

WORKING BEYOND 80: THE MEANING OF WORK TO AN OCTOGENARIAN IN THE WORKFORCE

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Abstract

There is an increasing share of people aged 50 years and over in the labor market structure and the rapid aging of the global workforce that supports the latter claim but with a little tank of information on qualitative research describing the experiences of a working octogenarian. An octogenarian is a person who is between 80 and 89 years old. This study aimed to investigate the experiences of a working octogenarian in her fieldwork through a qualitative case study analysis. From the interview, the following three themes were revealed: (a) Work as a legacy, (b) Work as an advocacy, and (c) Work as an opportunity. In the first theme, the participant described that she had a laden path and a mission. These had been sustained along with the desire to serve and make a difference. In work as advocacy, she presented the vision to make the lives of the elderly better by making the environment compatible with her aspiration extending beyond the confines of her organization. Considering every work that she took part in as an opportunity to explore and further her vision was the very core of the theme “work as an opportunity.” Working beyond 80 years old becomes possible when one dedicates the undertakings in the fulfillment of the individual’s vision and mission.

Keywords: aging, gerontology, labor, octogenarian, workforce

Abstrak

Bekerja di Atas Usia 80: Sebuah Studi Kasus Kualitatif tentang Arti Bekerja bagi Seorang Tenaga Kerja Octogenarian. Terdapat peningkatan jumlah orang yang berusia 50 tahun ke atas dalam struktur pasar tenaga kerja dan penuaan dini dari tenaga kerja global yang mendukung klaim terakhir, namun masih sedikit informasi tentang penelitian kualitatif yang menggambarkan pengalaman seorang oktozenarian yang bekerja. Seorang octogenarian adalah orang yang berusia antara 80 dan 89 tahun. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki pengalaman seorang oktozenarian yang bekerja pada lapangan kerjanya melalui analisis studi kasus kualitatif. Berdasarkan wawancara, tiga tema berikut terungkap: (a) Bekerja sebagai warisan, (b) Bekerja sebagai advokasi, dan (c) Bekerja sebagai peluang. Pada tema pertama, peserta menggambarkan bahwa dia memiliki jalan yang sarat dan misi. Hal ini telah dipertahankan dengan keinginan untuk melayani dan membuat perbedaan. Pada tema bekerja sebagai advokasi, ia mempresentasikan visi untuk membuat kehidupan lansia menjadi lebih baik dengan membuat lingkungan yang sesuai dengan aspirasinya melampaui batas organisasinya. Mempertimbangkan setiap pekerjaan yang ia ambil sebagai kesempatan untuk mengeksplorasi dan memajukan visinya adalah inti dari tema “bekerja sebagai sebuah peluang.” Bekerja lebih dari 80 tahun sangat mungkin ketika seseorang mendedikasikan upaya dalam pencapaian visi dan misi individu.

Kata Kunci: aging, gerontologi, octogenarian, pekerja, tenaga kerja

Introduction

The past years have witnessed noteworthy differences in the construction of unemployment in the labor market on a global scale. There is an increasing share of people aged 50 years and over in the labor market structure and the rapid

aging of the worldwide workforce that supports the latter claim (Radović-Marković, 2013). The issue of age discrimination at work seems to remain a challenge for those at both extremes of the working population (Snowdon, 2012). It is more prominent to the elderly population because aging is characterized by a progressive

physiologic decline in all body systems with the concurrent risk of major pathologies (Antoniou, Burke, & Cooper, 2017). It may seem particularly difficult to imagine people working into their 60s, 70s, and 80s. It is like things that some people will work longer than they might have 50 years ago because they can. Modern medicine has not slain obesity or alcoholism, but it has created drugs and treatments that lengthen many people's lives (McIntyre, 2010).

Perceptions toward those aged over 70 years were more positive than toward those in their 20s, with more seasoned individuals viewed as being friendlier, having higher moral standards, and being more competent than their younger counterparts (Snowdon, 2012). In an authentic sense, our older workers are a key national asset, more vital to our future. Further, this is a workforce issue and a human productivity issue that includes everyone old enough to work and even many retirees who are still productive and contributing to our economy. Foremost, the effectiveness of our management of older people and their level and type of contribution is, or should be, a public issue of concern because it affects everyone (Shea & Haseen, 2006).

Government data show that each month, there are fewer jobs available for people seeking work. A generation ago, the competition for those openings would have been mostly among the relatively young and able-bodied. Now, the battle to employment includes the nondisabled over 80 years old (McIntyre, 2010). It prompts the proponent to look into the meaning of the experience of being an octogenarian and still an active member of the workforce.

Several factors, such as advancements in the medical fields and developments of society, have led to, in general, more people living in advanced age and the elderly populace growing in most of the industrialized countries. These demographic differences seen in the workforce populace affected and lowered the possibility of sickness benefits and disability pensions (Nilsson, Östergren, Kadefors, & Albin, 2016).

As the populace grows older, an expanding part of the workforce will be past the age of 60 years. Older workers are viewed as less beneficial than younger ones, raising the issue of whether an aging workforce will likewise be less productive (Burtless, 2013). It has been a long-standing issue regarding active aging in employment. More seasoned individuals or older people are an important and gainful economic reserve. Expanding employment openings among elderly workers is essential to guarantee that the work market and workforce adjust to address the issues of a maturing populace. The need to build the business rate of elderly workers has been converted into quantitative objectives proposed to keep those matured 55–64 years old in work and to raise their average period of exit from the work market (Radović-Marković, 2013).

Older people in the workforce bring with them favorable characteristics in the workplace, including stability, loyalty, reliability, experiences, maturity, and wisdom. One way to address ageism in the workplace is to tackle perceptions that have negative connotations regarding concerns about the competency of the elderly workers (Irving, 2017). An older person's decision regarding retirement is dependent on financial capacity, social support, and preoccupation after retirement. When these factors are unmet, an older person may opt to continue to work, adding a large number of older people in the workforce who will compete with workers from other age groups. Taking these factors into consideration before reaching retirement age will help a person plan in advance the things to do to make the retirement decision easier (Garcia, 2013). Studies found in the literature are focused on the intention of older people to continue working (Lu, 2012) but not on the experience of a working older person. It is the gap that the study wanted to fill. This study aimed to describe the experiences of a working octogenarian in her fieldwork through a case study analysis.

Methods

This research used a case study analysis, which

is an empirical inquiry that examines a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life framework when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not apparent and in which multiple supplies of evidence are used. The study used an instrumental case study, specifically, which is used to accomplish something other than just understanding or observing a situation in a particular sense. It would provide valuable insight into the phenomenon of interest. The case being examined played a primary role in understanding the experience of an octogenarian. The case presented can or cannot be seen as the same as that of the others. It is looked at in greater depth, its contexts scrutinized, and its ordinary activities detailed because of its help in making the researcher pursue external interests (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Garcia, 2019). In the final interpretive phase, the researcher reports the significance of the case, looking into whether that importance comes from learning about the case's issue (an instrumental case) or about an unusual situation (an intrinsic case). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) mentioned, "lessons learned" were taken out from the case during this phase. Inclusion criteria include the participant to be a worker, 80 years old and above, and must not have been separated from the current job.

Rigors of the Study. The rigors of the study were identified to provide the steps taken in the conduct of the research. These include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The basic steps such as triangulation, the researcher's "reflective commentary," and member checks provide the necessary avenue in determining the credibility of the data being gathered and explored. Transferability accounted for the accurate and sufficient details of the data being examined. The researchers described the research design with its purpose and implementation, stating what is planned and how it will be executed with adequate planning and interventions determined dependability. Furthermore, confirmability was run by noting each and every step of what was done during the data gathering and recording each step of the process through written field notes and unedited documents.

Participant. The participant was an 80-year old woman who is a professional currently working in the private sector. The study was conducted in Central Visayas, Philippines.

Data Gathering and Ethical Consideration.

The interview was conducted in a mutually agreed upon venue, which allowed relative privacy. An ethics clearance was obtained from the Cebu Normal University Ethics Review Committee. The researchers ensured that the informant could understand the study with all due consideration of their level of understanding. Before signing the consent, the participant was explained the process of a one-on-one interview and assured that confidentiality would be preserved. Consent for audio recording was obtained from the participant. The participant was free not to answer any question and withdraw from the study at any time without explaining the reason and penalty. After obtaining the clearance, the participant recruitment started. The researchers conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews as a mean of data collection. The main question, which was asked in English (with a Cebuano translation), is "Kindly share to us your story or work experience/being employed beyond the age of 80." Prompts, elaboration, and clarification were used as necessary to encourage the participant to continue her story.

The interview lasted for 1 hour. Before ending the conversation, the participant was asked if there was anything more she wished to talk about her full experience. The researcher conveyed his gratitude to the informant, and the cassette recorder was turned off. All the cassette recorders were handled by the researchers and placed in a locked cabinet where only the researchers can access. Audiotaped data were listened to by the researchers two to three times to achieve data immersion. The data were transcribed by the research assistant 24–48 hours after the interview was completed. The transcript of the interview was stored in the personal computer owned and used only by the researchers. The written transcript was also kept in a locked cabinet. For confidentiality, a pseudonym was applied for

the participant. The informant was given the pseudonym “Maria” to label the various undertakings that she engaged in accomplishing her passions. The authors used licensed NVivo 11, QSR International Pty Ltd, Australia software to analyze the transcripts.

Results

Three themes were discovered. This result will present the themes and scripts of the participants.

Work as a Legacy. Working as a healthcare provider paved the way to envision in making the environment fit for elderly individuals. This vision extends not only to where healthcare is provided but also to the community where the elderly persons are situated most of the time.

Laden path. Care and concern for her clients became her lifetime; even though other opportunities beckon, she still chose to serve the less fortunate.

“I am on public health ... my patients were poor...”

“There were a lot of programs I had. And we were audited by PRC, in Civil Service I mean. Then they asked who is this Maria. Why Sir? Because of all the doctors, she has the most handled program ... I was handling five programs.”

Inspirations for her advocacy stirred her desire to better herself by improving performance and participating in training to serve her clients better.

“I go up the ladder of city health, and then as I go up, it always is accompanied by training.”

“There was really a lecture. The programs always trained me in the Government. The Government has good programs.”

“I was able to build a center ... I was also appointed as director of XXX Foundation.”

“I am on public health ... my patients were poor.”

The work she started eventually embodied her. She started the legacy with a limited number of individuals who believed in her vision.

“...so, we were the first program because that was the first in the city of Cebu, even the region does not have. We informally started the program every Thursday for the elderly. There was an elderly who would come and we will just talk.”

“I don’t mind. 1, 2, 5, or 10. Also, bring companions. Oh, here he is, so there were five of us. So, the program in XXX was launched. So the city health officer before was my classmate. I said we would launch our program for the elderly. During that time, nobody talks about the elderly ... so how was the program run? The elderlies ran it.”

“I did not earn anything ... I’m spending my own money ... I’m not receiving any money. The donations, it goes to XXX Center...The thing that makes XXX Center running is due to persons and donations from where I work.”

Maria’s life-sustaining desire for service and making a difference requires a firm resolve to hurdle all the challenges that life would throw her way and a vow to deliver the best to the less fortunate. Making Maria’s mark amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life is a challenge and a struggle. Her desire to unite the elderly and give them the best environment to exist in harmony with the young ones is a path less trodden. In the early years of her work, only a limited number of elderly individuals were willing to join in her quest. Still, perseverance and commitment led her to institute the organization that became the household name for the elderly population in her locality, both professional and otherwise. It is noteworthy that the organization that Maria founded was run exclusively by its elderly

members and welcomes members who are senior citizens. Members of her organization grew at a much higher rate and reflected the cohesiveness of the elderly in the community. The organization that she led was the first elderly organization in her locality, and the programs it spearheaded became the benchmark for the creation of local government unit (LGU)-sponsored elderly programs.

Consequently, Maria's efforts were recognized by a particular nongovernment organization (NGO). This recognition comes with the fact that the organization became interested in Maria's undertakings for the elderly, thus suggesting the creation of an elderly facility that would house the elderly members in her locality and the donation of a lot in a certain part of the locale. In all her undertakings, Maria never acquiesced monetary or financial gain. To make her organization survive amid the financial demands of running, she developed linkages within both the public and private sectors, local and international. Maria had capitalized on her extensive work experiences to keep her desire aflame.

Mission. The participant's experiences of Maria had been etched on her and determined that this was the mission she sought long after. She saw the need of the people, especially that of the poor. She organized several groups to address the need of her clientele. Then, because of the efforts she took, she was conferred with several awards.

"I am on public health, and my patients were poor... and also, in the city health, I organized them, the doctors...this was the course on Hypertension Specialist."

"We have a lecture every month to keep up with the knowledge. Then I became the BHW coordinator ... so I asked the Mayor to revive the Health Board."

"I was awarded three times ... so many programs at that time I did not expect I would be honored ... it was just nothing with

me. What is in my mind is that I liked it. I did not expect any award. Nothing ... ehm, basically, what was the driving force of my activities were the programs, and that was my interest in aging ... if my interest left, then I would stop, but it did not."

Maria's experience working in the public sector and catering to the poor had propelled her to explore every chance to make a difference in the lives that she provided. She would go the extra mile of spending her own money to help out the receivers. She had the gift of organizing, which she used in full. She organized the health practitioners in her previous job so that they can develop programs to cater to the needs of poor hypertensive patients. They undertook health drives and taught the patients proper self-care and disease management. Also, Maria became the barangay health worker (BHW) coordinator. The BHWs are the force multiplier of the government's healthcare implementers. They are more in interaction with the grassroots for the government's health services to reach remotely located recipients.

Furthermore, Maria's linkage with the local chief executive allowed her to revive the health board in her locality. This health board, headed by the local chief executive, allowed the community to participate in healthcare decisions. In recognition of Maria's numerous undertakings to make a difference, she was given accolades from various organizations. To name a few, she received the Supervisory Award from the Cebu City Health Department, Leadership Award from the Soroptomist International, Cebu Chapter, Award of Merit from Pfizer, and several certificates of recognition from government organizations (GOs) and NGOs. Her interests are life enduring, and she vowed to continue her mission of making a difference in other's lives until her death.

Work as an Advocacy. Maria was able to use her work as a way of giving voice to the community by being an advocate. She stated that her interest in helping the elderly has never died

down. It led to her advocacy of providing an elderly-friendly environment.

“I am obsessive with gerontology ... the interest never died ... my interest never left ... if my interest left, then I would stop, but it did not.”

“I said that I did not study how to handle the elderly, I just gather them, and we talk until we know how to. It’s like while we are still alive, we will gather together ... the quality of life of the 80s and the 90s and the 100 ... the impact is longer life.”

“This is a small Florida: community where they can go, listen to old music, swim there, with small beauty parlor and watch television; also, some small grocery and consultation area. Also, if they want hotel hopping, they can go.”

Maria envisions an environment where the elderly’s concerns are given much consideration. Matters that go beyond economic needs but rather encompass the elderly’s existence. She visualizes a situation where the elderly can be themselves without fear of derision or stereotyping and an environment where the elderly can “go to, listen to old music, swim there; with small beauty parlor and watch television; also, some small grocery and consultation area.” It is a community that provides for their social and healthcare needs, and offers compatibility with the needs and concerns of the elderly to enhance individual functioning and quality of life.

Concrete works. There are also several concrete works that Maria was able to do, keeping track of her work as a legacy. These works reflect tangible things she can advocate.

“...gerontological design for architects... so, they are designing, they are architects, they’re very interested. They requested me to lecture for the architects of the XXX university and the United Association of Architects.”

“The commission on women were interested. Let’s make a home. There is a lot in Guba from the Government. Let’s ask the Mayor to make a home. We will do business, and our profit will be for the poor.”

“The airport elderly-friendly ... I will challenge the architects to make a design for XXX City to be elderly-friendly ... I’ve been advocating elderly-friendly community.”

Maria is not alone in her desire to match the environment with the needs of the elderly. A certain association of architects also aspires this same yearning. This association is interested in designing the environment that Maria envisioned, and their interest is supported by their desire to know how to build an elderly-friendly climate. Maria as a resource person on elderly care of various GOs and NGOs conducted a series of lectures on this subject with the architects as her audience and tutee. Her talks focused on gerontological designs, which the architects can consider when designing an elderly fit environment. Furthermore, Maria propositions a challenge to her architect and tutee to make their locality elderly friendly. This elderly-friendly environment encompasses airports, parks, walkways, and other settings where the elderly can be found.

Mentoring. The participant also wanted to share the experiences she had through mentoring. By doing such, she can create succession plans for the next generation of health workers.

“...XXX they’re sending their interns also to us for research ... we started dementia screening on a barangay ... I’m training nurses to screen.”

“I want the academe, my focus in gerontology ... offer gerontology in the other departments ... gerontology is multidisciplinary ... I hope I want ... I can teach in XXX.”

“...a nurse teaching another nurse but for a doctor to teach the nurses? Much better ... I hope gerontology will move forward in all

the sectors, such as in industry, in the academe, in the medical field, and the pharmaceutical.”

Maria’s vision to create an elderly-friendly environment does not stop by designing the atmosphere by the architects. It takes all the other professions to contribute to its design. As one age, various nicks and ills would challenge the quality of life of the elderly, and caring for them takes boldness and tolerance. With the minimization of the elderly’s complaints accompanied by the stereotyping of it being part of the aging process, it takes a careful assessment to arrive at a diagnosis that considers their atypical complaints. Thus, Maria, in her capacity as a mentor, guides interns in the proper care of the elderly and assists them in their research on elderly care.

Furthermore, Maria aspires to extend her knowledge on elderly care to various educational institutions and wishes for these to offer courses in gerontology. She considers teaching the nurses, other professions, and professionals on the correct elderly care. She hinges on her extensive training, work experiences, and personal vision in awakening the interests of all professions in elderly care. Maria hopes that concepts in gerontology will touch base all the sectors—in the industry, academe, medical field, and even pharmaceutical world.

Wider scope for public information. The need for a public voice has also been the source of inspiration for Maria, especially in the government. She has been a staunch leader in the broader scope of public information for elderly care.

“I was very active in public service. I was also invited. My service was continuous. When I stopped today, I was called the next day ... my interest is on. I still make programs. I link with the Government.”

“...people in the media, they do not know that there is XXX Center.”

The aging population of the world is an opportunity to advance awareness of the needs of the elderly population. Maria’s desire to promote elderly care in all sectors calls for a broader scope of public information. Widening the coverage of elderly awareness campaigns entails engagement with the media, government, and academe for its dissemination. Engaging these sectors allows for elderly information to be diffused within the populace to educate everyone on elderly needs and their care. It can also be a perfect venue for inviting everyone to look into the problems of the elderly, such as dementia and to properly treat the condition to give a quality of life to the survivors.

Work as an Opportunity. Maria saw her profession as an opportunity for her to be a part of the community and in ensuring that the community achieves the service they deserve.

“After my training, I organized in the city, in XXX, a program for the elderly ... Then there was an offering on Gerontology in XXX, and I took the course.”

“I was able to build a center. We had feeding in the barangay and collect data from the city health department and find out which barangay.”

“This is no longer public health but industrial medicine already.”

This opportunity has given her the avenue to practice her profession and translate it to the community. Maria considered every work that she took part in as an opportunity to explore and further her visions. Each training was an opportunity to widen and deepen the knowledge of the care of her patients. She takes every challenge to her capability a chance to make a difference in another person’s life. She organized programs for the elderly, and these programs were supplemented by her trainings locally, nationally, and internationally. She undertakes translational expertise sharing both locally, nationally, and globally to promote elderly care

and an elderly-friendly environment. Furthermore, these elderly programs were linked to the elderly programs of the LGU to provide better care and broader coverage of beneficiaries.

Maria's paradigm had shifted from public health to industrial medicine that allowed Maria to develop more programs that shifted from merely treating diseases to maintaining health, preventing and treating diseases and injuries, and maintaining and increasing productivity and social adjustment in the workplace. Her work as a company physician allowed her to integrate these concepts in planning programs for employee health care.

Discussion

The meaning of work to an octogenarian was identified into three themes, namely: work as a legacy, work as an advocacy, and work as an opportunity. In the current global scenario, there is rapid aging in the world population, and those who are 60 years old and above are forecasted to outnumber children under the age of 5 years (Bersin & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). Moreover, life expectancy has also lengthened over the years (Oshio, Usui, & Shimizutani, 2018). In this case, the world still needs older people to be a part of the active labor force.

Work for an octogenarian is a legacy that requires one to venture into the path less traveled, supported by a particular mission to make a difference in the life of others. Garcia (2020) made mention that success is contingent on the choices and behaviors that an individual had. The choice of a life-fulfilling mission starts early and becomes the measure of one's success and continued legacy. It is attained because of an individual's determination and choice to fulfill it (Katz & Calasanti, 2015). And just like any other successful people, one can create a habit and follow a formula of motivation to be successful (Garcia, 2018 & Lorenzen, 2017) and make it their life's mission. It is in agreement with the study's result that the path selected becomes the motivation for an individual to

pursue and eventually become a memorial of the choices and actions one has done in the past.

Concerning advocacy, the meaning of work calls for the extension of oneself beyond the call of duty. It requires exploration of all avenues that can be opened through envisioning the future, mentoring those that come after them, and creating concrete evidence of that vision. To be an advocate is to uphold and promote a certain cause (Mellinger, 2017). It allows the perpetuity of support to causes that one cares indeed started (Brooks, 2020). One feels a sense of integrity when they feel delighted over their achievements (Garcia, 2018) that translate into advocacies. How work transforms into advocacy is because of the passion and interest that never failed to die down. Throughout the years, they stay engaged in their work (Brooks, 2020).

Moreover, advocacy is seen as the transition of future responsibilities to the next generation and thereby sees mentoring as an excellent way to promote this type of teaching-learning relationship. It is even thought that both younger and older workers have complementary skill sets that would enable more productivity in the workplace (Gorvett, 2019). Moreover, contribution to the success of other people becomes vital when one experiences life experiences of successes themselves (Garcia, 2019).

Lastly, it is an opportunity that allows the octogenarian to move forward the mission of making a difference. Moving forward demands a paradigm shift and capitalizing on training to enable its continued existence. It is reflective of the results of Ulrich (2003) and Sewdas et al.'s (2017) qualitative studies that an elderly on employment who keeps on learning and can demonstrate the right competencies do feel good. Work to an octogenarian is not the characteristic of work that the productive workforce envisions it to be. It is a life-enduring endeavor that goes beyond retirement. It entails dedication, perseverance, commitment, and firm determination to sustain its existence.

This study is limited in its scope; only one participant qualified because of the stringent criteria set forth by the authors. The rigorous criteria were conceived to reflect on how work, life, and advocacy can be intertwined to support a vision that would create a significant influence on the lives of the recipients. Further, this is time bound, limiting the ability of the researchers to recruit respondents from other locales.

Nursing practice has evolved over the years and has become more specialized than ever. This knowledge would allow nurses to have a deeper understanding of what the elderly can contribute to the community and, in return, would have specialized skills and training in responding to the needs of the elderly working population. It may mean that senior nurses who can still work and contribute to the organization can likewise become valuable assets in the different areas of nursing practice on which they have served and continue to mentor younger ones. It allows the transition and learning of experiences to be more in-depth and more significant.

Conclusions

Working beyond 80 years old becomes possible when one dedicates the undertakings in the fulfillment of the individuals' vision and mission. It becomes life-sustaining when it grows into a source for the enhancement of one's quality of life. Each work endeavor becomes a fountain of youth that extends the individual's life.

It is implied that age is not a limiting factor to still pursue being in the labor force. Various reasons underlie the different meanings of work in old age. The case can be an example set as a policy driver for legislators and the key personnel in the labor force to consider the employment of older people, even those octogenarians and older. It is recommended that the study be pursued further to a qualitative phenomenological study using the same methodology with more respondents.

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