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Reading 27

THE BUSY ETHIC

Moral Continuity Between Work and Retirement

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There is a way that people talk about retirement that emphasizes the importance of being busy. Just as there is a work ethic that holds industriousness and self-reliance as virtues so, too, there

is a "busy ethic" for retirement that honors an active life. It represents people's attempts to justify retirement in terms of their long-standing beliefs and values.

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The modern institution of retirement has required that our society make many provisions for it. Foremost among these are the economic arrangements and mechanisms that support Social Security, private pensions, and other devices for retirement financing. Political understandings have also been reached about the claim of younger workers on employment and the claim of older people on a measure of income security. At the same time, our cultural map of the life course has now been altered to include a separate stage of life called retirement, much as the life course once came to include the new stage of "adolescence" (Keniston, 1974).

Among other provisions, we should also expect that some moral arrangements may have emerged to validate and defend the lifestyle of retirement. After all, a society that traditionally identifies work and productivity as a wellspring of virtue would seem to need some justification for a life of pensioned leisure. How do retirees and observers alike come to feel comfortable with a "retired" life? In this [essay] I will suggest that retirement is morally managed and legitimated on a day-to-day basis in part by an ethic that esteems leisure that is earnest, occupied, and filled with activity—a "busy ethic." The ideas in this [essay] developed out of research on the retirement process at the Normative Aging Study, a prospective study of aging in community-dwelling men (Bosse et al., 1984).

The Work Ethic in Use

Before discussing how the busy ethic functions, it is important to note a few aspects about its parent work ethic. The work ethic, like any ethic, is a set of beliefs and values that identifies what is good and affirms ideals of conduct. It provides criteria for the evaluation of behavior and action. The work ethic historically has identified work with virtue and has held up for esteem a conflation of such traits and habits as diligence, initiative, temperance, industriousness, competitiveness, self-reliance, and the capacity for deferred gratification. The work ethic, however, has never had a single consistent

expression nor has it enjoyed universal assent within Western cultures.

Another important point is that the work ethic historically has torn away from its context, become more abstract and therefore more widely useful (Rodgers, 1978). When the work ethic was Calvinist and held out hope of heavenly rewards, believers toiled for the glory of God. When 19th century moralists shifted the promise toward earthly rewards, the work ethic motivated the middle class to toil because it was useful to oneself and the common weal. The coming of the modern factory system, however, with its painful labor conditions and de-emphasis on the self-sufficient worker, created a moral uncertainty about the essential nobility and instrumentality of work that made individuals want to take refuge in the old phrases and homilies all the more. As work ideals became increasingly abstract, they grew more available. Rodgers (1978) pointed out that workingmen now could invoke the work ethic as a weapon in the battle for status and self-respect, and so defend the dignity of labor and wrap themselves in a rhetoric of pride. Politicians of all persuasions could appeal to the work ethic and cast policy issues as morality plays about industry and laziness. Thus, despite the failed spiritual and instrumental validity of the work ethic, it persisted in powerful abstraction. And it is an abstract work ethic that persists today lacking, as do many other of our moral precepts, those contexts from which their original significance derived (MacIntyre, 1981). While there is constant concern about the health of the work ethic (Lewis, 1982; Yankelovich & Immerwhar, 1984), belief in the goodness of work continues as a piece of civic rhetoric that is important out of all proportion to its behavioral manifestations or utilitarian rewards.

Among persons approaching retirement, surveys show no fall-off in work commitment and subscription to values about work (Hanlon, 1983). Thus, assuming that a positive value orientation toward work is carried up to the threshold of retirement, the question becomes: What do people do with a work ethic when they no longer work?

Continuity of Beliefs and Values

The emergence of a busy ethic is no coincidence. It is, rather, a logical part of people's attempts to manage a smooth transition from work to retirement. Theorists of the life course have identified several conditions that ease an individual's transitions from one status to another. For example, transitions are easier to the extent that the new position has a well-defined role, or provides opportunities for attaining valued social goals, or when it entails a formal program of socialization (Burr, 1973; Rosow, 1974). Transitions are also easier when beliefs are continuous between two positions, that is, when action in the new position is built upon or integrated with the existing values of the person. Moral continuity is a benefit for the individual who is in transition, and for the wider social community as well.

In the abstract, retirement ought to entail the unlearning of values and attitudes—in particular, the work ethic—so that these should be no obstacle to adaptation. Upon withdrawal from work, emotional investment in, and commitment to, the work ethic should by rights be extinguished in favor of accepting leisure as a morally desirable lifestyle. Along these lines, there is a common recommendation that older workers, beginning in their 50s, should be “educated for leisure” in preparation for retirement. For example, the 1971 White House Conference on Aging recommended that “Society should adopt a policy of preparation for retirement, leisure, and education for life off the job . . . to prepare persons to understand and benefit from the changes produced by retirement” (p. 53).

But the work ethic is not unlearned in some resocialization process. Rather, it is transformed. There are two devices of this transformation that allow a moral continuity between work and retired life. One—the busy ethic—defends the daily conduct of retired life. The other—an ideology of pensions—legitimizes retirees' claim to income without the obligation to work. As to the latter, a special restitutive rhetoric has evolved that characterizes pensions as entitlements for

former productivity. Unlike others, such as welfare recipients, who stand outside the productive process, whose idleness incurs moral censure, and who are very grudgingly tendered financial support (Beck, 1967), the inoccupation of retirees is considered to have been *earned* by virtue of having *formerly* been productive. This veteran-ship status (Nelson, 1982) justifies the receipt of income without work, preserves the self-respect of retirees, and keeps retirement consistent with the dominant societal prestige system, which rewards members primarily to the extent that they are economically productive.

The Busy Ethic: Functions and Participants

Along with an ideology that defends the receipt of income without the obligation to work, there is an ethic that defends life without work. This “busy ethic” is at once a statement of value as well as an expectation of retired people—shared by retirees and nonretirees alike—that their lives should be active and earnest. (Retirees' actual levels of activity are, as shall be explained, another matter altogether; the emphasis here is on shared values about the conduct of life.) The busy ethic is named after the common question put to people of retireable age, “What will you do (or are you doing) to keep yourself busy?” and their equally common reports that “I have a lot to keep me busy” and “I'm as busy as ever.” Expressions of the busy ethic also have their pejorative opposites, for example, “I'd rot if I just sat around.” In naming the busy ethic, the connotation of busyness is more one of involvement and engagement than of mere bustle and hubbub.

The busy ethic serves several purposes: It legitimates the leisure of retirement, it defends retired people against judgments of obsolescence, it gives definition to [the] retirement role, and it “domesticates” retirement by adapting retired life to prevailing societal norms. Before discussing these functions of the busy ethic, it is important to emphasize that any normative feature of social life entails endorsement and management by multiple parties. There are three parties to the busy ethic.

First, of course, are the subjects of the busy ethic—older workers and retirees—who are parties to it by virtue of their status. They participate in the busy ethic to the degree that they subscribe to the desirability of an active, engaged lifestyle. When called upon to account for their lives as retirees, subjects of the busy ethic should profess to be “doing things” in retirement or, if still working, be planning to “do things.” Retirees can testify to their level of involvement in blanket terms, asserting: I’ve got plenty to do, I’m busier than when I was working. Or they can maintain in reserve a descriptive, mental list of activities (perhaps exaggerated or even fictitious) that can be offered to illustrate a sufficient level of engagement. These engagements run heavily to maintenance activities (e.g., tasks around the house, shopping) and involvement with children and grandchildren. Obviously, part-time jobs, volunteering, or major life projects (“I’ve always wanted to learn how to play the piano”) can be offered as evidence of an active lifestyle. Less serious leisure pursuits (hobbies, pastimes, socializing) can also contribute to a picture of the busy life as long as such pursuits are characterized as involving and time consuming. In honoring the busy ethic, exactly what one does to keep busy is secondary to the fact that one purportedly *is* busy.

A second group of parties to the busy ethic comprises the other participants—friends, relatives, coworkers—who talk to older workers and retirees about the conduct of retired life. Their role is primarily one of keeping conversation about retirement continually focused on the topic of activity, without necessarily upholding ideals of busyness. Conversation with retirees also serves to assure these others that there is life after work. Indeed, apart from money matters, conversation about retired life *per se* is chiefly conversation about what one does with it, how time is filled. Inquiries about the retiree’s lifestyle (“So what are you doing with yourself?”) may come from sincere interest or may only be polite conversation. Inquiries, too, can be mean-spirited, condescending, or envious. Whatever the source or course of discussion, it nonetheless frequently

comes to assurances that, yes, it is good to keep busy.

The third group can be called institutional conservators of the busy ethic, and their role is more clearly normative. These parties hold up implicit and explicit models of what retired life should be like, models that evince an importance placed on being active and engaged. Prominent institutional conservators of the busy ethic are the marketers of products and services to seniors, the gerontology profession, and the popular media. More shall be said about these later.

Returning to the purposes that the busy ethic serves, its primary function is to legitimate the leisure of retirement. Leisure without the eventual obligation of working is an anomalous feature of adulthood. Excepting the idle rich and those incapable of holding a job, few adults escape the obligation to work. Retirement and pension policies, however, are devised to exclude older adults from the labor force. In addition, age bias operates to foreclose opportunities for their further employment. How can our value system defend this situation—retirement—when it is elsewhere engaged in conferring honor on people who work and work hard? The answer lies in an ethic that endorses leisure that is analogous to work. As noted above, leisure pursuits can range from the serious to the self-indulgent. What legitimates these as an authentic adult lifestyle is their correspondence with the *form* of working life, which is to be occupied by activities that are regarded as serious and engaging. The busy ethic rescues retirement from the stigma of retreat and aimlessness and defines it as a succession to new or renewed foci of engagement. It reconciles for retirees and their social others the adult obligation to work with a life of leisure. This is the nature of continuity in self-respect between the job and retirement (Atchley, 1971).

In an essay that anticipates some of the present argument, Miller (1965) took a stricter view about what justifies retirement leisure. Mere activity is not meaningful enough; it must have the added rationale of being infused with aspects of work that are culturally esteemed. Activity

legitimizes retirement if it is, for example, economically instrumental (profitable hobbies), or contributes to the general good (community service), or is potentially productive (education or skill development). Whether people in fact recognize a hierarchy of desirable, work-correlative activities at which retirees can be busy remains to be determined. What Miller's essay and the present argument have in common, nonetheless, is the view that what validates retirement, in part, is activity that is analogous to work.

The busy ethic serves a second purpose for its subjects, which is to symbolically defend retirees against aging. Based on the belief that vigor preserves well-being, subscription to the norm of busyness can recast retirement as "middle-age like." Adherence to the busy ethic can be a defense—even to oneself—against possible judgments of obsolescence or senescence. To accentuate the contrast between the vital and senescent elder, there is an entire vocabulary of pejorative references to rocking chairs and sitting and idleness. As an illustration, a recent piece in my local newspaper about a job placement service for seniors quoted one of the program's participants, who said: "I am not working for income. I am working for therapy, to keep busy. There is nothing that will hurt an elderly person as much as just sitting alone all day long, doing nothing, thinking about nothing." It is appropriate to note here that, in scope, the busy ethic does not apply to all retirees. The busy life is more likely to be an expectation on the conduct of the "young-old" retiree, or at least the retiree who has not been made frail by chronic illness.

A third purpose of the busy ethic is that it places a boundary on the retirement role and thus permits some true leisure. Just as working adults cycle between time at work and time off, retirees too can have "time off." Because the busy ethic justifies some of one's time, the balance of one's time needs no justification. For example, if the morning was spent running errands or caring for grandchildren, one can feel comfortable with napping or a stretch of TV viewing in the afternoon. The existence of fulfillable expectations

allows one to balance being active with taking it easy—one can slip out of the retirement role, one is allowed time offstage. Being busy, like working, "pays" for one's rest and relaxation.

The busy ethic serves a fourth function, and this for the wider society by "domesticating" retirement to mainstream societal values. It could be otherwise. Why not an ethic of hedonism, non-conformity, and carefree self-indulgence as a logical response to societal policies that define older workers as obsolescent and expendable? Free of adult workaday constraints, retirees could become true dropouts thumbing their noses at convention. Or why not an ethic of repose, with retirees resolutely unembarrassed about slowing down to enjoy leisure in very individual ways? Retirees do often describe retirement as a time for sheer gratification. In response to open-ended questions on Normative Aging Study surveys about the primary advantages of retirement, men overwhelmingly emphasize: freedom to do as I wish, no more schedules, now I can do what I want, just relax, enjoy life. Such sentiments, however, do not tend to serve drop-out or contemplative models of retired life because retirees will go on to indicate that their leisure is nonetheless responsibly busy. The busy ethic tames the potentially unfettered pleasures of retirement to prevailing values about engagement that apply to adulthood. For nonretirees, this renders retirement as something intelligible and consistent with other stages of life. Additionally, the busy ethic, in holding that retirees can and should be participating in the world, probably salves some concern about their having been unfairly put on the shelf.

The active domestication of retirement is the province of the institutional conservators of the busy ethic. The popular media are strenuous conservators. An article in my local newspaper last year bore the headline, "They've retired but still keep busy," which was reprised only a few months later in another headline, "He keeps busy in his retirement." Both articles assured the reader that these seniors were happily compensating for their withdrawal from work. It is common for "senior set" features to depict older

people in an upbeat fashion, though in all fairness the genre of newspapers' lifestyle sections generally portrays everybody as occupied by varied and wonderful activities regardless of age. The popular media are also staunch promoters of aged exemplars of activity and achievement—Grandma Moses, Pablo Casals, George Burns, and so on through such lists (Wallechinsky et al., 1977). A current National Public Radio series on aging and creativity bears the perceptive title: "I'm Too Busy to Talk Now: Conversations with American Artists over Seventy."

Marketers, with the golf club as their chief prop, have been instrumental in fostering the busy image. A recent analysis of advertising in magazines designed specifically for older people found that the highest percentage of ads in these magazines concerned travel and more often than not portrayed older people in an active setting such as golfing, bicycling, or swimming (Kvasnicka et al., 1982). Calhoun (1978) credited the ads and brochures of the retirement home industry, in particular, with promoting an energetic image of older Americans. This industry built houses and, more importantly, built a market for those houses, which consisted of the dynamic retiree. While few retirees ever live in retirement communities, the model of such communities has been most influential in the creation of an active, if shallowly commercial, image of the elderly. One writer (Fitzgerald, 1983), visiting Sun City Center in Florida ("The town too busy to retire"), reflected:

Possibly some people still imagine retirement communities as boarding houses with rocking chairs, but, thanks to Del Webb and a few other pioneer developers, the notion of "active" retirement has become entirely familiar; indeed, since the sixties it has been the guiding principle of retirement-home builders across the country. Almost all developers now advertise recreational facilities and print glossy brochures with photos of gray-haired people playing golf, tennis, and shuffleboard. (p. 74)

The visitor noted that residents talked a great deal about their schedules and activities. The visitor also noted how their emphasis on activities was an attempt to legitimate retirement and knit it to long-standing beliefs and values:

Sun Citians' insistence on busyness—and the slightly defensive tone of their town boosterism—came, I began to imagine, from the fact that their philosophies, and, presumably, the [conservative, work ethic] beliefs they had grown up with, did not really support them in this enterprise of retirement. (p. 91)

The gerontological community has been an important conservator of aspects of the busy ethic. Cumming and Henry (1961) early on pointed out the nonscientific presuppositions of mainstream gerontology's "implicit theory" of aging, which include the projection of middle-aged standards of instrumentality, activity, and usefulness into later life. This implicit, so-called "activity theory" of aging entailed the unabashed value judgment that "the older person who ages optimally is the person who stays active and manages to resist the shrinkage of his social world" (Havighurst et al., 1968, p. 161). Gubrium (1973) has noted the Calvinistic aura of this perspective: "Successful aging, as the activity theorists portray it, is a life style that is visibly 'busy'" (p. 7). Continuing this orientation over the last decade, gerontology's campaign against ageism has, according to Cole (1983), promoted an alternative image of older people as healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive, and self-reliant.

Institutional conservators of the busy ethic are by no means monolithic in their efforts to uphold ideals of busyness. Rather, in pursuing their diverse objectives they find it useful to highlight particular images of retirement and later life that coalesce around the desirability of engagement.

Sources of Authority

The busy ethic is useful, therefore, because it legitimates leisure, it wards off disturbing

thoughts about aging, it permits retirees some rest and relaxation, and it adapts retirement to prevailing societal norms. These benefits to the participants of the busy ethic are functional only in an analytic sense. No one in daily life approves of busy retirements because such approval is "functional." It is useful at this point to ask why people ultimately assent to the notion that it is good to be busy.

The busy ethic has moral force because it participates in two great strong value complexes—ethics themselves—that axiomatize it. One, of course, is the work ethic, which holds that it is ennobling to be exerting oneself in the world. The other basis for the busy ethic's authority is the profound importance placed on good health and the stimulating, wholesome manner of living that is believed to ensure its maintenance. The maintenance of health is an ideal with a deep tradition that has long carried moral as well as medical significance. Haley (1978), for example, has pointed out how Victorian thinkers promoted the tonic qualities of a robust and energetic lifestyle. The preservation of health was seen to be a duty because the well-knit body reflected a well-formed mind, and the harmony of mind and body signified spiritual health and the reach for higher human excellence. Ill, unkempt, and indolent conditions, by contrast, indicated probable moral failure. Times change, but current fashions in health maintenance still imply that a fit and strenuous life will have medical benefits and testify as well to the quality of one's will and character. Thus, admonitions to older people that they "keep busy" and "keep going" are authoritative because they advocate an accepted therapy for body and soul.

Correspondence With Behavior

One crucial issue is the correspondence between the busy ethic and actual behavior. It is important to mention that not all self-reports about busy retirements are conscious presentations of conformity to a busy ethic. There are retirees who by any reckoning are very active. But in the more

general case, if people believe it is important to keep busy, should they not therefore *be* busy by some standard or another?

This [essay's] argument in favor of the busy ethic has implied that belief is not necessarily behavior. On one hand, the busy ethic may—as any ethic should—motivate retirees to use their time in constructive or involving pursuits. It may get them out of the unhealthy rocking chair or away from the can-of-beer-in-front-of-the-TV. On the other hand, the busy ethic can motivate people to *interpret* their style of life as conforming to ideals about activity. An individual can take a disparate, even limited, set of activities and spin them together into a representation of a very busy life. It would be difficult to contradict such a manner of thinking on empirical grounds; "engagement" is a subjective quality of time use that simple counts of activities or classifications of their relative seriousness or instrumentality are not likely to measure. Indeed, gerontologists should be wary about the extent to which the busy ethic may shape people's responses on surveys about their leisure, frequency of activities, and experience in retirement.

In posing the question, "How busy do retirees have to be under such a set of values?" the answer is they don't objectively have to be very busy at all. Just as with the work ethic, which has been an abstract set of ideals for some time (Rodgers, 1978), it is not the actual pace of activity but the preoccupation with activity and the affirmation of its desirability that matters. After all, all of us are not always honest, but we would all agree that honesty is the best policy. The busy ethic, like the work ethic and other commonplace values, should be evaluated less for its implied link with actual behavior than for its ability to badger or comfort the conscience. The busy ethic, at bottom, is self-validating: Because it is important to be busy, people will say they are busy.

Conclusion

The busy ethic is an idea that people have about the appropriate quality of a retired lifestyle. It

solves the problem of moral continuity: how to integrate existing beliefs and values about work into a new status that constitutes a withdrawal from work. The postulation of a busy ethic is an attempt to examine sociologically people's judgments of value and obligation regarding the conduct of daily life—their expectations of each other and of themselves.

To be sure, there are other superseding expectations on the conduct of retirees. Writing about the duties of a possible retirement role, Atchley (1976) has noted that a stability of behavior is expected, as well as self-reliance and independence in managing one's affairs. Such normative preferences are fairly vague and open-ended. Rosow (1974) surveyed the prospects for socialization to later life, in which the retirement role is nested, and found that behavioral prescriptions for older people are open and flexible, and norms are limited, weak, and ambiguous. Even admonitions to be active carry virtually no guidance about the preferred content of such activity. Perhaps this is just as well. Streib and Schneider (1971), summarizing findings from the Cornell Study of Occupational Retirement, pointed out that the vagueness of retirees' role expectations may protect retirees from demands that they might be disinclined to fulfill or from standards that diminished health and financial resources might not allow them to meet.

The busy ethic, too, comprises vague expectations on behavior. It is a modest sort of prescription—less a spur to conformity and more a way to comfortably knit a new circumstance to long-held values. Social disapproval is its only sanction. Not all retirees assent to this image of retirement, nor do they need to. Judging by the ubiquity of the idea, however, subscribers to the busy ethic are probably in the majority; one cannot talk to retirees for very long without hearing the rhetoric of busyness. The busy ethic also legitimates the daily conduct of retired life in a lower key than has been claimed by some gerontologists, who propose that work substitutes and instrumental activity are essential to indemnify retirement. While some retirees do need to work at retirement

to psychologically recoup the social utility that working supplied (Hooker & Ventis, 1984), for most it is enough to participate in a rather abstract esteem for an active lifestyle and to represent their own retirement as busy in some way.

To conclude, the busy ethic, as an idealization and expectation of retired life, illustrates how retirement is socially managed, not just politically and economically but also morally—by means of everyday talk and conversation as well as by more formal institutions. Drawing its authority from the work ethic and from a traditional faith in the therapeutic value of activity, the busy ethic counsels a habit of engagement that is continuous with general cultural prescriptions for adulthood. It legitimates the leisure of retirement, it defends retired people against judgments of senescence, and it gives definition to the retirement role. In all, the busy ethic helps individuals adapt to retirement, and it in turn adapts retirement to prevailing societal norms.

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Reading 28

MOVING TOWARD A CREATIVE RETIREMENT

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Gale Arneson's voice communicated an urgency that convinced me I needed to make time for the out-of-town visitors that very day. "We're trying

to figure out how to have a creative retirement," she announced over the phone, "and you're supposed to be the place to find out."

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