



Celebrating fifty years of research and applications in reminiscence and life review: State of the art and new directions



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ABSTRACT

Fifty years ago, psychiatrist Robert Butler (1963) published an influential article on the recollection and evaluation of personal memories in later life. We discuss the major insights and applications in psychological gerontology that were inspired by Butler. Reminiscence and life review serve to create bonds between people, to cope with important life events, and to attribute meaning to life. We discuss a heuristic framework that relates reminiscence and life review to individual and contextual characteristics as well as to psychological resources and mental health and well-being. The increasing evidence is discussed that different types of interventions can effectively promote mental health and well-being in later life. We propose that processes of reminiscence and life review need further study. This can partly be achieved within the current research tradition by longitudinal studies and good trials that also address the processes accounting for effects of interventions. Synergy with psychological studies on autobiographical remembering and life stories will provide further innovation in the field, as these studies provide new methods and evidence of processes linked to the recollection and evaluation of personal memories.

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Introduction

Fifty years ago, psychiatrist Robert Butler (1963) published a seminal article “The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged”. He distinguished between reminiscence as a process of recollecting personal memories and life review that also involved the evaluation of negative past experiences and conflicts. Butler forwarded the idea that reviewing one's past plays an adaptive role in coming to terms with life's finitude. He went on to demonstrate the constructive as well as the pathological uses of life review, interpreting case materials as well as artistic expressions in film and literature, such as Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* and Henry James' *The Beast in the Jungle*. He concluded that in

order to fully apprehend the aging experience, it is necessary to listen to the stories that older people have to tell: the personal meaning of the life cycle is nowhere more clearly unfolded than in those who have nearly completed it.

Butler's article has become one of the classics in the psychology of aging. Butler inspired hundreds of scientific studies in reminiscence and life review and a wide variety of practical applications. There is an official interest group of the Gerontological Society of America, a biannual international conference, and an International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review. Although earlier reviews concluded that the field needed better definitions, measurements, and effect studies (Haight, 1991; Molinari & Reichlin, 1984), strong progress has been made over the past decades (Haber, 2006; Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010; Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010). The goal of the present article is to provide a state of the art and new directions for research and applications. There is a particular need for good studies on processes of

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remembrance and life review. This can be achieved within the current research tradition, but we propose that synergy with psychological studies on autobiographical remembering and life stories will provide further innovation in the field.

Reminiscence and life review: state of the art

Over the decades, it has become clear that reminiscence and life review are complex processes that may take on many different forms and functions beyond death acceptance. Based on theoretical classifications, content analyses of memories, and self-report questionnaires (e.g., Cappeliez, Rivard, & Guindon, 2007; Webster, 1993; Wong & Watt, 1991), we distinguish three broad functions: social, instrumental, and integrative functions.

First of all, reminiscence serves *social functions*. Sharing personal memories in everyday conversations fosters bonding between people. Older adults may also use personal memories to teach and inform others about past experiences. Secondly, reminiscence has *instrumental functions*. Recollecting earlier coping strategies may help people to deal with current problems. Memories may help to come to terms with losses by maintaining symbolic bonds with people who passed away. A return to the past can also be a coping strategy in itself: thinking back of positive memories may help to regulate emotions in the present. However, this strategy may become maladaptive when it is used to escape present-day problems. Thirdly, remembering has *integrative functions* that come closest to Butler's life review. Especially in times of change, reflecting on the past may help to continue or to flexibly adjust one's identity. However, some people come to define their identity by a negative past event or episode. This has been labeled obsessive reminiscence or bitterness revival.

The Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS) has developed into the most widely used instrument to study reminiscence (Robitaille, Cappeliez, Coulombe, & Webster, 2010; Webster, 1993). It measures eight functions that capture most of the social, instrumental, and integrative functions described above (Table 1): conversation, teaching/informing others, problem solving, intimacy maintenance, boredom reduction, death preparation, identity construction, and bitterness revival.

Table 1

Eight reminiscence functions (based on Webster, 1993).

<i>Death preparation:</i>	The way we use our past in order to arrive at a calm and accepting attitude towards our own mortality.
<i>Identity:</i>	The existential use of the past to discover, clarify or crystallize our sense of who we are.
<i>Problem solving:</i>	The use of reminiscence as a constructive coping mechanism by remembering past problem-solving strategies.
<i>Teach/inform:</i>	An instructional type of reminiscence to relay personal experiences and life lessons to others.
<i>Conversation:</i>	The informal use of memories in order to connect or reconnect to others.
<i>Boredom reduction:</i>	Thinking back about the past to escape an understimulating environment or a lack of engagement in goal-directed activities.
<i>Bitterness revival:</i>	The recall of memories about unjust treatments, providing the justification to maintain negative thoughts and emotions to others.
<i>Intimacy maintenance:</i>	A process whereby cognitive and emotional representations of important people in our lives are resurrected in lieu of the remembered person's physical appearance.

Antecedents and consequences

An important question is who reminisces in what ways and with what consequences. Fig. 1 provides a heuristic framework for the relations that have been proposed and studied (e.g., Cappeliez & Robitaille, 2010; Fry, 1995; Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2010). In the following, we use this framework to structure the most important findings on reminiscence and life review. It shows that reminiscence results from individual characteristics and contextual factors. Depending on its form and function, it may serve to accumulate different psychological resources that in turn support mental health and well-being in later life.

Although Butler conceived of reminiscence and life review as naturally occurring processes in the last phase of life, studies found that not all older people engage in these processes (e.g., Wink & Schiff, 2002). There is also evidence that younger and older people do not differ much in the frequency of reminiscing (e.g., Pasupathi & Carstensen, 2003). However, younger adults reminisce more often for bitterness revival, boredom reduction, identity construction, and problem solving, whereas older adults do so more frequently for death preparation and to teach/inform others (e.g., Cappeliez, Lavallée, & O'Rourke, 2001; Webster & Gould, 2007). More recent theories describe autobiographical remembering as a key developmental skill across the entire lifespan (e.g., Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011).

In line with research on gender-role stereotypes, women tend to focus more on interpersonal and emotional memories, whereas men focus more on past achievements and facts (Haber, 2006). Personality traits are also related to reminiscence and life review: being more open to experience is associated to more reminiscence for the sake of identity, problem solving, and death preparation; being more extraverted to sharing memories with other people; and being more neurotic to bitterness revival (e.g., Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2002; Cully, LaVoie, & Gfeller, 2001).

There has been some research on contextual factors as well. People tend to reminisce more often in times of change in their lives (Parker, 1999). Social relations are important, e.g., attachment styles (Webster, 1998) and family styles of sharing memories (Webster & McCall, 1999). Cultural contexts also play a role: stronger social functions were found among African Americans (Shellman, Ennis, & Bailey-Addison, 2011) and Chinese migrants (Webster, 2002). These differences have been related to a stronger oral tradition or a more collectivist cultural orientation in these groups.

Particular forms and functions of reminiscence are differentially related to mental health and well-being, rather than the frequency of reminiscence per se (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010). This may be explained by findings that different types of reminiscence and life review result in the accumulation of different psychological resources, such as positive relationships, mastery, coping, self-esteem, and meaning in life. Through these resources, reminiscence functions are differentially related to mental health and well-being in older adults (e.g., Cappeliez & Robitaille, 2010; Korte, Cappeliez, Westerhof, & Bohlmeijer, 2012; O'Rourke, Cappeliez, & Claxton, 2011). Social functions are related to happiness, but only indirectly related to mental health through other reminiscence functions. Death acceptance, identity construction, and

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