

Being and Becoming through Doing: Cultivating Identity in Retirement through Community Gardening

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BACKGROUND

Aging of America - By 2050, the number of older adults age 65 and up will more than double; projected at 80 million¹

Retirement: An occupational transition - Changes one's role and position in society and can impact social relationships, identity, and self-worth²

Meaningful occupations offer a bridge with which to "narrate and construct identity in retirement"³

Identity and engagement are adaptive (protective) strategies during the retirement transition

Life transitions - retirement as opportunity rather than disruption; a chance to refocus on important social relationships and occupations

Community gardening - an optimal context for participation in retirement

Research Aim: To examine the way that identity is expressed in retirement through community gardening practices

METHODS



Site: Carolina Campus Community Garden (CCCG)

Design: Phenomenological, qualitative study

Sampling: Purposive sampling and naturalistic observation

Participants: 3 retired individuals who were active volunteers at the CCCG: semi-structured interviews

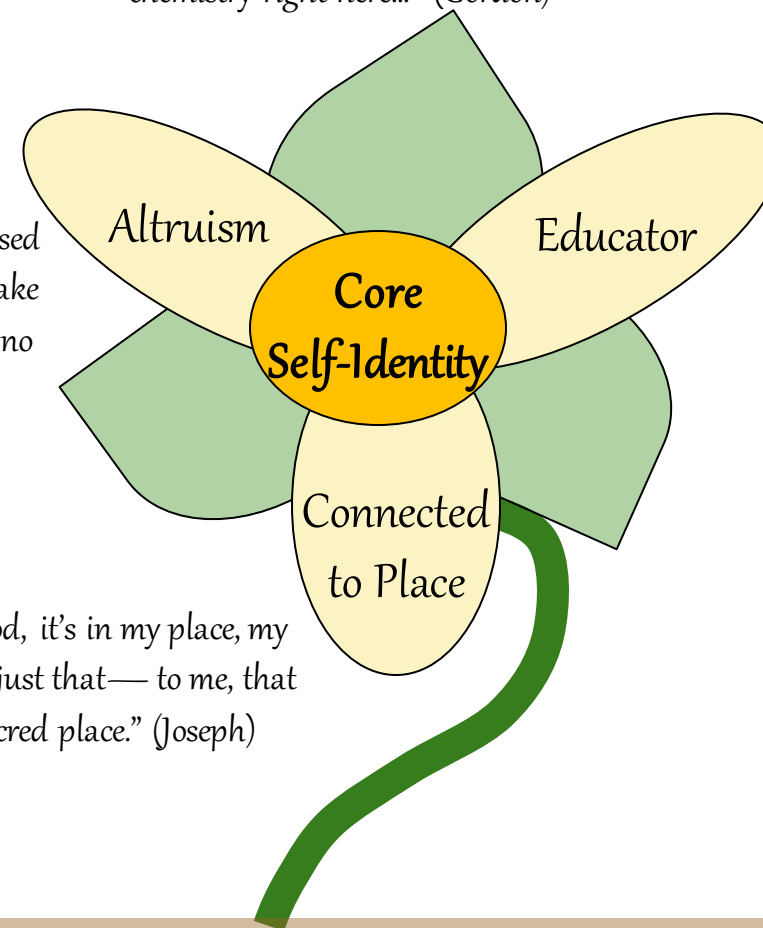
Data Analysis: Thematic coding and peer-switching

RESULTS

"...come here, let me show you something in this soil... put your hands in it, and feel it, and realize this is organic chemistry right here..." (Gordon)

"Sometimes I make the joke that I used to take care of patients and now I take care of plants, so you're nurturing no matter what." (Cathy)

"It's in my neighborhood, it's in my place, my landscape, and it's not just that—to me, that place—it's like a sacred place." (Joseph)



Retirement is the landscape where identity can be expressed

"You have the time to think about consciously how you want to act, how you want to interact with people, and stuff like that... so to me it was very freeing to finally do, kind of, the things I really wanted to do but maybe didn't have the time." (Gordon)

DISCUSSION

Continuity of Self - In retirement, participants continued to engage in roles that express self-perceived identity^{3,4}.

Engagement in purposeful, meaningful activities such as volunteering at the CCCG, enabled expression of key identity features.

Social vs. Personal Identity in Aging - Gardening served as the context through which to maintain and cultivate central components of self (being and becoming) by expressing personal values.

"Technically retired" - Participants viewed themselves as being actively engaged in the community and their volunteer roles, and so did not self-identify as retirees.

"Serious amateur" - Surprisingly, despite their commitment and level of engagement in the garden, participants were hesitant to self-identify as "gardeners."

CONCLUSION

- Older adults are at increased risk for disease and disability, which can impact role loss and occupational performance^{1,2}.
- Continuity of identity can be used by Occupational Therapists as a lens for understand older adults' engagement in occupations and retirement transition^{2,3,4}.
- Community gardening provides a flexible therapeutic setting that can accommodate a range of roles and opportunities to express personal and social identity.

REFERENCES

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