberman, 1984: 215–21).

Organisational policy

Permanent employees in all three of the case study organisations had access to an occupational pension. The organisations all had normal retirement ages (NRA), at which employees were expected to retire. In TRANSPORT three NRAs were in operation relating to different pension schemes for different work groups. TRANSPORT had just introduced the possibility of employees working beyond NRA if suitable work was available. All three organisations provided for early and ill health retirements. LOCALGOV and HEALTH PRODUCTS also had provisions for early retirement on grounds of efficiency. Employees in all organisations can request early retirement with abated pension from the age of 50. In local government there is also the 85 year rule; namely, if years of service and your age add up to 85 then you can retire with a full pension. However, management still has discretion over the final decision for those who satisfy the rule but are not yet 60.

To conceptualise the role of management discretion in retirement decisions, we used the idea of the ‘retirement zone’, which the individual enters at the age of 50. From this time on the individual employee faces a range of possibilities: early retirement, retirement at the ‘normal age’ or continuing to work beyond the normal retirement age. A decision about the actual timing of retirement at any of these points is at managements’ or the pension funds’ discretion, as is the decision to allow someone to continue working after NRA.

Interviews with managers, employees and retirees in all of the organisations revealed some ambivalence over the relative roles of the organisation’s management and the pension fund trustees in making decisions about early retirement and retirement ages.

Retirement decisions are if anybody wanted to take early retirement, which they can request from being 50 then the request has to come via their manager HR and then we sort of endorse whether it’s going to be possible to allow their retirement to go ahead. The ultimate decision though is made by the pension trustees because obviously the earlier someone retires the longer they’re going to receive their pensions so it is their ultimate decision, but I would think at that stage if the manager says its OK and HR says its OK to release they would only ask sort of questions about will I be taking a pension so they can get another job outside or what the situation is. (Senior HR Adviser 1 HEALTH PRODUCTS)

In each of the organisations, pension administration was practically and physically organised separately from the human resources management (HRM) function. Among HR professionals in all three organisations, there was a sense that pensions were complicated, difficult and largely the responsibility of the ‘pension specialists’. They were not seen as a part of mainstream HRM, although its significance for the effective management of human resources was recognised.

So in a way I suppose we’re not active in sort of promoting the pension arrangements or the facilities that people have got to make good pension arrangements here . . . as pensions become an ever higher profile issue in employment terms at the moment we’re holding our own . . . we

can still say we offer a final salary pension scheme and there are increasing number of firms who don't. (Senior Personnel Adviser, LOCALGOV)

Actual decisions about retirement timing were taken on a case-by-case basis in all three organisations. This led to considerable unpredictability from the individual employee point of view. Management discretion to accept or reject a request for early retirement or to let someone continue working in some form after the normal retirement age was experienced by many as capricious and arbitrary (Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004: 6–9). A personnel manager referred to a case in LOCALGOV where someone was being refused exit on the grounds of cost, although they met the 85-year rule. Other people in LOCALGOV had volunteered for early retirement in the past but been refused. In TRANSPORT a change in pension rules for one group of employees had meant that the opportunity of taking early retirement with pension enhancement had ended in 1999, leaving some individuals just the wrong side of the age cut off. In HEALTH PRODUCTS, requests to retire before NRA with a reduced pension were usually accepted, although it was typically better-paid managerial and professional staff that sought this option. In all three organisations there were individuals who wanted to work on beyond the NRA but had been refused.

Fixed retirement ages are particularly likely to impact upon lower-paid workers who do not feel financially secure enough to retire. Most of the male manual and routine workers in TRANSPORT who had to retire before state pension age had found or planned to find work to bridge the gap to 65. Here, as elsewhere in the research, we confirmed evidence for the two nations in retirement idea or, as Beatty and Fothergill (2003: 158–9) put it, the middle-class world of comfortably off early retirees and the working-class world of redundant or early retired manual workers struggling to get by.

The HR managers and employees and former employees were also asked about opportunities for individuals to downshift their roles, either with respect to hours worked or responsibilities shouldered, as such opportunities to work flexibly have been hypothesised as important for the work trajectories of older workers (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000; DWP, 2002; Loretto *et al.*, 2005). Although there was broad support for the right to retire gradually and downshift, even from those who did not want such opportunities for themselves, in practice there were not specific policies addressed to gradual retirement and few examples of individuals who had changed their roles or hours. This was another area of management discretion and, as with research on the impact of family-friendly policies, the role of line managers in encouraging or discouraging flexible working seemed to be paramount (on family friendly policies, see Yeandle *et al.*, 2003).

Despite the initial hypothesis that the three organisations would vary in their approach, the conclusion is that the retirement of older workers from all

three organisations was not actively managed as a whole but rather responded to in a piecemeal way according to immediate pressures. What characterised management practice in the 'retirement zone' in all cases was informality and discretion (for the wider human resource management implications of this, see Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004; Vickerstaff, 2004).

Individual aspirations and choices

Individuals enter the 'retirement zone' with different aspirations and characteristics. Some are planners, but many of our younger employees felt it was too far away as yet to worry about:

They do write to you once a year with an outline of what your pension could be if you retired at a certain age at a certain figure of remuneration. So it's well explained and it will give you sort of permutations of this. So it is very helpful that if you were thinking seriously of retiring in the next five years for example. So I think by next year, 2003, I'll look quite seriously at that document in January and begin to look at my future then, I suppose. But I can't really remember what the heck is in there. (R51, male employed manager, LOCALGOV)

When I get nearer to retiring I'll have to find out more. But it's not something that's a priority for me now. (R104, male employed manual worker, TRANSPORT)

The actual age of retirement among our retired respondents had varied from 56 to 70, while for those still employed expectations about age at retirement ranged from 55 to 65. Roughly half of the employees who were some distance away from retirement expected to retire at the normal retirement age for their organisation; under half of those employees who were closer to retirement expected to retire at the normal retirement age. Only 12 employees in total expected to retire before they were 60. Whatever the individual's preferred age at retirement there was, however, the generally held view that this should be a matter of personal choice.

In reality, however, individual choice interacts with the dynamics of organisational policies to produce various possible retirement scenarios. It is better to conceptualise these as scenarios rather than trajectories or ideal types as individual and organisational circumstances may change so that the individual's aspirations or expectations alter or have to be modified. The idea of a scenario is useful also because a factor which in one individual case may predispose to early retirement, may in another case be a factor for staying at work. As individuals enter the 'retirement zone', they meet a complex mixture of factors that condition outcomes. All the different individual and organisational variables are present in a particular individual's retirement scenario, but the pattern of interactions is different from case to case.

From the study it is possible to identify four broad categories of retirement scenario, which in turn are subdivided according to the individual or organisational factors that are key in that scenario (see retirement scenario box). These four stylised descriptions are not to be seen as distinct categories;

an individual may move between scenarios as their personal situation or organisational circumstances change. Rather, they provide a means of analysing a number of key influences on the retirement pathways of individuals. We will discuss each scenario in turn.

Happy and keen to retire

Individuals may be keen to retire for positive or negative reasons. Some people were focused on what came next, whereas others were clearer about what they wanted to leave behind. Finances obviously provided a significant backdrop for people's decisions, being a force for going or staying. Finance also conditioned what people could look forward to:

I would like to spend my winters in perhaps Spain, ideally the Canary Islands because you get the guaranteed heat as opposed to Spain where you don't and my summers here. Both my wife and I would like to do that and we like Spain and it would be lovely not to have to endure the British winters . . . I'm determined whatever happens to have some money so that as soon as I retire I can clear off to Spain at least for the first two or three winters. So that's my immediate plan. (R107, male employed manager, TRANSPORT)

No. I've thought about it but I can't seriously consider it because I can't afford it. (R162, female employed white collar, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

For other people it was the pull of their non-work life: being able to please themselves, spend more time with family or friends, or to devote time to hobbies or pastimes:

We've got so much planned. We've got a motor home now. We picked her up the day after I retired. (R125, male retired white collar, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

So on balance would you say you looked forward to retirement or . . . ?

Oh I love it. It's the best job I've ever had . . . I love it to bits . . . so now I'm retired I spend as much time as possible out in the garden, growing things which I've never in my whole life had the opportunity to do. So I'm really thoroughly enjoying the garden now. And I've got my motorbikes and if I feel like going crazy I can always go for a ride on them. (R61, male retired manager, TRANSPORT)

Having more freedom to do what I want to do and being able to travel more than we can because you're limited by the amount of holiday you have and things like that . . . I quite fancy getting involved in the local nature conservancy or counselling or that sort of thing. (R143, male employed manager, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

Others simply felt that they had worked for a long time; they had done their bit and deserved to retire.

So I've done 30 years here and I think well that's about enough. (R147, male employed white collar, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

1. Happy and keen to retire
 - Financial situation
 - Looking forward to other things
 - Done enough

2. Forced or felt forced to retire
 - age
 - early retirement

3. Don't want to retire
 - enjoy work
 - afraid of retirement

4. Blown off course
 - family circumstances
 - individual health status
 - organisational policies

Figure 2. Retirement scenarios.

The only thing is the early retirement. I'd like to see that come back. You know, I think 40 years of shift work is enough for any human being and I think that should be recognised. I mean, in the police and fire brigade, they all come out at about 55 and one of the reasons is it's shift work. I mean our job is more stressful at night than it is in the day. (R109, male employed manager, TRANSPORT)

Forced to retire

Another group of employees and retirees felt that they had been or would be forced to retire by their organisations. NRAs were the main issue here.

I couldn't afford to retire so I didn't consciously make a decision when to go. It was a situation where I had to go because it's local government policy. (R45, female retired white collar, LOCALGOV)

No. You can only work until you're 63 here. You don't have a choice. If I'd have had the choice I'd have preferred to work for as long as I was capable. It would have helped me in the long run, even until I was 65, financially as well and I'm active and fit and while I'm that . . . I've never not worked you see so I think I'm going to find . . . but what I've been doing, which is not the best thing to do, is blocking it out, knowing I'm going to finish and think I'll tackle it when I get there. (R83, female employed manual, TRANSPORT)

There was general agreement among the respondents that the individual should have some choice in when they retired and that NRAs were an arbitrary and unfair rule:

Oh, I'd like to have the option, yes, to stay on. I would like to have the option. I think it should be there, but I don't feel that you should be made to stay on. Those who want to go at 63, let them go. (R108, male employed manual, TRANSPORT)

There were only a handful of respondents across all three organisations that had taken voluntary early retirement with a package from the employer. This undoubtedly reflects, especially in LOCALGOV, the general trend among organisations to reduce the number of early retirement packages offered because of the costs to their pension funds. However, there were individuals in all three organisations who felt that they had been or would be forced to 'opt' for early retirement because they did not like changes to their jobs or the way they perceived the organisation to be going:

Would you say you've seriously started to consider retirement yet?

Well I suppose the answer is yes. It's probably driven not by the fact that I want to retire; it's the fact that the culture of this company has changed so dramatically and it's not the family that it was. I find some of the decision makers and the decisions of this company absolutely crazy sometimes . . . But because there's such a cultural change I really have been thinking about maybe I should just take up something different, some of the things I maybe do in my own time, maybe I should spend more time doing that. (R161, male employed manager, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

Not everyone, of course, who felt disgruntled with their work were in a position to do anything about it:

The job has changed in that I don't like what's happening within the company and I would probably have retired a couple of years earlier if I could have afforded to. (R173, male employed manager, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

Don't want to retire

Another distinct group among our respondents were those who were not looking forward to retirement. Once again there could be positive or negative

reasons for this: for many work was enjoyable and satisfying and they wanted to carry on doing it; others, however, expressed fears about retiring which were less to do with the fulfilment in the current job and more to do with anxiety about what they would do when they were retired. Men predominated in this latter category.

I'm a bit anxious about being at home all the time. I'm sure there would be plenty to do and things, but I don't want to sit at home just looking after the grandchildren. That's what I don't want to do. (R177, male employed white collar, LOCALGOV)

Well, I know, what are you going to do when you retire? You've got gardening or you've got this or what interests have you got? But that's not the point. An eight hour or a ten hour day is a long time. How are you going to fill it? It might be alright for the first six months, but after that how are you going to fill it? (R148, male employed white collar, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

For yet others, the prospect of retirement was a mixture of liking their work, and uncertainty about what retirement would hold.

Well, it's the unknown, really. I said before for 41 years I don't know anything else. I know my wife is worried that I won't have enough to occupy my mind. I mean, I like what I do. I enjoy what I do. I always have done. (R86, male employed manager, TRANSPORT)

Blown off course

The last group of scenarios involved individuals who had made plans for their retirement but who were blown off course because of unexpected or unplanned events. As discussed above, much of the literature on retirement decisions concentrates upon individual variables, such as wealth, health and family circumstances as key causes of individual decisions. This research does not dispute the significance of these factors but adds two extra subtleties to our understanding of how they work. First, personal factors can have different effects depending upon the organisation the individual works for. Examples would be ill health or caring responsibilities. These may necessitate an exit from work or not, depending upon the employer's ability or willingness to accommodate changes in work practices or routines or shifts. Second, the influence of a particular factor, such as ill health or domestic factors, may encourage one person to seek early retirement, while strengthening another's resolve to continue working.

Three main issues served to interrupt or confound our respondents' plans and choices for retirement: domestic circumstances (especially marital breakdown or retirement or death of a partner); health (their own or that of a family member); and, lastly, organisational changes.

I wanted to retire at 55, until I was widowed, and then I thought well I'd better carry on till I'm 60. Always, when my husband was alive, I kept saying 55 and I'll pack it in, because he didn't like me doing the nights. (R21, female employed manager, LOCALGOV)

Relatively few of our respondents had been forced to retire on grounds of ill health, although health of partners was a factor in both encouraging and discouraging others to seek retirement (Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004: 26–27). Organisational practices and changes could also be negative or positive, frustrating plans or encouraging some to feel that the time had come to go:

I always really wanted to retire when I was about 55 . . . I would retire this year if the organisation would let me retire. As you know, with local government you can retire at any time onwards from 50, but between 50 and 60 it has to be with management permission before you can actually draw your pension. So I'm at the stage at the moment of saying I would like to retire and the organisation is at the stage of saying we want you to stay. So there's nothing unpleasant or awkward about it, but that's the stage we've got to at the moment. (R20, male employed manager, LOCALGOV)

I've got an opportunity to do something more, perhaps not necessarily with LOCALGOV. So I'm still quite interested in working, but if the time came when, for example, there was another restructuring and the sort of job that I was offered was not what I wanted then I would certainly prefer to retire then than to go on doing something that wasn't something that I wanted to do. (R57, male employed manager, LOCALGOV)

Others experienced accommodations to their work patterns which allowed them to stay:

Yes, as I told you before, I was going to retire and then when I came onto days it was a totally different role and I was quite happy, and I think that if you can somehow give people that job satisfaction they will stay on. Remove the pressures and things and let them slow down. (R167, male employed manual, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

Research on the retention of older nurses similarly found that relatively minor adjustments to work role or hours could facilitate an individual's decision to stay in nursing rather than leave the NHS (Watson *et al.*, 2003: 14–22). In the case study organisations, there was no systematic procedure or process for reviewing individuals' work patterns: it was up to an individual to ask about the possibility and the issue would be decided on a one-off basis.

Discussion

The research has opened a window on a neglected facet of retirement decisions: namely, the dynamic role of the organisation. There is considerable management discretion over the timing of individual retirements, and employing organisations can encourage or deny the continuation of work or retirement. Organisations may do this explicitly through NRAs or more often informally through case-by-case practices. The issues, choices and constraints that the individual faces in the retirement zone are complex and shifting. This is why the idea of retirement scenarios seems to provide a good means for conceptualising the interaction of individual attributes (themselves subject to change) and organisational practices (also unpredictable and variable). It is very difficult to capture this complexity of

interactions in large-scale surveys. It is also the case in surveys that the reasons individuals report for their retirement decision may change over time. There is evidence to suggest that ill health may retrospectively be seen as the cause for early retirement when it did not figure as the key reason for work exit at the time (Beatty and Fothergill, 2003: 147–9; for a recent attempt to model a more complex measure of health status, see Disney *et al.*, 2003). Recent research in the United States using the longitudinal Health and Retirement Study data has estimated that about one third of their sample experienced unexpected changes in marital or disability status which were likely to impact upon retirement timing (Williamson and McNamara, 2003a, 2003b). In semi-structured interviews it was possible to hear some of the intricacy of individuals' situations and thinking. They typically did not provide clean linear narratives of their retirement plans or process. There were individuals who did not want to retire but would go on to recount lots of things they expected to do, while others were keen to retire without being able to say in any detail how they might spend their time. Often our respondents' descriptions of their expectation or aspirations showed how a range of factors interact, making it impossible to determine one reason or the key cause for trying to stay or leave their job. The following two quotes are indicative of this:

If I can put it in a nutshell, I couldn't see why I should still be in a job which I no longer enjoyed, being taxed at a ridiculous rate of tax, while I have got two acres here which takes a lot of maintenance and I'm into old vehicles so I've got plenty of toys to play with, and then paying people to do things that I would have liked to have done myself anyway. So, in other words, it was a push and a pull. (R136, male retired manager, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

Have you thought about retirement yet?

I have done but I'm not doing anything about it because my lad is going to . . . both my lads are going to university so . . . at the moment. But it's still . . . If I retired I'd virtually go out with nothing so . . . So no. I did think about it at one time but . . . But all of the time I'm able to work because of my injury I'm alright. I mean, things could change tomorrow because I've got a bad neck and that. (R164, male employed manual, HEALTH PRODUCTS)

There was a sense that people experienced the prospect or reality of retirement as an individual project, which they were trying to manage. They had access to a range of experiences of family members, work colleagues and friends that seemed to suggest that there were very variable outcomes and not a common retirement pathway. In this sense the research seems to confirm the individualisation and deinstitutionalisation theories that chronological age markers no longer structure the life course in the way they once did, and that people must, in Beck-Gernsheim's (1998) definition, construct their own do-it-yourself life histories. However, they often lacked the empowerment to do this through insufficient understanding about pensions and retirement options, and the fact that their employer held a trump card in the decision-making. Among our respondents, the more highly

paid managers and professionals were most likely to have the understanding and financial wherewithal to be able to negotiate a preferred retirement option for themselves. The majority of more routine employees struggled to understand their pension situation and were more likely to have to simply accept what was or was not offered to them (Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005).

Government analysis of the need for individuals to work for longer and delay retiring must recognise that the majority of individuals may in reality have relatively little personal discretion over the timing and manner of their departure from work. This is not through some failure of effort or imagination on their part. Their exit from work is unpredictable and they hold some but not all of the levers of the decision. The degree of choice that individuals have is patterned by their level of income, their gender, their health and, very importantly, the organisation they work for. Urging them to change their behaviour will have little effect if at the same time employers are not urged to reappraise their management of older workers. As Hoggett commented, 'There seems to be real contempt around for people who cannot or will not be "empowered" at the moment.' (2001: 44) and recent government policy on pensions and savings (DWP, 2004) puts the emphasis on individual planning and responsibility, but says surprisingly little about employer accountability for the employment patterns of older workers. Many older individuals may want or, more likely, need to work; a largely unexplored question is whether employers are willing to continue employing them.

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