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Representing Retirement, Aging, and Old Age During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario, Canada

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Research Summary:

Title: Representing Retirement, Aging, and Old Age During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario, Canada

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study was to establish a better understanding of the social meaning and impact of retirement on the social identity of older persons (70+) as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these experiences in Ontario, Canada. Social identity is defined based on Erving Goffman's (1959) and Judith Butler's (1988) writings and conceptualized as our sense of belonging to a social group(s), shaping how we interpret and experience ourselves and the world around us. This sociological research is part of a multi-method doctoral dissertation project assessing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social significance and experiences of retirement, old age, and aging in Ontario, Canada. The findings of this part of the study focused on acquiring new insights into the direct impact of retirement on the social identity of older persons and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these experiences in textual and visual form using photovoice method. Photovoice method is a form of participatory action research where participants are recognized as experts on their social situations and encouraged to lead discussions about their experiences through photography, accompanying narration, and policy recommendations (Sutton-Brown 2014). The research questions include: (1) What impact does retirement have on the social identity of older adults in Ontario, Canada? and (2) What impact does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the social identity of older adults (70+) in Ontario, Canada? Participants were also asked to provide policy recommendations and/or messages to policymakers as it relates to these experiences as well as recommendations for future social science researcher about areas of inquiry, they believe ought to be examined in more detail. Though typically done in-person, this study was modified to have interactions between participants and the researcher by telephone and/or online to reduce risks associated with COVID-19.

Methods and Procedures: Recruitment for this study occurred through the distribution of research recruitment posters to community organization focusing on the needs of individuals who have retired and older persons generally in the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario, Canada. Prospective participants completed an Online Project Interest Form and those eligible were contacted by the researcher. The final data sample included 6 participants (n=6). Participants took part in an initial meeting to discuss the project and submitted six photographs, titles, and descriptions corresponding to two photovoice prompt questions to the researcher by email as well as engaged in a semi-structured photovoice interview to further discuss themes generated in their photographs. Participants were provided with a basic digital camera by the researcher to complete this task. The textual data (interview transcripts, titles, and descriptions) were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019;2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis employed aspects of Durkheimian social sensibilities, to explore the dialectic between individual lived experiences, structural and cultural realities as it relates to social identity (e.g., Goffman 1959; 1967; 1986; Butler 1988; Pickard 2016).

Preliminary Results: The themes and the subsequent subthemes generated for the first research question indicate that experiences of retirement on social identity are framed by all participants

as having a positive impact on social identity. Most noticeably, participants described the freedom to choose how to structure one's time (e.g., traveling, volunteering, community programs, family/friend time) as impacting their sense of social connectivity, with some participants also noting challenges experienced by increased free time (i.e., anomie). The three main themes developed were (1) *Personal choice: It's up to me to decide* (subthemes: *personal choice as an opportunity; challenges of personal choice; and personal choice as a responsibility*), (2) *Changes to roles and routines* (subthemes: *shifts to self-valuation; and shifts to social networks overtime*) and (3) *Negative societal perceptions of retirees and old age: intergenerational tensions*. While all participants noted retirees and old age as being perceived negatively by Canadian society, generally, this did not appear to impact their social identity or subjective experiences of retirement. The themes and the subsequent subthemes generated for the second research question indicate that the impact of COVID-19 on social identity are commonly framed negatively by all participants. Specifically, participants describe a decrease in social connectivity with meaningful social groups because of COVID-19 mandates and/or perceived personal risks related to the virus, with some participant's also noting new social roles and connections as well. The four main themes developed were (1) *Restrictions and separations: Disruption to social connectivity* (subthemes: *loneliness and social isolation; and managing personal health risks*), (2) *Changes to roles and routines* (subthemes: *this is not 'normal' life: Changes to normative routines; shifts to social roles and networks; and the existential self and future planning*), (3) *Bridging the gap: Resiliency strategies to increase social connectivity* (subthemes: *increase in social connectivity; and barriers to social connectivity*). Moreover, most participants describe negative societal changes that emerged since the pandemic and how these have influenced their social identity and connectivity with others in the last theme reflecting anomic social conditions, (4) *Where is it all going? Uncertainty about societal changes*.

Participants also provided policy recommendation and/or messages to policymakers as it relates to their experiences, generating four main themes including: (1) *Changes to monitoring and regulating eldercare*, (2) *Programs for older persons [in-person/virtual]* (subthemes: *educational, physical activity, and social programs*), (3) *Addressing systemic barriers* (subthemes: *economic challenges; healthcare needs; housing and staying in-home longer*), and (4) *Challenging ageism*. In addition, participants also provided recommendations to future social science researcher as it relates to the topic of this study, developing four themes including: (1) *Studying ageism* (subthemes: *ageism and social media; and strategies to challenge ageism*), (2) *Studying wellbeing* (subthemes: *social, economic, and health wellbeing*), (3) *Studying how to plan for retirement*, and (4) *Studying aging throughout the lifespan*.

Discussion: Overall, the study highlighted common representations of the impact of retirement on the social identity of older persons in Ontario, Canada as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these experiences. The data analysis also reflected current literature about the impact of neoliberal rationality on retirement, old age, and aging expectations and experiences (e.g., Katz and Laliberte-Rudman 2005; Laliberte-Rudman 2006; 2015). It also appears to be the first photovoice study to explore this topic, providing new vivid textual and visual data about these experiences. The findings emphasize the complexity of social identity and compare how many of the social connections and activities that characterized retirement as having a positive

impact on social identity were no longer possible and/or needed to be adjusted (e.g., outdoor visits and virtual connections) during the pandemic with varying degrees of perceived connectivity. As a part of photovoice methods, the dissemination of findings will also include developing an in-person photovoice exhibition, including photographs taken by participants, research findings, and policy recommendations and/or messages to policymakers as well as research recommendations for future social science researchers made by participants, to develop social solidarity and collective consciousness about issues and potential solutions as discussed by participants in this study.

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