

**Reminiscence About Work Life in Retirement: What is Remembered? Why Might it
Matter?**

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Abstract

Retirement and reminiscence research prosper largely independent of another. The current research integrates both perspectives to explore what retirees remember when they look back upon their work life and whether reminiscing work life is related to their current well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six retirees to develop initial codebooks. To characterize work-related memories and explore links between memory characteristics and retirees' well-being, 66 retirees participated in an online study. They reported memories in text and rated memory valence and indicators of subjective well-being. Qualitative content analyses of memory narratives show that retirees recalled both work tasks and workplace relationships that were particularly pleasant or conflict-ridden. They reminisced about profound (e.g., job loss) and small events (e.g., appreciative gestures from the leadership). Most retirees described their work life in an accepting way, although some expressed bitterness. Correlational analyses indicate links between memory valence and retirees' perceived stress in work life and subjective well-being. We discuss our findings within the resource perspective on retirement with consideration of reminiscence as internal resources with permanent access. We suggest that well-being in retirement depends not only on external resources, but also on what retirees reflect on and remember. Practically, we discuss how work could be designed to build up such internal resources. We conclude with future research ideas, emphasizing the importance of a rigorous mixed-methods approach to studying how the life chapter of work that is long gone may continue to shape the lives of retirees.

Keywords: retirement, reminiscence and life review, positive aging and resources, work life, well-being

Reminiscence About Work Life in Retirement: What is Remembered? Why Might it Matter?

Twenty-one years ago, after my probation period in recruiting with all the new hires from 6 to 100 employees, my supervisor spontaneously came by with a bottle of sparkling wine and we toasted together. That was a real appreciation of my work. (Mr. H., 61 years, personal communication, June 2021)

Throughout my working life I had always felt somewhat inferior, I had not graduated from university like the other teachers at this school. On my last day at work, a longtime colleague gave me a short farewell speech. Her kind words in the company of all colleagues actually reconciled me with my whole professional life. (Ms. G, then 63 years, personal communication, summer 2009)

People often think about their past. This process of recalling memories of one's self, termed *reminiscence* (Bluck & Levine, 1998), can help maintain a sense of identity, create social bonds, and direct future behaviors (Bluck et al., 2005). Even though events in the past have long gone, like in the first introductory example above, reminiscing about past life events has implications for current well-being (Speer & Delgado, 2017; Westerhof et al., 2014), as both introductory examples above suggest. Despite the wealth of reminiscence research and first evidence that employees' work-related memories can affect their motivation and well-being years later (Philippe et al., 2019), research on *retirees'* memories of their work lives is lacking. This is surprising given the importance of work as life domain and life story chapter (Duffy et

al., 2016; Thomsen et al., 2011). A long working life most likely yields manifold memories that might matter for postretirement well-being. The current study thus provides first insights into retirees' work life memories. Our goal is to explore *what* retirees remember when they look back upon their work life and *whether* characteristics of those memories are linked to their current well-being.

This study integrates reminiscence and life review literature and retirement research, previously two largely unrelated lines of study, to better understand late life well-being. Research on reminiscence and life review over the past five decades has demonstrated adaptive functions that remembering the personal past can serve (Butler, 1963; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). Building on this functional approach to remembering the personal past (see also Webster, 1993) in tandem with the resource perspective on retirement adjustment (Wang et al., 2011), the current research proposes a new research direction for understanding well-being of retirees. Specifically, we suggest that memories about work life may be understood as internal resources in retirement that hold implications for adjustment and well-being in life after work. Memorable work experiences, particularly good memories, might contribute to a rich inner life in old age, which could support well-being beyond external resources such as financial means or supportive relationships (Holmgreen et al., 2017). Knowing that this study is an initial step in addressing this topic, we conducted six interviews with retirees to probe retirees' reactions to our inquiries. We then conducted an online study to collect more work-related memories from sixty-six retirees to capture aspects of work life being remembered and to explore associations between basic memory characteristics and self-rated well-being and adjustment. With the insights gained from the current research, we suggest memories of work life as a potentially fruitful line of future

research for understanding positive aging in retirees. Implications for those who take a leadership role and future research ideas are discussed.

Reminiscence (about Work) and Well-being of Retirees

Reminiscence—one's remembrance of the personal past—is a universal experience that can occur at every age (Haber, 2006). However, its particular relevance for older adults has been emphasized given that reminiscing is an integral part of life review. Life review, presumably primed by the awareness of life's finitude in old age (Butler, 1963), is a process of remembering in tandem with evaluating episodes of one's life (Staudinger, 2001).

Reminiscence and life review have been theorized and shown to serve both positive and negative functions (Webster, 1993). Bluck and colleagues (2005), for example, indicate that personal memories help maintain a sense of identity, create social bonds, and direct future behaviors. Lenses that individuals adopt in recalling their pasts and well-being are also linked. An early study shows that recalling the personal past with a focus on accepting deviations between one's ideal and real life (i.e., integrative reminiscence) and the recollections of one's past plans and goal-related activities (i.e., instrumental reminiscence) were related to better physical and mental health in old age, while ruminating about bitter experiences (i.e., obsessive reminiscence) appeared to be maladaptive (Wong & Watt, 1991).

Meta-analyses by Bohlmeijer and colleagues (2003, 2007) that investigated effectiveness of reminiscence interventions indicate positive effects of reminiscence on reducing depressive symptoms and enhancing psychological well-being in older adults. Their findings on the use of reminiscence as a treatment for depression in the elderly were replicated in a later review focusing on studies that employed randomized controlled trials (Cuijpers et al., 2006). Overall, the literature suggests that many life events that have long gone stay alive in one's memory and

continue to shape life at present. How past experiences are interpreted and reinterpreted, beyond factual details, play a pivotal role in subjective well-being and adjustment (for reviews, see also Westerhof et al., 2010; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014).

For many older adults across different cultures, working life remains an important period of life that they would think about and rehearse when looking back at their entire life (Glück & Bluck, 2007; Zaragoza Scherman et al., 2017). To our knowledge, research that focuses on memories of work life remains limited even though how memories of momentous events are remembered is widely studied (e.g., loss and life challenges; Mroz et al., 2019; turning points; Pillemer, 2001) and links between middle-aged workers' memories of work life and motivation and stress at work have been examined (Philippe et al., 2019). The current research investigates what is remembered when retirees are asked to recall events from their work life and explores potential links between memories of work life and adjustment and well-being in retirees.

Memories as Internal Resources in Retirement

Entering retirement is a life-changing transition in many adults' life course (Henning et al., 2016) that is often marked by memorable rituals such as farewell ceremonies or gifts (van den Bogaard, 2017). This transition is complex because retirees can simultaneously feel hope, despair, anxiety, and relief as they search for continuity in their lives (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2004). Research on how well retirees adapt to this new life chapter has focused on their changes in well-being and showed that this adaption is not uniform. Pre-/post-retirement analyses of Australian, German, and US panel data (Heybroek et al., 2015; Pinquart & Schindler, 2007; Wang, 2007), for example, revealed three to four subgroups with different well-being trajectories. Broadly speaking, the majority experience relative continuity in well-being. Although changes in retirees' well-being are usually minor, some report notable positive or negative developments in their

well-being (Heybroek et al., 2015; Pinguart & Schindler, 2007; Wang, 2007). For example, it is not conducive to well-being in retirement if retirees still identify very strongly with their old work role and cannot let go of it (Damman & Henkens, 2017).

Retirement research grounded in the resource perspective on retirement adjustment (Barbosa et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2011) suggests that postretirement differences in well-being often depend on retirees' resources and thus their access to means that they value and that fulfill their needs and goals (Hansson et al., 2019; Hobfoll, 2001; Wang et al., 2011). In theory, resources include both internal (e.g., self-efficacy or vigor) and external or tangible resources (e.g., supportive relationships; Holmgreen et al., 2017). Internal resources such as individuals' beliefs in their ability to find support when in need are considered means to obtain external resources such as actual emotional or financial support from social partners (Holmgreen et al., 2017).

Although retirement means to leave the labor market, retirement is not 'free' from work in many ways. Bridge employment or volunteering, for example, are obvious pursuits of retirees that involve work (Matthews & Nazroo, 2021; Wang et al., 2008). Such activities might ensure financial and social resources, for example. Among the less obvious ways of how work continues to affect retirees is reminiscing and reflecting about work life. In the current research, we propose that good memories of work life can be viewed as internal resources in support of retirees' adjustment and well-being. In contrast to tangible or obvious resources such as financial assets, social contacts, or physical strength that individuals often have to build with effort, memories about work life are private and hidden and, importantly, readily accessible for all retirees. They might serve as a means to access external resources (e.g., when retirees talk to others about their memories to strengthen relationships or create social bonds); but they could

also be an end in itself, contributing to a rich inner world that cannot be taken away. Since the ease of retirement adjustment is considered “the direct result of the individual’s access to resources” (Wang et al., 2011, p. 3), we argue that good memories (that can be recalled as desired) can be viewed as internal resources with permanent access. Reminiscing bitter or upsetting aspects of work life that were not coped with or that individuals cannot let go (i.e., intrusive or obsessive reminiscence), however, could possibly counteract well-being in retirement.

The Current Study

With joint consideration of the resource perspective on retirement (Barbosa et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2011) and the literature on life review and reminiscence (Webster, 1993; Wong & Watt, 1991), we suggest that good memories of work life or other memories serving positive functions can be considered internal resources and thus valuable means for achieving the goal of a good late life (Holmgren et al., 2017). Such memories represent an inner wealth of experience that allows looking back with peace of mind.

Overall, we suggest that the ways retirees remember and reflect on their lives at work may be related to their well-being. Good memories of work life and being able to recall those memories as desired may be associated with retirees’ current well-being, whereas looking back in bitterness and being unable to stop thinking about work life events probably has the opposite effect. Identifying adaptive and maladaptive ways of looking back at work life could offer new insights into work, aging, and retirement.

To date, there is ample evidence pointing to the adaptive function that reminiscence serves (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). However, there is hardly any work that combines the perspectives of reminiscence and retirement research (but see a single-case study by Harper,

1993). We consider reminiscence about work life an important but overlooked topic in aging studies. As a starting point, the current study explores what retirees remember when they look back upon their work life, how those recalled experiences are evaluated and described, and whether there are links between memory characteristics (i.e., memory valence and control over intrusive reminiscence) and retirees' well-being in terms of life satisfaction, affect, and retirement adjustment. Two studies were conducted. In Study 1, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to first probe work life memories in detail and to establish an initial codebook. A subsequent online study with 66 participants was conducted to more fully investigate what was remembered and whether there are potential links between remembering work life events and well-being (Study 2). Thus, Study 1 was predominantly qualitative in nature. Study 2 combined a qualitative analysis of memories of work life events with quantitative assessments of retirees' well-being. Data collection took place in 2018 and 2019 and thus before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the second author with four retired German women and two retired German men ($M = 74.33$ years; $SD = 9.75$ years, range 65–87 years). They were designed to explore the feasibility of this reminiscence approach, validate protocols, and develop codebooks to capture what retirees remembered. Five interviews were conducted on the phone and one interview face-to-face. Educational levels and former professions in this small pilot sample were diverse. Interviewees' last job functions prior to retirement were retail saleswoman (i1), shop clerk (i2), high school teacher (i3), project manager

(i4), child daycare provider (i5), and pre-school teacher (i6). The interviews lasted for about 60 minutes ($SD = 10$ minutes) and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before the interviews were conducted, participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and the tape recording. The interviews started after their consent.

Materials and Analytic Approach

The interview guideline comprised questions about interviewees' spontaneous work life memories ("What is the first memory that spontaneously comes to mind when you think back to your working life?"), their specific occupational biography (adapted from Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and their well-being in retirement. As to their occupational biography, participants were asked to draw a timeline and mark important stages of their professional life. Participants were also asked to describe their work life memories (including their valence, context, and impact) relating to these particular stages. The interview mostly involved open questions, but also some evaluations on rating scales (e.g., single items on general life satisfaction and health status; Richter et al., 2013). The interview transcripts were analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach that involves systematic coding and theme development. These themes or core ideas were discussed among the authors and reviewed again against the coded data. Figure 1 presents findings of the thematic analysis.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed two major themes in terms of respondents' memory content, (1) *memories of work 'itself'* and (2) *memories of workplace relationships* (see Figure 1). Memories of *work itself* included memories of daily work life routines and tasks (e.g., "sale of glass and porcelain ... decorate and design the store (i1)," "calculation of the statics of bridges and port facilities ... everyday new problems, that's fabulous for a young engineer (i4)") and

memories of work events that were embedded in landmark events (e.g., “after the Fall of the German Wall, I could finally teach religion ...that was a caesura for me (i6);” “all branches of our department store were closed in 2000 ...this was my all-time low, the very big scare (i1); ”in the fall of 1989, at the time of the Fall of the German Wall, I spoke to 5,000 people at a Monday church demonstration ... I am proud that I had the courage to speak in public (i3)“).

Memories of *workplace relationships* involved memories of *particularly positive or negative relationships* as well as *memorable encounters and conversations*. For example, one participant (i4) shared his exceptionally positive relationship with his manager who allowed him a great deal of autonomy and responsibility at a young age. In contrast, another participant (i2) felt treated negatively and unfairly by her supervisor because of a transfer for disciplinary reasons. Memorable encounters and conversations comprised the memory of a pre-school teacher who returned to school as a retiree to help during a time of staff shortage; she remembered a child approaching her and happily asking if she was now “done with retirement” (i6). Another interviewee remembered that during a difficult time searching for a new job, she plucked up all her courage, went directly to another employer, and said: “Do you need a good worker? Then hire me.” In addition, she got the job (i1). In general, most interviewees emphasized the significance of good workplace relationships and connections (“that’s the be-all and end-all (i5)”) and mentioned the great importance of appreciation, gratitude, kind interactions, and teamwork in this context. For example, a project manager who led large teams stated that his performance was highly dependent on the mindset of his teams (i4).

Apart from the themes that refer to retirees’ memory content (i.e., *work itself* or *workplace relationships*), we also identified retirees’ approach to their memories as an additional important theme in the interviews. It was distinguished whether interviewees reported (1)

acceptance and personal growth or (2) *bitterness and resentment* when looking back upon their work life. One interviewee with no school-leaving qualification (i2) seemed a bit bitter, remembering difficult working conditions and the abovementioned transfer for disciplinary reasons. She first said that she would not miss anything from working life, but added “but my colleagues” after a while. She also reported to enjoy retirement. The remaining five interviewees all had in common that they looked back on their working lives with an accepting and benevolent view, although all had also experienced setbacks, upheavals, and difficult times (e.g., sudden unemployment (i1) or forced career restarts from road planning to child daycare provider (i5)). They generally reported high life satisfaction and good health. It seemed that most participants have generally accepted both positive and bitter aspects of their work life and reviewed their mastering of difficult times and challenges with a mixture of pride, relief, and serenity (“we recovered and stood up ... we made the most of it” (i1)).

Discussion

This interview study provides an initial understanding of the memories that retirees report when they think back to their working lives, both spontaneously and after some reflection during the interview. In general, it seems promising to ask retirees about their work life memories. Multifaceted experiences of working life were shared including work-focused and relationship-focused themes. These emergent themes echo autobiographical scenes of personal mastery and intimacy that were commonly observed in personal life stories (McAdams et al., 1996).

We however also observed nuanced connections between themes. In addition to these two distinct themes that stood out, we noted that themes are sometimes related to one another. For example, a *major* or *landmark event* (i.e., a work life event embedded in history-graded context) is mentioned in conjunction with the indication of a significant relationship with a supervisor or

colleagues (e.g., the project manager (i4) described it as a “caesura” for him that his supervisor trusted him so fully even when he was very young). Likewise, it seems possible that little events (such as the ones subsumed under *memorable encounters and conversations*) can also comprise work experiences that are not social in nature. In many (service) jobs, work tasks and work relationships seem inseparable. Thus, for the coding scheme of the following study, we decided to include a third category for memories in which both aspects, work itself and workplace relationships, were inextricably intertwined (see Table 1 for the final coding scheme). We also added a separate coding category to express the magnitude of the recalled event (also see Table 1). Turning points, caesuras, and landmark events with an impact on employees’ career trajectory were coded as “major,” while reminiscing about little events and experiences (e.g., a gesture, a remark, a certain work routine, or a small mishap) were coded as “little.” We were aware that our findings are tentative and limited by the small and selective sample. We conducted a second study to collect more work life memories from a larger sample of retirees.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Procedure

Sixty-six German retirees (53% female, $M = 68.47$ years, $SD = 6.60$ years, range 54–87 years) were recruited through websites designated to older people (e.g., alumni and retirement communities) to participate in an online survey with open-ended questions about their memories of work life. Based on the four criteria that define the status of retirees (Talaga & Beehr, 1995), sixteen respondents had been excluded: Participants needed to be older than 50 years, consider themselves retirees, work no more or less than they did in their previous working lives, and receive some form of income intended for retirees.

Most participants had children (91%) and were married or living together with a partner (61%); 17% were divorced, 12% widowed, 4% single, and 6% reported other arrangements. About three fifths held a university degree (61%). The average work experience was 38.14 years ($SD = 7.86$) and the average time in retirement was 7.8 years ($SD = 7.14$). At least once during their working life, 67% had held a leadership position. As to their last job, about one third (36%) reported a job in the civil service sector, 58% in the corporate sector, and 6% in the non-profit sector. Seven participants felt that their life was slightly impaired by recent decreases in their ability to remember new information (Ehrensperger et al., 2014).

After providing consent, participants followed the instructions to recall up to three memories, rated memory characteristics associated with each of the recalled memory, and completed questionnaires assessing well-being. Participants completed the study on average in 34 minutes ($SD = 28$ minutes).

Measures and Coding

Memories of Work Life and Coding of Memory Narratives. Participants were instructed to freely type up to three memories of any kinds from their work life. The following instruction was used:

What do you remember when you think back to your working life? Please think for a moment and write down your memories below. They can be about everything concerning your past work life, for example specific events, people, longer phases, something seemingly small or something big. There are no right or wrong answers. You may write down up to three memories that come to your mind.

They were also instructed to evaluate their memories by describing what the recalled memory means to them personally. After the recall of each memory, participants also reported memory

characteristics including the positive and negative valence of each memory (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*; adapted from Glück & Bluck, 2007). They also indicated to which phase of their working life each memory belonged (1 = *beginning of my career*, 2 = *middle of my career*, 3 = *end of my career*). We further assessed how frequently they think about positive and negative memories of their work life in general using two items (each on a scale from 1 = *never* to 5 = *daily*). Additionally, participants rated on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*) how well they are generally able to control (i.e., recall or stop thinking about) their work-related memories as they please (“I can control the act of my remembrance of my work life very well”; adapted from Scheibe et al., 2007).

For the coding of memory narratives, we used the scheme developed and discussed in Study 1 (see Table 1) to evaluate the applicability of the coding scheme. As to *memory content*, we coded whether descriptions involved solely work itself, workplace relationships, a combination of work *and* relationships, or other topics. We also coded the *magnitude of the recalled event/experience* by distinguishing between major events and little incidents that showed no significant impacts on one’s career trajectory. Memories that did not fall into either category were coded as other. Regarding personal meaning and evaluation, we coded how retirees *approach their memories of work life* in terms of acceptance and growth or resentment and bitterness. Descriptions that did not fall into either category were coded as other. Overall, we coded 139 memories and 136 evaluative descriptions about their personal meaning.

Intercoder reliability based on a random selection of 50% of narratives that were independently coded by two trained coders showed acceptable reliability. Cohen’s Kappas were .77, .69, and .76 for memory content, magnitude of the recalled event, and approaches to

memories, respectively. The raters discussed disagreements until they reached a consensus. This coding scheme was later validated in a second, shorter survey study¹.

Self-report Measures. Workers' memories of work life events are associated with their work health and motivation (Philippe et al., 2019). To explore links between memories of working life and retirees' work experience, we assessed how central and how stressful work life has been. Specifically, retirees' past work stress and their identification with their previous jobs were assessed. Three items from the subscale 'identification' of Hagmaier and Abele's (2012) *calling* measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) were used. A sample item was "I was passionate about doing my job" (scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). The amount of *stress* that retirees generally perceived in their work life was assessed with a single item (1 = *no stress at all*; 5 = *very much stressed*) adapted from Stanton and colleagues (2001).

To explore links between memories of working life and retirees' current well-being, we assessed subjective well-being (life satisfaction and affect) and retirement adjustment. Participants rated five items (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life"; $\alpha = .90$) from Janke and Glöckner-Rist (2014), a German version of the life satisfaction scale from Diener and colleagues (1985), on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). As to *affect*, a German version (Breyer & Bluemke, 2016) of the short form of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Mackinnon et al., 1999) was used. Participants rated five items measuring positive ($\alpha = .75$) and five items measuring negative affect ($\alpha = .78$) in the past weeks on five-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). As to *retirement adjustment*, participants rated three items ($\alpha = .65$) adapted from van Solinge and Henkens (2008) and Wells and colleagues (2006) on five-point scales (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*). A sample item was "I enjoy being retired."

Results

We first report themes that emerged from content coding. Then we report findings from correlational analyses that address relationships between self-reported memory characteristics, work orientation and stress, and well-being.

Remembering Work Life Events

In terms of *memory content*, Table 1 shows that participants reminisced about “work itself” most often ($n = 57$ memories, 41% of all memories), followed by a focus on relationships ($n = 48$, 34%). Memories that included both aspects came third ($n = 22$, 16%). Twelve memories (9%) were coded as other topics. Regarding the *magnitude of the recalled event*, major events were evident in 45% of the memories ($n = 63$) and 43% of the memories contained little events ($n = 60$). Twelve percent of the memories ($n = 16$) did not fall into either category. As to participants’ *approaches to memories of work* that were identified from reflections on the meaning of the recalled events, the majority ($n = 95$; 70%) included an accepting, constructive, or growth-oriented manner of handling memories. About 18% of meaning statements contained resentment and bitterness ($n = 24$). There were 12% showing no clear inclination ($n = 17$).

For example, a 77-year-old female retiree reported that she felt stuck in an office job with a long commute for many years until she ventured into self-employment at the age of 53 and became a dog trainer, enjoying work. Thus, she described her work (“work itself”), a major event (fundamental job change at the age of 53), and a positive approach to the new professional challenge. Another 65-year-old female retiree wrote that she has not been promoted once in her entire 37 year-long working life as a social worker despite hard work, resulting in meager pension. Thus, she described her work, a major disappointment, and a look back in bitterness. Memories of relationships included, for example, receiving positive feedback and having

enjoyable conversations and experiences with patients, colleagues, and (pre-school) students. For example, a 61-year-old female retiree who worked as a kindergarten teacher wrote that she had “very much contact with other people. I remember that I was appreciated, that my opinion was asked.” A 70-year-old male retiree, a former high school teacher, reported that making music together was emphasized at his school, leading to a good sense of community. Examples of small events included appreciative gestures such as a flower bouquet or other attentive courtesies and kind or meaningful words (see Table 1 for quotes). In this context, a 69-year-old former geriatric nurse reported that she remembers how a severely demented old woman, who had not spoken for years, had a completely lucid mental moment, which meant a lot for this nurse and changed her view on dementia.

Correlational Analyses

Zero-order correlational analyses were conducted to probe potential links between memories of working life, work experience in the past, and current well-being. As shown in Table 2, memory valence was associated with perceived stress in work life. The more stress was perceived, the less positive ($r = -.25, p < .05$) and the more negative ($r = .33, p < .01$) were retirees’ memories. Memory valence was also associated with negative affect felt in the past weeks and current life satisfaction. The more positive retirees’ memories, the less negative affect was experienced ($r = -.29, p < .05$); and the more negative retirees’ memories, the higher was their level of negative affect ($r = .44, p < .01$) and the lower their current life satisfaction ($r = -.25, p < .05$). Perceived stress in past work life was unrelated to measures of current well-being ($p > .05$).

The perception of having control over one’s act of reminiscence correlated with most self-reported work experience and well-being measures. The more control retirees perceived that

they had over their act of reminiscing about work life, the more positive ($r = .35, p < .01$) and less negative ($r = -.25, p < .05$) memories were recalled. Control over one's act of reminiscence was also associated with lower negative affect ($r = -.46, p < .01$), better retirement adjustment ($r = .25, p < .05$), and greater identification with one's past work ($r = .32, p < .01$).

Discussion

We consider that findings of Study 2 suggest that the examination of retirees' work life memories could be a meaningful line of future research in aging. First, the developed coding scheme was able to capture what was remembered by retirees. It provides a first framework to organize memories of work life that could be further developed in future work. It appeared that the majority of work life memories were remembered via an acceptable if not positive lens and that work-focused and relationship-focused themes were equally distributed in memories of work life. These two pieces of findings are intriguing when they were considered altogether. In studies by Pillemer and colleagues (2007, 2013) that investigated what memories made people feel good and bad about themselves, they found that people felt good in recall of achievement-related memories. Memories that made them feel bad often involved relationship themes such as interpersonal conflicts. Although their studies and ours differ in many ways and we did not assess self-worth in our study, our findings seem to suggest that fond memories about work life were kept regardless of event type.

Though tentative, our correlational analyses suggest links between work life in the past and retirees' current well-being through the lens of personal memory. For example, perceived past work stress was unrelated to self-reported well-being, whereas recalling negative memories about work life was related to lower well-being in retirees, consistent with the reminiscence literature in general (Speer & Delgado, 2017). We acknowledge that findings of the current

research are limited given the cross-sectional design and the relatively small sample size. Various factors such as current mood (Bower, 1981) that can affect memory recall were not measured. A bad day or low well-being in general might lead to a recall of more negative memories or the interpretation of memories in a more negative way. However, even if effects are reciprocal, we argue that a reservoir of good memories of work life is still an asset.

Our participants also appeared to possess many tangible resources (e.g., high education, partnership) that might contribute to positive evaluations of work life and current well-being irrespective of their former careers (Henning et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2011). However, we validated our coding scheme in a different survey study that yielded similar findings¹. Some participants in that study reported to be at peace with their work life despite their experience of severe difficulties.

General Discussion

This exploratory research provides first insights into aspects of work life that retirees remember. It shows that they remembered both profound events and small incidents. They recalled both their work (tasks and contents) itself and with whom they had pleasant or conflict-ridden relationships and encounters. The majority of memories involved an accepting view on work life. However, some memories also involved bitterness and resentment. We discuss these findings with a focus on how adopting a reminiscence approach may advance research on retirement that aims to understand retirees' adjustment and well-being. Potential applications for (re)designing workplaces based on this novel perspective are also discussed.

Contribution to Research on Work, Aging, and Retirement

Overall, our findings echo the notion that work is an important life chapter with a long shadow (Damman & Henkens, 2017; Duffy et al., 2016; Thomsen et al., 2011). We observed that

retirees' memories of work life were multifaceted and emotionally and personally meaningful. All retirees were able to provide memories about their work life. It is not surprising that retirees would recall major events and memories that focused on work, obligations, and duties. A novel discovery might be that they identified so many relationship themes and small events. This fits in with research that has highlighted the relevance of joyful dyadic encounters at work (*high-quality connections*; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). The kind gestures that retirees remembered (e.g., the birthday flower bouquet received decades ago from a supervisor, or the gratifying feedback from patients or pre-school students), for example, could be considered memories of high-quality connections at the workplace. Future research with larger sample sizes may examine whether the presence of memories that involved workplace relationships versus work obligations and achievements is associated with retirees' well-being including their sense of identity and self-worth (Pillemer et al., 2007, 2013).

In addition, we observe that even though work life has long gone, some aspects of work life memories appear to relate to retirees' current well-being in the direction consistent with past reminiscence research (Bohlmeijer et al., 2006; Westerhof et al., 2010). These associations also illustrate the proverbial 'long arm of the job' (Meissner, 1971) in a new way: Work does not only impact non-work domains when people are actually working. Via memories, work may remain present in late life after work. Beyond memory valence, one potential research direction is to examine retirees' control over their act of thinking and reminiscing about work life. Though tentative, we found that retirees who reported being able to manage their reminiscence act also reported better well-being and retirement adjustment. This finding is consistent with prior research on longing or constant thinking about something that is unattainable (Scheibe et al., 2007).

Taken together, we suggest that the current research sheds light on a new perspective on resources in retirement (Barbosa et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2011). That is, in addition to external and tangible resources (e.g., social support, financial assets) that are central and therefore much studied in the context of retirement adjustment (Heybroek et al., 2015), we draw the attention to another kind of resources, to retirees' inner world of personal memories. Well-being in old age has many determinants, but it does not seem to be exclusively about what people possess or do; it also matters what they think of and remember (Staudinger, 2001).

Practical Relevance: Suggestions for Employers

Broadly, our results imply that workplaces may be reshaped in ways that foster good memories (at every age; Philippe et al., 2019). Based on our study and some thoughts extending beyond, we cautiously suggest four approaches that employers may consider adopting should future studies replicate and extend our findings. First, consistent with prior research on links between work stress and health (Semmer & Meier, 2009), employers may monitor employee stress and keep levels of work stress moderate. Our findings add to this line of research by showing associations between work stress in the past and how one's work life is pleasantly or unfavorably remembered.

In addition, employees or those who take on a leadership role may pay attention to little things such as kind gestures as memories recalled in our study illustrated that small appreciative actions (e.g., receiving flowers or small gifts, receiving gratifying feedback; see Table 1) could be remembered fondly, sometimes for decades. These thoughts also resonate with research showing that a warm, appreciative farewell from work when entering retirement is also linked to postretirement well-being (van den Bogaard, 2017; also see our second introductory example).

We observed that some memories about work were marked by resentment. Severe conflicts, dismissals, and accidents, for example, were bitterly remembered and not coped with by some of our participants. Noticing that workers may carry these events with them after retirement, the importance of reducing encounters of negativity at work is suggested. We recognize that some kinds of unwanted experiences are unavoidable and part of most work lives. However, employers should take care that employees can cope with these events to reduce the chance for them to become sources of bitterness and resentment. For example, employers could strive to provide fair communication and a support infrastructure when profound negative events happen (e.g., job placement after dismissal, use of conflict managers, ombudspersons, mediators, and coaches).

The perspective that memories of work life are internal resources may also be informative for organizations' design of mentoring or training programs. Memories in our study reflect the richness of long work lives; they are full of events big and small, high and low. A memory 'that sticks' in the sense of a memorable story might be more instructive for younger employees or those who step into a leadership role than a regular training program with lectures by a professional instructor. In line with this idea, prior intervention research suggests certain intergenerational narratives and exchange of life experiences generate outcomes that benefit both older and younger generations (Gaggioli et al., 2014). Of course, it is not only the employer who is in demand to build up employees' internal resource capabilities. Employees themselves can help to shape better workplaces and to foster beneficial memories, for example by being kind to colleagues and by adopting an active approach of dealing with negative experiences at work (e.g., by writing or talking about them; Lyubomirsky et al., 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

The strength of the current research is that it taps into a largely unexplored topic, mainly relying on qualitative data and the coding of manifold narratives. Still, as we mentioned in the context of both studies, our sample sizes were small, findings were exploratory, and we were unable to rule out reversed or reciprocal effects in the context of our correlational analyses. It is also possible that those retirees satisfied with their life are more inclined to participate in such research than those who feel less well (Lüdtke et al., 2003).

Future research on retirees' work life memories is abound with thematic and methodological options and could try to tackle the mentioned limitations. First, large-scale panel studies for which researchers can propose ideas and items would allow to approach the relation of work life memories to retirement adjustment and well-being both concurrently and over time in diverse samples. Because large panels often include life events, it would be possible to examine whether the association between work life memories and well-being decreases over time, with growing distance to retirement entry and private events such as welcoming grandchildren. Thus, for the oldest old, current well-being might be more related to private events and aging processes and less related to long-ago work experiences (see also Liao et al., 2021). Panel studies may also allow the inclusion of various aspects of memory characteristics (e.g., vividness, specificity, psychological distance, Sutin & Robins, 2007) and comprehensive quantitative assessments of well-being that capture successful aging more broadly with additional indicators such as positive psychological functions (Freund & Riediger, 2003; Ryff, 1989). Such large-scale studies might also allow to examine non-linear associations since it is possible that too much reminiscence is not conducive to well-being (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Greenhoot & McLean, 2013).

Second, more qualitative approaches (e.g., in-depth interviews) could develop our codebook further or also use established codebooks (e.g., meaning-making; for a review, see McAdams & McLean, 2013) when analyzing retirees' memory narratives of work life. We observed that emotional experiences associated with memories of work life are sometimes not necessarily positive *or* negative, but both. Future studies could examine the complexity of emotions focusing on ambivalence, mixed emotions, regret, or nostalgia (Larsen et al., 2021; Roese & Summerville, 2005) in work life memories. Future analyses could also rely on theoretical angles about motivation and goals (e.g., self-determination theory; Ryan & Deci, 2000), utilized by past memory research (Philippe et al., 2019). Such future studies could also seek to connect research on reminiscence about work life with research on career shocks (i.e., extraordinary and disruptive career events; Akkermans et al. 2018).

Finally, intervention studies (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012) could target those retirees who still struggle with difficult work experiences, setbacks, or humiliations. Such interventions could support them in resolving internal conflicts, controlling their memories, and constructing a less hurtful narrative. For example, simply talking with others about one's (negative) memories might help to find new perspectives and to come to peace with one's past work life (Harper, 1993; Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Staudinger, 2001). Apart from supporting the well-being of retirees who look back in bitterness, intervention studies could strive to encourage intergenerational exchange in mentoring programs. Retirees could share central memories and lessons learned to help younger professionals handle current and future work challenges. In brief, we consider this topic, memories of work life, a fruitful line of future research that could advance a deeper understanding of one's transition into and adaption to life after retirement.

Conclusion

The current study begins with an inquiry about how work life may be remembered and whether work-related memories would be relevant to adjustment and well-being in retirement. With the discovery that memories of work life were multifaceted and seemingly linked to well-being in retirees, we suggest future retirement and aging research to also explore potential contributions that a rich inner life could offer to a good late life through the angle of life review and reminiscence. Well-being in old age depends on many different resources. It matters what people possess and do, but we suggest that it is also important what they reflect on and remember, and reminiscence about their work life contributes to this inner world. This study thus widens the set of resources that is typically studied in retirement research. With the research inquiries presented, we hope to ignite more research in this field.

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Appendices

¹ We conducted a second, shorter survey study after the main survey to further validate the coding scheme. To keep this study short, we assessed fewer well-being and work orientation measures. The sample ($N = 86$ retirees; $M = 67.65$ years, $SD = 6.27$ years) was relatively similar to the sample of the first online study in that respondents reported relatively many resources (e.g., 77% were married or living with a partner, 79% had children, and 33% had a university degree); their average time in retirement was 7.21 years ($SD = 6.75$). Participants were able to report up to two memories of their work life. In sum, 136 memories and 127 statements of their personal significance were coded according to the developed scheme (see Table 1); the same second coder as in the main survey coded a random 50% of the open responses with satisfactory reliability (Cohen's $\kappa \geq .85$). Overall, results of the second survey demonstrated the applicability of our coding scheme and displayed similar findings: Again, a majority of statements included a positive *approach* to work life memories (61%) as compared to bitterness (21%). As to *memory content*, memories referred to work itself (30%) and to workplace relationships (32%) about the same extent. Both aspects were coded in 23% of the memories. As to the *magnitude* of the recalled events, 32% were major events and 22% small events. The rest category was relatively large (46%) because participants tended to make more general remarks in this study.

Examples for memories of small, kind gestures in workplace relationships included the memories of a 72-year-old female retiree who reported that it meant a lot to her that her colleagues took her personal situation—she has a disabled daughter with special needs—into consideration when it came to vacation planning. Another female retiree, 63 years old, reported a funny situation when she fell asleep during a break from work and her colleagues had to wake her up. Examples for memories of major events included the text of a 61-year-old former

policeman who had to deliver death messages to relatives after severe events. Another male retiree, 71 years old, reported that he was unexpectedly elected mayor of his city, which completely changed his life.

As to associations between memory characteristics and current well-being, this study was able to replicate the negative correlation between the positive valence of work-related memories and negative affect ($r = -.24, p < .05$). However, negative memories did not relate to negative affect ($r = .10, p > .05$).

Table 1*Emergent Topics in Retirees' Memory Narratives of Work Life (Study 2)*

Topic	Coding categories	Definition and coding rules	Examples (translated by the authors)	Coding results
<i>Memory themes</i>	Reminiscing about work 'itself'	Memories of work tasks and routines or special/onetime work-related events (e.g., success, failure, job loss). Focus is on work content.	"Preparation of a very complex expert opinion, which ended a legal dispute after 15 years"	41%
	Reminiscing about workplace relationships	Memories of interactions, encounters, and associated emotions at work (e.g., social contacts, conflicts, conversations). Focus is on workplace relationships or relationships affected by work.	"It is already 40 years ago, I was in the city and bought me a porcelain doll and then went to work and showed it to the colleagues. The senior manager came to us and asked for the price (245 DM). The next day I got an envelope and check (exactly 245 DM). I have felt the appreciation for my work very much."	34%
	Reminiscing about work and workplace relationships	Memories that involve work tasks and relationships. To assign when both aspects are intertwined and equally important.	"Talking with my supervisor and developing new ideas. The planning of an integrative childcare center, it was like working in a state of flow."	16%
<i>Magnitude of the recalled experience or event</i>	Reminiscing about major events (with impact on career trajectory)	Memories including precise descriptions of major events and experiences (e.g., being fired, being (not) promoted, being awarded, becoming unemployed, going/working abroad, being bullied, abrupt change in political/economic context, health issues interfering work)	"Fatal accident of two divers during offshore work. Drowning caused by serious mistake of the supervisor in charge."	45%
	Reminiscing about little or everyday events	Memories including precise descriptions of small or everyday events and experiences (e.g., a remark that stuck in memory, anecdotes, little gestures)	"I was a first-year apprentice and received a beautiful bouquet of flowers from the head of the department on behalf of the entire department for my birthday."	43%
<i>Approaches to memories</i>	Acceptance, personal growth	Statements that involve the acceptance and reflection of positive and negative experiences of work life, lessons learned, mastering challenges, or being at peace with how things went	"Today I can meet these colleagues at private meetings friendly and cordially, because I understand that changes were annoying/uncomfortable and especially self-confident behavior of women in working life was new for many men in the past."	70%
	Resentment, bitterness	Statements that involve bitterness, negative emotions, regrets, or rumination about how things went at work, being not at peace with the past, no acceptance	"I am very disappointed and not aware of any guilt."	18%

Note. Memories that did not fall into the categories above were coded as other (rest category).

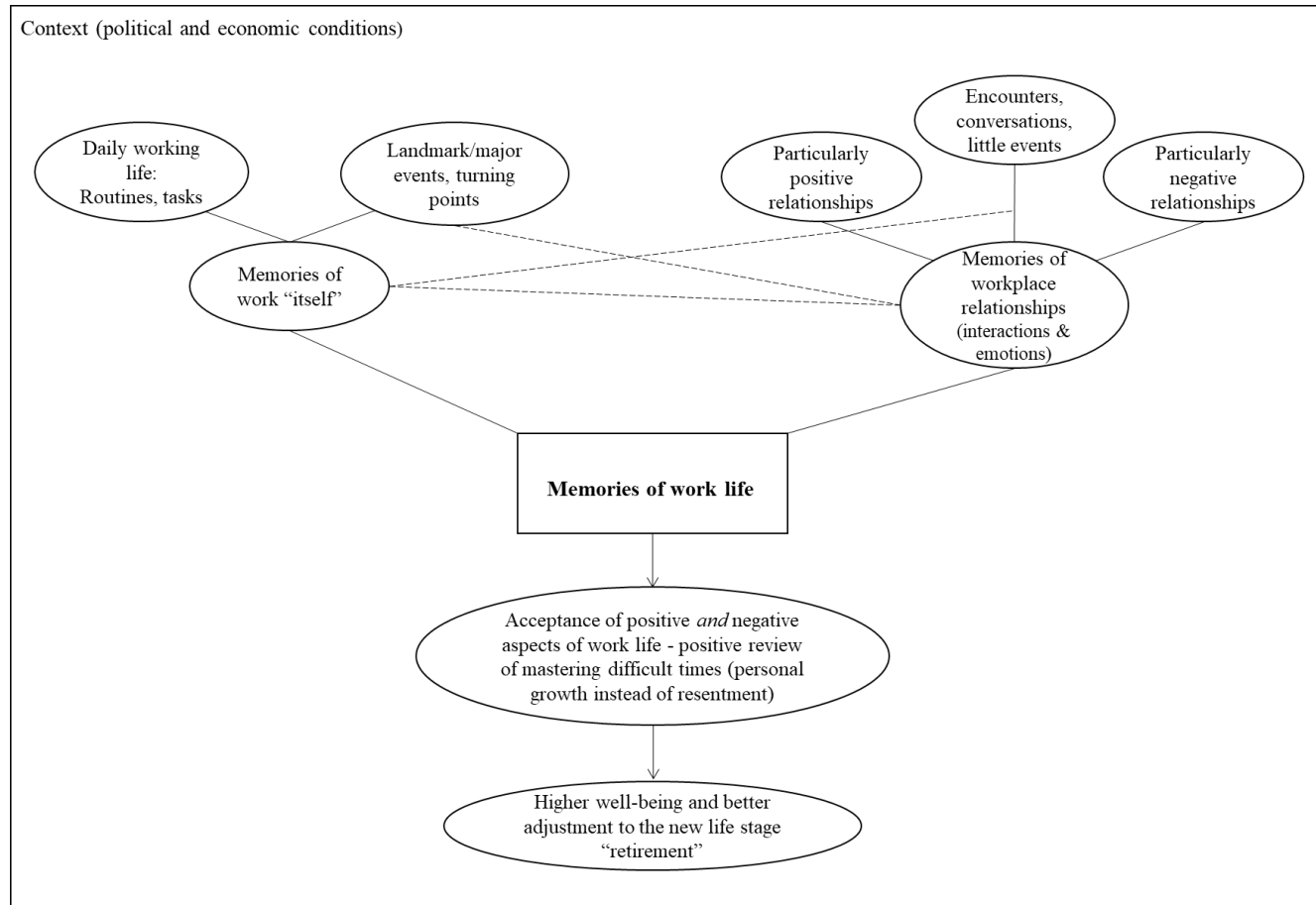
Table 2*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Memory Characteristics, Past Work Stress, and Well-being (Study 2)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<i>Memory characteristics</i>											
1 Valence positive	3.87	1.09	-								
2 Valence negative	2.11	0.98	-.82**	-							
3 Frequency positive	2.91	0.98	.16	-.12	-						
4 Frequency negative	2.17	1.00	-.12	.18	.36**	-					
5 Control over memories	5.14	0.99	.35**	-.25*	.16	-.27*	-				
<i>Stress & current well-being</i>											
6 Stress in past work life	3.36	0.97	-.25*	.33**	-.19	-.16	-.08	-			
7 Life satisfaction	5.26	1.19	.14	-.25*	.14	-.09	.11	-.06			
8 Positive affect	3.12	0.69	-.16	.15	-.08	-.01	-.12	.19	.39**		
9 Negative affect	1.80	0.77	-.29*	.44**	.02	.37**	-.46**	.11	-.24	.01	
10 Retirement adjustment	3.91	1.04	.20	-.20	.06	-.20	.25*	-.15	.47**	.25*	-.33**

Note. $N = 66$. Age was not associated with all variables listed. Calling/identification was only related to perceived control ($r = .32, p < .01$) and life satisfaction ($r = .38, p < .01$). Most recalled experiences happened in the middle ($n = 57, 41\%$) or the end ($n = 53, 38\%$) of participants' working life; about 20% occurred in the beginning of their careers ($n = 29$). ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$

Figure 1

Thematic Map Derived from Study 1: Content of and Approach to Memories of Work Life



Note. The dashed lines represent associations that were not pronounced in the small sample of Study 1 but that were discussed among the authors and included in the coding scheme for Study 2 (see Table 1).