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# From the boardroom to the clubhouse: using a novel qualitative data collection method to inform interviews exploring the role of golf club membership in the retirement transition process

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that having meaningful occupations and active, valued social roles is important in successfully transitioning into retirement. Golf is often associated with retirees and studies show participation can have generic health benefits. However, this research aims to explore if golf club membership can satisfy a deeper need for meaning and social interaction in the absence of the work role. Eight retirees who were active members of a golf club participated in the study. A novel methodology was utilised, involving a five-minute writing task designed to elicit spontaneous thought about the subject of retirement. Themes derived from the writing task were used to inform semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of combined data from interviews and the writing task generated four themes: *keeping busy*, *freedom from the work role*, *the social side of golf*, and *continued sense of purpose*. The writing task proved successful in summoning succinct yet rich data that tapped into spontaneous and raw thoughts about retirement and should be considered for use in future qualitative work. Results demonstrate that golf club membership can offer volunteering and personal development opportunities in addition to being a place where social identity can be re-negotiated, helping to replace the social roles and meaningful occupations lost in the transition out of work.

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## Introduction

Retirement appears to many as a glistening prize, rewarding freedom from a life dedicated to toilsome work and study. However, retirement is a stage in life that is often overlooked in its complexity, presenting new challenges, opportunities and threats to those seeking to don what James and Wink (2006, xxx) call the 'crown of life'.

The definition of retirement is complex, with its ambiguity being the only thing retirement scholars can agree on. Previously it was simply considered to be the time when the worker was physically unable to continue working (Beehr and Bowling 2013), but now retirement means something different to everyone (Kim and Hall 2013). Denton and Spencer (2008) synthesised eight commonly used definitions of retirement, including examples such as non-participation in the workforce, reduction in hours worked and receipt of pension. The definition chosen for the present study was self-assessed retirement – asking participants if they consider themselves to be retired (Denton and Spencer 2008). The wide usage of this definition in the literature can be attributed to its convenience, flexibility and the way it turns the subjectivity of defining retirement onto the

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participant. In addition, retirement is conceptualised in this study through a psychological lens, meaning that 1) it views retirement as an adjustment process as opposed to a singular decision event, 2) it places emphasis on the psychological mechanisms and antecedents that influence retirement, allowing for insight into individual experience, and 3) it examines the dualistic relationship between the retiree and his or her environment, acknowledging the control the retiree has over their own experiences (Shultz and Wang 2011).

### *Meaningful occupations and social roles*

Employment often forms the basis of a person's identity (Newman, Jeon, and Hulin 2013) and is a meaningful occupation in that it provides value to time spent, an element of challenge and regularity to a person's life (Jonsson, Josephsson, and Kielhofner 2001). In addition, employment constitutes a significant part of a person's social role. This means that a person's position within a social network can be defined by their job role as well as providing that person with a sense of purpose and worth (Heaven et al. 2013). Once a person has retired, be it forced or by choice, they have to adjust as they get used to the lifestyle changes that come with the transition from work to retirement (Von Bonsdorff and Ilmarinen 2013). If a person is unable to re-negotiate their identity away from that of their employed self, they may become vulnerable to experiencing an unsuccessful retirement transition (Baltes and Rudolph 2013). To overcome this, Atchley's (1989) continuity theory helps to explain how people should seek to create a retirement that bears a resemblance to their work life. In other words, as a person transitions from employment to retirement, they should be replacing lost work roles with new roles that add meaning to their life and that once again define their social position, providing a new sense of identity and worth. There is evidence to suggest that seeking these meaningful occupations and social roles in the transition phase can aid a successful retirement. For example, a systematic review by Heaven et al. (2013) showed that interventions offering explicit social roles to people going through a retirement transition can improve health and well-being. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of recent retirees in Australia found that participating in activities in retirement benefitted participants feelings of retirement satisfaction and adjustment, provided the activity was truly meaningful and aligned with their values and interests (Pepin and Deutscher 2011). Considering this, there is an opportunity here to explore the specific arenas apart from employment within which recent retirees can find meaningful ways to spend their time and construct a new social identity.

### *Leisure in retirement*

Retirement is often perceived by those late in their career as a time of liberty from the obligations of employment, offering instead the freedom to spend time as they please, perhaps on hobbies, activities and investing in relationships (Bauger and Bongaardt 2016). Research by Ekerdt and Koss (2016) showed that sentiments of increased time sovereignty were salient in the minds of the recently retired, expressing satisfaction at the freedom from work-related obligations and the ability to spend time on more gratifying endeavours. Gardening, cooking and sport are amongst the leisure activities commonly associated with the retired individual simply because they facilitate freedom of choice and self-determination (Dorfman 2013), as well as being the foundations of new social interactions and the scaffolding within which the expanse of life after work can be built (Taylor and Schaffer 2013). Additionally, engagement in volunteer and leisure activities in retirement has been shown to significantly improve life satisfaction (Kim and Feldman 2000). Widening a person's leisure portfolio can improve retrospective life satisfaction, whilst ceasing leisure activities has the opposite effect (Silverstein and Parker 2002). Furthermore, Heo et al. (2010) found that people who display serious commitment to their leisure activity reported improved affect and higher subjective well-being in retirement than those not seriously committed to a leisure activity.

As mentioned, leisure can manifest as involvement in sporting activities. A study of Dutch retirees showed that sports involvement has almost doubled in the last 25-years, specifically in sports such as cycling, walking, swimming, gymnastics and tennis, and retirees are now more likely to be sports club members than previous decades (Cozijnsen, Stevens, and Van Thilburg 2013). One reason for this may be the overall health and wellbeing benefits of physical activity found by retirees (Barnett, Guell, and Ogilvie 2012). However, Dorfman (2013) notes that one of the primary challenges of retirement is finding leisure activities capable of replacing the rewards and accomplishments offered by the working context, such as social togetherness, personal growth and a sense of achievement. These can all be found in sport as evidenced by the following studies. Firstly, whereas before the workplace might be the primary source of friendships, retirees can find an equivalent camaraderie and social togetherness in sporting activities (Becchetti, Ricca, and Pellioni 2012; Dorfman 2013; Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich 2020), this may look like a four-ball of golfers playing regularly each week and stopping for a drink in the clubhouse afterwards. Secondly, sport can provide opportunities for personal growth, identity re-invention and expansion of oneself (Liechty, Yarnal, and Kerstetter 2012; Dorfman 2013), allowing retirees to re-negotiate or adapt roles lost in the workplace. Finally, sport is competitive by nature and so can facilitate a continued sense of achievement and mastery that success at work might once have provided, warding off feelings of uselessness in retirement (Barnett, Guell, and Ogilvie 2012). In addition, a systematic review by Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich (2020) showed that the presence of competition and challenge was important in older adult sport participation and by achieving goals through their sport, older adults are able to challenge stereotypes regarding the capabilities of the ageing person. Furthermore, older adults are motivated to volunteer within their sport in order to continue to utilise skills they have accumulated during their career, seeking stimulation from this involvement, contributing to the desire to continue achieving in some sense as they transition out of employment (Hamm-Kerwin, Misener, and Doherty 2009).

### *Golf and the present study*

For those unfamiliar with golf, players attempt to strike a small ball into a four-and-a-half-inch hole at the other end of a uniquely designed stretch of land (sometimes in excess of six hundred yards in length) eighteen times over. Golfers must utilise a mixture of strength, skill, finesse, and careful selection from their armoury of up to fourteen differently shaped 'clubs' to forge a trouble-free path through the elements, avoiding lakes, coastlines, sand traps, and foliage as they go. Typically played in groups of two, three or four people over a period of about four hours, and approximately eight kilometres in walking distance (Parkkari et al. 2000) golf is a social game, with on-course conversation central to its appeal.

Anecdotally, it is easy to see the health and social benefits offered by the very nature of golf, and these observations are supported by research. At a basic level, a Delphi consensus by Murray et al. (2018) concluded that playing golf benefitted overall physical and mental health and wellbeing, and Stenner, Mosewich, and Buckley (2016) go a step further, suggesting that golf can be socially rewarding as people are interacting with likeminded individuals, bonding over their relative triumphs and faux-pas on the golf course. Being outdoors when playing golf is also important as the closeness to wildlife, plants and water creates a relaxing and enjoyable environment in which to spend time (Berlin and Klenosky 2014). It is also noted that a key driver for sport participation amongst older adults is the 'desire to challenge their own limits and abilities, set goals and achieve them, and be successful in their chosen sport at an appropriate level' (Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich 2020, 10). Golf can serve this purpose for several reasons and it is no surprise that it remains one of the most popular sports amongst older adults (Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich 2020). For example, Siegenthaler and O'Dell (2003, 47) explain that golf requires only a 'moderate degree of physical activity', which means as a physical endeavour, the sport is accessible to many despite the inevitable physical decline of the ageing body. Additionally,

aerobic exercise (of which golf would be an example) in older age has been shown to increase hippocampal volume, improving spatial memory and reducing the risk of dementia (Erickson et al. 2011). Golf is also unique in that it incorporates a handicap system which affords less competent golfers the chance to seriously compete against a golfer much more skilled than themselves. Furthermore, improvements in competency can be easily measured by way of reductions in this handicap.

However, golf's history of exclusivity and elitism cannot be overlooked and remains an unfortunate reality in the sport. The most recent statistics make for bleak reading; of the 4.1 million golfers in Europe, only 25% are female (KPMG 2019), white British adults dominate a 98.1% share of golf participation in the UK (Sport England 2020), and participation disparity between the higher and lower socio-economic positions continues to grow (Widdop and Parnell 2016). This being said, campaigns such as *#ThisGirlCan* jointly run by *Sport England* and the *National Lottery* are leading the way in the UK for making golf more appealing and accessible to women through community taster sessions, and flexible, affordable membership packages offered by companies such as *PlayMoreGolf*, are helping golf become more financially accessible.

Based on the above, the authors believe the interplay between golf and retirement is worthy of further research and have identified a previously unexplored section of this relationship. So far, research is yet to go beyond the basic social and health benefits of golf and explore the possibility that golf club membership might also offer meaningful occupations and new social roles in retirement. Furthermore, Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich (2020) conclude in their review that a better grasp of why older adults participate in sport could be gained by further research into sports like golf which have been underrepresented in the literature. The purpose of this study therefore is to examine the role of golf club membership during the retirement transition and discuss its ability to replace the work role by providing meaningful occupations, social roles and a continued sense of purpose and achievement.

## Method

### Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study and there are several reasons for this selection as will now be discussed. Firstly, most retirement research is theoretical or quantitative (Fisher and Willis 2013) and so this research is partly in response to an apparent qualitative void. Secondly, it has been noted by Szinovacz (2013) that until now, research on retirement has relied on a 'single-level approach', and that retirement will not be well understood until research considers the context in which it occurs. In response to this critique, the present research employs a qualitative methodology that grants a deep understanding of context by accessing rich, accounts of individual experience (Smith and Caddick 2012). Thirdly, the existing research presented throughout the introduction is predominantly broad in its approach, highlighting the existence of a void in the literature for a more contextually informed, focussed look at these phenomena within one outlet of leisure – a golf club, and a qualitative exploration is equipped for this purpose.

Additionally, this study aimed to trial a novel method of collecting qualitative data to inform semi-structured interviews – a role usually reserved for focus groups. For example, a study on psychological resilience in expert cricket batsmen (Brown, Butt, and Sarkar 2019) used focus groups to inform interviews with participants by first analysing the focus group data, and using the themes derived to construct follow-up interviews. However, Brown, Butt and Sarkar themselves note that focus groups are limited in that their participants could only offer singular accounts of their experiences, reducing the extent to which those experiences could be fully understood, perhaps because participants were competing for the chance to speak. More broadly with regard to focus groups, dominant characters can sway group opinion in their favour and socially accepted views are more likely to be shared in the social environment of a focus group, both resulting in reduced individuality of responses

(Smithson 2000). So, with inspiration from the procedure utilised by Brown, Butt, and Sarkar (2019), the present study aims to trial the use of a writing task to inform semi-structured interviews.

Data collection consisted of two stages: a writing task followed by individual semi-structured interviews. The writing task has been adapted from a reflective practice technique conceived by Bolton (2014) where it was used to initiate the reflective process by getting reflectors to write unguided for six-minutes without stopping, about anything that springs to mind. The reflector then conducts more structured reflective tasks on salient points in their writing. The exact procedure used is outlined below, but fundamentally the writing task served to open the topic of retirement in a broad way, accessing raw, unfiltered, internal monologues which may not have come forth in an interview setting. Interviews were then conducted, with the themes derived from the writing task providing the structure to the questioning and to afford participants the chance to elaborate upon and give context to these themes.

### **Positioning**

At this stage it is important to acknowledge the author's position on the research topic and the lead author's (TH) involvement in golf and the environment in which this study took place. TH is far from the age bracket of the studied population but spent most of his childhood as a member at the golf club in question, regularly playing with the recently retired, including many of the participants. For this reason, TH had his own beliefs about the topics covered in this study following countless conversations and observations amongst the older and recently retired population of the club. More recently his involvement in the administration of the club brought him in contact with members who took on additional volunteering roles within the club and it appeared that being part of the golf club meant more to these individuals than simply participating in the sport, offering instead a greater purpose in their life after work.

In addition, TH would, like many of the participants, be classified as a 'core devotee' golfer as explored by Siegenthaler and O'Dell (2003) and based on the original categories of serious leisure created by Stebbins (1992). He is a single figure handicap golfer who outwardly displays the norms, etiquette, rules and traditions of the game, he seeks great meaning from engaging with all aspects of the sport, it provides many social connections for TH as well as being the industry in which he is currently employed. Because of TH's pre-existing association with the research environment and participants, the present research is philosophically underpinned by a relativist ontology and a constructionist epistemology. This position acknowledges the fact that the social reality explored here is humanly constructed, multiple and subjective, and assumes that the researcher and the participants are inextricably linked and thus 'findings' are a consequence of this interaction rather than being independent of the researcher (Smith and Caddick 2012).

It is believed by both authors that the above factors served to enhance TH's ability to facilitate effective data collection as terminology and jargon, as well as specific references to the club could be discussed by participants without interruption to the flow of conversation. A reflexive journal was kept ensuring TH's assumptions, potential biases and previous interactions with the participants did not negatively impact the quality of the data.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a small number of participants whom the researcher believed well represented the desired population of recent retirees who were active in the club. Participants were recruited from a proprietary golf club in the south-east of England, and were eligible for participation if 1) they were a member of the golf club, and 2) they answered 'Yes' to the question 'Are you retired?' It is recognised that the participants were entirely white and represented medium to high socio-economic status. However, the south-east of England is 90.6% white (GOV.UK 2018), is the UK's wealthiest region, with the highest median total household wealth (Office of



National Statistics 2019) and as mentioned in the introduction, golf is a sport played predominantly by white people of a higher socio-economic status. Hence, the demographics of these participants is no surprise.

Eight participants took part in both the writing task and the interviews, five were women (59–67 years of age,  $M_{age} = 62.4$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ), and three were men (62–66 years of age,  $M_{age} = 63.33$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ). Duration of retirement ranged from a few months to twenty years, with the majority being in the early stages of retirement ( $M_{months} = 56.63$ ,  $SD = 72.68$ ).

## Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Royal Holloway, University of London Research Ethics Committee, the sample was contacted, and time slots were arranged to complete the first stage of data collection. TH conducted all data collection face-to-face at the golf club, either in the boardroom, an upstairs function room or the main bar area, depending on availability and participant preference.

The writing task was subject to a pilot study before it was used on the participants. Two participants took part in the pilot study and the results showed the technique to be viable, fostering short but rich accounts of their experiences. Participants were asked to provide feedback on the pilot study. It was deemed that the original six-minutes was too long, and the instructions could be streamlined. The procedure below is that of the full study. Many of the instructions given closely resemble those suggested by Bolton (2014).

Prior to arriving at the club, the participants only knew they would be completing a five-minute writing task and that the study was broadly looking at retirement. Participants were told that the researcher would give them a prompt, and after the prompt was given, they must begin writing immediately. They were instructed to keep writing for the full five-minutes, their pen must not leave the page and they must not pause to think at any point. The researcher explained this was because their writing should be unplanned and spontaneous, there were no right or wrong answers and participants must allow themselves to write whatever comes to mind, even if it did not seem relevant. Participants were also urged to ignore their inner critic, disregarding the need for good grammar or continuous prose, but instead prioritising getting their thoughts onto the page. The researcher reminded participants that they did not have to share their writing with anyone, including the researcher, if they did not want to and they would have a chance to re-read and make small, superficial corrections to their writing after the allotted time. Following a final reminder of key instructions of the task, the researcher issued the prompt and participants began writing immediately. The prompt chosen was as follows: 'Imagine we have gone back in time and it is about a year before you retired. Someone says "retirement" to you, what springs to mind?' For the most part, the researcher sat in silence during the writing but occasionally encouraged the participant to continue writing if they paused for any longer than three seconds. The researcher alerted the participant when the time was up and allowed the participant to finish their sentence. Participants wrote between 119 words and 174 words ( $M = 144.63$ ,  $SD = 20.34$ ). Few participants made *post hoc* corrections and when they did, corrections were minor and superficial. Finally, participants were asked to suggest a pseudonym for use in the final report. Only one participant did not and in this case the researcher chose a name that was culturally and historically relevant.

Interviews were conducted approximately three months after the writing task and took place at the golf club in the aforementioned locations. A recording device was used to capture audio and the researcher took supplementary notes to help guide the more exploratory questions. Interviews lasted between 17:23 and 54:53 minutes ( $M = 34:44$ ,  $SD = 13:58$ ). A semi-structured format was followed whereby all participants were asked a set list of questions that were borne directly out of the themes derived from the writing task data, and follow-up questions were used to gain a deeper understanding of individual responses. The set list of questions was individually tailored by including

references to their writing task data. Examples of how this was done can be seen throughout the results section.

### **Data analysis and research quality**

Considering the philosophical positioning of this study, a reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2019) has been used. Central to this method is the recognition that the researcher plays a part in knowledge production. Results and themes are by no means stumbled upon, rather they are dually constructed through the researchers' deep engagement with the data, the constant pondering and challenging of their theoretical assumptions, and their experience and skill (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). The journey through reflexive thematic analysis is signposted by six steps leading from familiarisation with the data to the write-up but, to purloin Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016, 198) own analogy, the way there is 'more like following a hose through long grass, where you cannot clearly see the way ahead, and the path is not direct: sometimes you move forwards; other times you coil back on yourself.' The analysis was free from the constraints of a recipe-like method but instead followed a snaking path through the process, thoughtfully engaged with and deeply immersed in the data.

The two-step data collection of this study also added two layers to the data analysis process. Firstly, the writing task data was analysed inductively, with this data being used to generate an initial set of themes upon which the interviews could be based, these themes were *time for more, a new chapter, ageing, keeping busy, planning, and money*. Next, the interview data was analysed, combining both deductive and inductive approaches as data was analysed and themes developed through the lens of the themes generated in the writing task, and new themes could be constructed inductively from data unique to the interviews. The final themes established after all analyses were *keeping busy, freedom from the work role, the social side of golf, and continued sense of purpose*.

In order to bolster the trustworthiness or rigour of this research, certain criteria have been considered to judge methodological quality, but in keeping with a relativist ontology, criteria have not been universally applied. Instead, taking heed of recommendations by Smith et al. (2017) criteria were open-ended and evolved during the study, rather than being rigid and pre-determined. At the time of writing, the criteria chosen were: 1) worthy topic 2) resonance, as synthesised by Tracy (2010), 3) fidelity of the subject matter and 4) utility of methods in achieving study goals (Levitt et al. 2017). Retirement research is more relevant now than ever considering the UK's growing ageing population: in 1997 roughly one-in-six UK people (15.9%) were over the age of 65 whereas 20-years later, that figure is more like one-in-five (18.2%) and is projected to be one-in-four (24%) by 2037 (Office of National Statistics 2018). By learning about the nature of retirement and the characteristics of smooth retirement transitions, it is hoped the ever-increasing older generation might be able to fully capitalise on their 'golden years' (Beehr and Bowling 2013), and retirement research is therefore deemed a worthy topic. Considering resonance, the author presented the results such that they might resonate with readers who could liken the experiences portrayed to their own, creating generalisability in a naturalistic sense. Finally, the chosen methodology aimed to allow an intimate connection with and understanding of the participants experience on an individual level which both enhanced fidelity and confirmed this method as appropriate for achieving the study goals.

### **Results and discussion**

The results below present a combined look at the writing task and interview data with an emphasis on how the writing task data was developed and elaborated upon through the interviews. The discussion begins with an exploration into the utility of the writing task in this study, the benefits found in this method and why the authors believe it should be considered as a method to be used in future research. Next, the final themes generated are presented and discussed.



### The writing task

A novel methodology in the form of a writing task was employed to inform semi-structured interviews that aimed to generate unique data previously inaccessible via traditional methods such as focus groups. This proved successful in providing the researcher with rich but concise data that tapped into participants' internal monologues, affording the researcher a glimpse into their spontaneous, unfiltered, raw thoughts as they were prompted to think about a topic. An extract from Mary's writing perfectly captures how this method draws out fleeting moments of cognitive activity onto the page:

Play some more golf, maybe can't afford it, think about that, not a problem been planning for a long time (Mary, writing task).

It is brief and blunt, yet it reveals a great deal about Mary's thoughts on her personal retirement transition and the internal conversations that occur beyond the veil of the spoken word.

In addition, the initial broadness of the prompt used in the writing task allowed the participants the freedom to explore their own thoughts on retirement and not be constrained to responding to a limited view of retirement transitions presented by the researcher – as would likely happen had the data collection began with a semi-structured interview with questions generated out of the authors own understanding and interpretations of retirement. The authors were thus able to interpret this data in conjunction with their own assumptions, and create interview questions, reflexively derived from the written data. As mentioned previously, focus groups have been used in existing research to precede an interview, gathering broader data in a group setting (Brown, Butt, and Sarkar 2019). The writing task has shown its ability to fulfil this role by providing valuable, concise and ample data with which interviews can be created, without the potential foibles associated with gathering data in the social setting of a focus group (Smithson 2000). In summary, the writing task employed here is a simple, quick, and effective way of collecting data upon which semi-structured interviews can be based, but it is also fascinating and insightful data in its own right and should be considered by qualitative researchers in future as an alternative to other more established methods.

### Keeping busy

For some, the notion of doing nothing is unfamiliar because the hectic schedules of their working careers prevented it, so the void of retirement stretching out before them was a daunting prospect. In response, their retirement became a continuation of this same busy schedule:

I think that's probably to do with I've always worked, you know [my husband] would say sometimes, "why don't you just sit down, read a book or watch the television?" Well that is so alien to me, to just sit down and do nothing, or take time out, I'm not that, I need to keep busy, I think I always like to keep busy (Fiona, interview)

[Keeping busy is] very important. I can't sit and do nothing. No. no. It's not in my nature. We've got quite a big house, big garden, so there's always something to be done in the home. And if I sit down, I would be doing ... knitting or something, I can't sit and do nothing (Janis, interview).

The distinction, however, lies in the nature of activity. Although they may appear as busy as ever, they are occupied with leisure activities rather than work;

I wanna get up and I get busy with something, and obviously it's not work anymore, it's busy walking the dog, busy down the allotment, busy reading ... (Shep, interview).

These results resemble those of Wink (2007) with data from the Institute of Human Development's longitudinal study of retirees. Some described how busy their lives were with hobbies, family engagements and holidays, and those familiar to working full-time welcomed more free time, thus devoting it to their passions. Participants in the present study were familiar with the busy schedules of work life and achieved this same intensity in their retirement by replacing work with leisure. In line with Atchley's (1989) continuity theory, the *need* to keep busy may stem from

the loss of work roles, and in order to maintain a level of continuity during the transition and avoid feelings of loss, participants attempt to replace these work roles by throwing themselves into a myriad of activities, filling their schedules as they begin the process of re-shaping their identity. This idea was similarly found in research by Ekerdt and Koss (2016) who showed that there was an element of discomfort amongst interviewees when asked to recall a recent day in which they perceived themselves to have achieved very little. The participants also displayed criticism towards fellow retirees who didn't, 'get off their butt and enjoy life' (Ekerdt and Koss 2016, 1306), and hence were keen to show their achievement-focussed work identity was not lost in retirement but rather continued in a new form.

Further demonstration of this theme came from Janis for whom golf served as more than just a means of keeping busy but as a 'saving grace' that helped her regain a sense of identity in retirement. After caring for her elderly parents for many years, Janis lacked confidence and felt insular. Whilst Janis was grateful for the time with her parents, she suffered from identity loss and so towards the end of her parents' lives, golf provided Janis with the chance to rebuild her identity:

... when both my parents had passed away, I went on to do voluntary work for a disabled charity and of course started playing golf. This was my saving grace as I then had something to focus on (Janis, writing task).

The benefit of a two-stage data collection process was exemplified here as a short moment of thought captured in Janis' writing could be explored fully in the interview. In this case the researcher asked the generic question, 'What role has the golf club played in your transition into retirement,' which was asked to all participants, along with a specific reference to Janis' mentioning of golf as a saving grace in her writing. The following is Janis' interview response:

... [golf] gave me an interest and an outside interest from the ten years that I was looking after my parents, 'cause that was quite full on, so I could come out and just get away so long as I knew everything was alright at home, I could come out and play my golf. I think it gave me a bit more confidence again ... you become insular because you're totally focussed on looking after your parents ... so it gave me much more confidence to go back out and do things thinking, "Oh, yeah I have still got a purpose and I can still do things, not quite dead in the head yet." So, it was good to come to play golf, and I love it, I just love to be out in the fresh air, love meeting people and yeah, it was good.

For Janis, being able to get out and play golf was a welcome break from the challenges of caring for her parents, reinforcing the findings of Stenner, Mosewich, and Buckley (2016) who showed that golf can act as a form of temporary escapism from the stressors of life, including caring for family members. In this sense, the golf club became a place of solace and relaxation during her pre-retirement life. Additionally, playing golf helped Janis reform her identity in the transition from caring to retirement by providing cognitive stimulation and purpose to life as well as new friendships. This shows that the findings of Liechty, Yarnal, and Kerstetter (2012) research on leisure innovation in retired women can be extended from sport in general, as a means of re-inventing identity, to the more specific context of golf.

### *Freedom from the work role*

From participants' responses to both modes of data collection, there was a strong sense that retirement was a chance to invest more time in the leisure activities and past-times that working life could not accommodate. This was salient for Fiona, coming through initially in her writing, 'The thought of retirement, the first and most important thought for me was more leisure time as I had worked for 43 years without a break ...' When questioned in the interview, Fiona elaborated:

'Cause when you're working Monday to Friday, everything has to happen on a Saturday or a Sunday and like for years I used to play hockey and just like a silly example like I never went to the shops on a Saturday in hockey because you never had any time ... so it was just taking more time to do things that maybe I wouldn't have [to] run round like a headless chicken.

Similarly, Shep and Mary recognised retirement was the time of life to focus on more enjoyable activities:

Retirement is a time of life to spend time on the things that you wished you could be doing more of when you were actually working ... (Shep, writing task)

I do more of the things that I like to do. I've read a lot more again, I've taken up some of my hobbies again, you know I make bits and bobs, so that free time has become much more free time than I had before (Mary, interview).

These sentiments resonate with the work of Ekerdt and Koss (2016) who found increased time sovereignty to be the most common response among participants when asked to talk about their thoughts on retirement. However, as discussed by Rai et al. (2019), this increased abundance and control over free time can be accompanied by difficulty in establishing routines, especially ones involving exercise, and adjusting to life after the work role. By comparison, the participants in Ekerdt and Koss (2016) study were significantly older than those in the present study, with a mean age of 79 – sixteen years older than the present cohort, and spoke more extensively about routine and structure, differing from the participants of this study who focussed more on the freedom of retirement. It may be that the younger cohort of this study remain in a 'honeymoon period' of their retirement transition, free to romp about their newly acquired leisure time, and not yet settling into the routines and rituals that structure the days of Ekerdt and Koss's older retirees. This finding echoes that of Bauger and Bongaardt (2016) who also found early retirement to be a departure from routine, with recent retirees embracing instead the opportunity to linger in the moment, wherever that might be. In sum, this shows that early retired life is a place to explore the benefits of increased time sovereignty, wading into the activities that nine-to-five schedules constrained and facilitating the search for past-times that will eventually provide the framework around which new routines can be built.

### *The social side of golf*

The opportunity to socialise was a commonly cited benefit of the golf club. Capturing this most clearly was Francis, who missed the badinage of his work environment, expressing how the golf club has been important for his continued engagement in a camaraderie that he wouldn't expect to be replaced by life at home:

I think also, what the golf course is, particularly this golf club, is the sociability ... you know stand on the front tee on a Thursday morning and get your leg ripped off because QPR have just lost. It doesn't happen at home, it can only happen at golf clubs, that means a lot to me (Francis, interview).

Research has already shown that sport can be a source of camaraderie and social togetherness in retirement when the previously relied upon workplace environment is *in absentia* (Becchetti, Ricca, and Pellioni 2012; Dorfman 2013; Stenner, Mosewich, and Buckley 2016). To further this, our results demonstrate that membership at the golf club helps recent retirees engage in meaningful, important and missed social opportunities grieved in the transition from the sociability of the workplace.

For the women in particular, the golf club was another asset on their social balance sheet, adding diversity to their existing social landscape, and increasing it in size. Initially for Mary, this came through in her writing as just two words, 'New people.' The interview shed some more light on what this meant to her;

... met a lot of people [at the golf club] which has been very nice. Played a lot of golf here, it's introduced me to a lot of people in other clubs that I've made friends with, so it's widened my circle of friends (Mary, interview).

In Fiona's case the golf club was another means of investing in a retired, leisurely, sport playing, social self, gradually replacing the working self she has left behind.

I suppose I'm very lucky because I have lots of friend in more than one place. So, I still have friends from my hockey days, I still play tennis, I have golf friends and I have my social friends ... yes, the golf club is an important element, it's only an element, it's not the main force (Fiona, interview).

Here we see that Fiona has been flexible and adaptable in her utilisation of social resources, pooling friendships from various hobbies and activities from both pre- and post-retirement. This adaptability is a key facet to negotiating what Baltes and Rudolph (2013) define as a successful retirement transition. Fiona has potentially avoided negative psychological disturbances such as loneliness or depression that can often accompany the retirement transition if the retiree is overly invested, socially, in the work role (Baltes and Rudolph 2013). Instead, she demonstrates successful adaptation through a diversified social landscape with a healthy disengagement from the work role. Interestingly, the golf club is not central to Fiona's social life but is a component to its diversity. This strengthens the idea that membership at a golf club can contribute to successful retirement transitions as it can help a person develop important friendships unrelated to work, aiding their disengagement from their work role.

### *Continued sense of purpose*

Another aspect discussed by participants was their engagement in the golf club as a volunteer on the club committee. Five out of eight participants have been or were currently Ladies, Men's or Club Captain, and six of eight had previously or currently served other roles on the committee. Volunteering can be done with both altruism and individualism in mind and is believed to be important for people going through retirement transitions (Hedge and Albright 2013). This links strongly to the theme of *keeping busy* as the opportunity to volunteer for a committee role within the golf club helped deliver a continued sense of purpose and meaning to their lives in retirement. For example, Mary says:

... golf has played a large part and then 'course still being involved in the committee ... most days I have something to do with golf ... I could see why some people fall into this pit of hopelessness of "I'm no longer useful." Perhaps that's one of the reasons I continued to do voluntary work because perhaps I wasn't ready to not be useful ... (Mary, interview).

For others, a role on the committee allowed them to channel the skills they built up over a career into a more enjoyable setting. When asked about his role as Men's Captain, Walter said:

... it kept my mind going, it kept my need to work with other people in like a non-sporting sense, more like a business sense, and I was able to use a lot of the skills that I had from my employment in that environment. So, if you like, it was almost work, but really enjoyable work, and obviously it wasn't paid and it kept me active mentally, and helped me build relationships with people (Walter, interview).

Similarly, Shep found that being Club Captain meant his career skills were not lost in retirement, but rather developed and re-applied to a more enjoyable and rewarding arena:

... your work life brings you; you know gives you a lot of experience. I was operating at a leadership level ... So, I wouldn't say any of that is lost in retirement ... It's extremely useful as Captain because you have to communicate a lot to people, in writing, face-to-face, in different situations. (Shep, interview).

Those that took up roles on the committee in retirement can be likened to what Kim and Hall (2013) call, 'Late Passion-Followers'. These people align their passions with their work in later life in a bid to become more holistic people. Shep, for example, is passionate about developing people and his job allowed him to accumulate the necessary skills, but retirement into a valued role at the golf club has afforded Shep the chance to expend these skills in a more enjoyable setting.

The golf club – specifically volunteering on the committee – can also be seen to offer important social roles and meaningful occupations to participants as they transition into retirement. Heaven et al.'s (2013) definition of social roles suggests purpose, worth and structure are important in retirement; Shep has developed 'a fairly strong sense of purpose' (interview) from being on the

committee, Mary's continued involvement in the committee is because she 'wasn't ready to not be useful' (interview) thus giving her worth in a new role, and for Walter, the committee role provided structure, new meaning and a new challenging environment to ascribe work skills to – all of which are characteristics associated with meaningful occupations (Jonsson, Josephsson, and Kielhofner 2001).

Additionally, it appears participants are demonstrating what Rai et al. (2019) would describe as a 'gain focus' towards retirement, seeing it as a time of liberation in which control over their lives can be reclaimed and new goals attained. For Francis, rather than a chance to slow down, retirement offers opportunities for continued growth and learning:

What retirement should be is a further chapter in one's life. A stage which brings fulfilment, a sense of achievement . . . and a continuing sense of purpose which a professional career brings (writing task).

In a similar vein, Shultz and Wang (2011) note that retirement is no longer viewed as death to the work life, but rather as an opportunity to continue some form of 'work' in a different venue. Curiously, however, the idea that retirement is a 'further chapter in one's life' was not a view held by all. For example, when asked if retirement was a 'new chapter' in life, Gloria and Janis differed greatly:

Very much so. Very much so. Because the rule book changes . . . the whole framework of your life is different, so a new chapter is a very clear way of describing it (Gloria, interview).

I didn't ever feel it was a new chapter because it was something I just progressed into . . . it was a progression really and eventually sort of another life took over from what I was doing (Janis, interview).

In all cases, however, there was a sense of novelty in their descriptions of retirement, recognising that regardless of their journey, retirement represented a different way of life that required an element of adjustment. This period of adjustment centres around the increased autonomy and agency that accompanies retirement which is both daunting and enlivening (Bauger and Bongaardt 2016).

## Concluding remarks

This study fundamentally aimed to explore the role of golf club membership in the retirement transition of eight recent retirees through a two-stage, contextually specific, qualitative methodology. The motivation to undertake this study was borne out of the researcher's anecdotal experiences of retirees within a golf club and the observation that the club seemed to mean more to them than simply a venue to participate in a sport. It is somewhat of a cliché that golf is a game for the elderly, so this study was interested in whether being a member at a golf club harbours a deeper meaning and purpose in the lives of the retired than participating in a sport for generic health benefits.

Based on the results of the present research, the overarching conclusion is that golf is a tremendous past-time for the recent retiree, not only for the health and wellbeing benefits explored in previous research, but in its ability to satisfy the social and occupational needs left unfulfilled by the loss of the work role. Golf club membership can offer meaningful volunteering opportunities in the form of club committees; it can provide structure to life after a nine-to-five routine, a means to reform a person's identity away from that of the working self, and new, active social roles.

The reality is that any environment alike a golf club offering social engagement, a new meaningful focus to life and opportunities for continued personal growth is likely going to be beneficial to the recent retiree, be it a tennis club, art club or amateur dramatics society. The methodology employed in this study could easily be applied to any of these settings, exploring the possibility that the results could translate across a range of hobbies or sports. Further research of this ilk would bolster the view formed by this study that leisure activities such as golf do more than simply keep people active in retirement, but satisfy a deeper, more intrinsic need in the lives of those

adjusting to life after work.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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