

## Couples in Retirement: Summary Concepts and Unifying Themes

The following summary concepts are distilled from the research of Dr. Gail S. Eisen, based on a three-year dissertation research effort combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor).

This research project was designed to investigate the effects of retirement upon the marital relationship and the wider experience of life at home. Study participants included 112 men and women, consisting of 56 couples in which the husband had retired from a full-time occupation within the previous six to 20 months. The sample was drawn from male retirees of five large organizations in Michigan and California. The objective of this study was to assess several dimensions of change within the marital relationship following the retirement of husbands. (Retired women were not the central focus of the study because of the difficulties in obtaining a large enough sample of “women-as-retirees” – their numbers in the population were fairly low at the time of investigation.)

Brief summary highlights of the study include the following:

1) The post-retirement experiences of husbands and wives tend to be very different. Men and women often hold different interpretations of the same event and experience the same basic realities in consistently different ways in such areas as:

- Needs for privacy and personal space
- Perceptions of time and its passage
- Feelings of responsibility for household tasks and maintenance
- Reactions to shared activities and “togetherness” in retirement
- Preferred pace of activities in retirement
- Perceptions of specific arrangements of space within the home or on the property since the onset of retirement
- Perceptions of freedom, free-time, leisure, and control over personal schedules
- Amount of activities in retirement
- Feelings of guilt or enthusiasm about post-retirement visits with personal friends
- Major problems encountered in this new stage of life
- Sources of satisfaction experienced (especially, self vs. spouse).

2) Husbands and wives tended to see their individual problems as rooted in different sources: Women tended to identify problems originating in some aspect of the spouse’s behavior, followed by financial concerns in retirement, while the largest percentage of male responses reflected an absence of any problems in retirement. Following this “no problem” comment, men’s concerns most frequently focused on missing some aspect of the work experience, followed by financial problems in retirement.

- 3) Men and women also described different interpretations and recollections of the same event – for example, men and women differed markedly in their recollections of whether any interpersonal topics had been addressed in the pre-retirement course they had attended together.
- 4) Although both partners felt that the impact of retirement upon the marital relationship had been generally positive or neutral, men were more likely to see an essential continuity in the marriage, while women were more likely to describe improvements in the relationship.
- 5) In some respects, both male and female reports of the disadvantages encountered in retirement may be understood as descriptions of loss: Men focused on the loss of various satisfactions provided by the work-role (e.g., contact with colleagues, an interesting work-task, structure to the day, a sense of belonging), while women focused on lost freedom, lost control (social, spatial, and temporal), and declining autonomy in scheduling their personal time and activities.
- 6) Findings lend complete confirmation to the insight of Jesse Bernard (1973), who described the existence of two separate marriages within each marriage – the husband's, and the wife's. Perceptual differences and contrasting interpretations of the same reality occurred with such regularity that it seemed possible that men and women often inhabited two separate cultures (spatial, temporal, and psychological) within the household.

A formal dissertation abstract will be posted at a later time.

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