Functions of Reminiscence in Later Life as Viewed by Young and Old Adults

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RÉSUMÉ
La réminiscence consiste dans le fait de penser ou de parler de ses expériences passées. Le but de cette étude était d'examiner quelles fonctions des jeunes adultes attribuent à leurs propres réminiscences, ainsi qu'aux réminiscences des personnes âgées. Les réponses des jeunes adultes concernant les réminiscences des personnes âgées ont été ensuite comparées à celles formulées par les personnes âgées à l'égard de leurs propres réminiscences. Nous avons utilisé l'Echelle des fonctions des réminiscences (Webster, 1993, 1997) qui mesure huit fonctions: Réduction de l'ennui, Préparation à la mort, Identité, Résolution de problème, Conversation, Entretien de l'intimité, Réactivation de l'amertume, et Enseigner/Informer. Soixante-seize étudiant(e)s de premier cycle universitaire ont rapporté leurs propres utilisations des réminiscences. Quelques semaines plus tard, ces personnes ont donné leurs vues au sujet des fonctions des réminiscences pour les personnes âgées au moyen de la même échelle. Quatre-vingt trois adultes âgés de plus de 65 ans ont répondu à l'échelle à propos de leurs propres utilisations des réminiscences. Bien en rapport avec leur âge, les réminiscences des jeunes adultes étaient caractérisées par des utilisations plus élevées des fonctions de Réduction de l'ennui, d'Identité et de Résolution de problème. Les personnes âgées utilisaient plus caractéristiquement les réminiscences pour Enseigner/Informer, c'est-à-dire pour transmettre des expériences de vie. Comparativement à eux-mêmes, les jeunes adultes estimaient que les personnes âgées réminiscient plus pour quasiment

* Key Words: Age Differences, Reminiscence, Stereotypes.
Mots clés: Différences d'âge, réminiscence, stéréotypes.

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toutes les fonctions, ce qui reflète la perception stéréotypée. Lorsque ces croyances ont été confrontées aux réponses des adultes âgés, il est devenu apparent que les jeunes adultes surestimaient pratiquement toutes les utilisations, et particulièrement la Réduction de l'ennui, la Préparation à la mort, et Enseigner/Informer. Ces résultats reflètent la prévalence des opinions âgéistes en ce qui a trait aux réminiscence des personnes âgées.

ABSTRACT
Reminiscence is the process of thinking or telling about past experiences. The goal of this study was to investigate which functions young adults attribute to their own reminiscences, and to the reminiscences of older persons. The views of young adults on the reminiscences of older adults were also compared with the self-reports of older persons on their reminiscences. We used the Reminiscence Functions Scale (Webster, 1993, 1997), which measures eight functions: Boredom Reduction, Death Preparation, Identity, Problem-Solving, Conversation, Intimacy Maintenance, Bitterness Revival, and Teach/Inform. Seventy-six undergraduate students reported on their own uses of reminiscences. A few weeks later, they gave their views regarding the functions for older persons on the same scale. Eighty-three adults over the age of 65 completed the scale regarding their own uses. Age-appropriate higher uses of the functions of Boredom Reduction, Identity and Problem-Solving characterized the young adults. Older adults most characteristically used reminiscence for Teach/Inform, i.e. for transmission of life experiences. Compared to themselves, young adults believed that older adults reminisced more for practically all functions, which reflects the stereotypical view. When these beliefs were checked against the reports of older adults, it became clear that young adults overestimated almost all uses, especially Boredom Reduction, Death Preparation, and Teach/Inform. These findings reflect the prevalence of ageist assumptions regarding the uses of reminiscence by older persons.

Reminiscence entails the recall of personal memories in which the person is either an actor or an observer (Ross, 1989). Interest in the study of reminiscence has increased significantly in recent years. In particular, research has examined the contribution of reminiscence to coping and adaptation. Part of the impetus for this line of inquiry was the recognition that reminiscing comprises several dimensions and serves different functions. Several authors have studied the functions of reminiscence and devised taxonomies (e.g., Merriam, 1993; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1981; Wong & Watt, 1991; Webster, 1993). Typically these efforts have been developed by clinicians to describe various functions of reminiscence in relation to indexes of functioning. Despite differing methodologies, these classification systems overlap to a large degree. Webster (1995) compared these taxonomies and concluded that a system with six types reflects the consensus about the functions of reminiscence. Wong and Watt (Wong, 1995; Wong & Watt, 1991) have proposed such a taxonomy constituted of six types of reminiscences: integrative; instrumental; avoidant; transmissive; obsessive; narrative. Integrative reminiscence refers to memories
indicating the acceptance of one’s past, reconciliation of discrepancies between ideal and reality, and resolution of negative events. This corresponds to one main component of life review (Butler, 1963, 1974) and to functions purported to contribute to self-understanding and identity consolidation. Instrumental reminiscence implies recall of past problem-solving and coping strategies to foster perceived competence. Avoidant reminiscence is manifested by memories which glorify the past and depreciate the present. Transmissive reminiscence is characterized by the sharing of information relative to old customs and habits, traditional values, and lessons taught by life and experience. Obsessive reminiscence is manifested by statements of guilt, bitterness, and despair about one’s past. Finally, narrative reminiscence pertains to descriptive accounts of the past without evaluation, i.e. the process of telling one’s story.

In line with clinical and descriptive traditions which address the contribution of reminiscence to coping and adaptation in late adulthood (Webster & Cappeliez, 1993), some authors have worked on devising tools to assess the frequency and functions of reminiscences in a broader context. As Webster and Haight (1995) indicated, existing instruments possess questionable reliability and validity (e.g., Merriam, 1993; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1981). In addition, the use of these scales is limited to the assessment of circumscribed functions of reminiscence exclusively among older persons. To address these weaknesses, Webster (1993, 1997) devised the Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS) in order to provide a more useful tool for life-span research. The instrument was initially developed through factor analysis with a large sample of various adult ages and demographic backgrounds (Webster, 1993). This led to the constitution of a 43-item questionnaire covering seven functions (i.e. Boredom Reduction, Death Preparation, Identity/Problem-Solving, Conversation, Intimacy Maintenance, Bitterness Revival, Teach/Inform). Subsequent research confirmed the structure of the scale with the original factors; however Identity/Problem-Solving was split into two dimensions (Webster, 1997). The resulting final scale thus contains eight subscales. It is interesting to note the close correspondence between the functions of reminiscence measured by this scale and the taxonomy proposed by Wong and Watt (1991). The functions of Boredom Reduction, Problem-Solving, Conversation, Bitterness Revival and Teach/Inform correspond respectively to the notions of avoidant, instrumental, narrative, obsessive, and transmissive reminiscences. The functions of Death Preparation and Identity can be considered as facets of integrative reminiscence. Only the function of Intimacy Maintenance does not readily correspond to a specific type of reminiscence in Wong and Watt’s classification.

Recently Parker (1999) reported that young adults reminisced significantly more frequently than older adults. This contrasts with most studies which have examined overall reminiscence frequency in samples of adults of various ages and consistently found no age difference (Merriam & Cross,
1982; Hyland & Ackerman, 1988; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1983; Webster 1995; 1997; Webster & McCall, 1999). However, it is plausible that younger and older populations reminisce for different purposes. Indeed, age differences have been found when a more detailed analysis focusses on specific reminiscence functions (Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999). Boredom Reduction presents a U-shaped relationship with age, young adults scoring highest relative to older groups except for octogenarians. In contrast, Death Preparation shows a linear pattern of increased use with advancing age. Whereas Intimacy Maintenance followed a pattern similar to Death Preparation in the earlier study, it is not so clear in a more recent study which showed no age difference (Webster & McCall, 1999). Compared to older groups, young adults use reminiscence more for Identity and Problem-Solving. Conversation shows no significant age difference. Bitterness Revival demonstrates a linear decline with advancing age. Finally, the Teach/Inform function also increases with age, although it appears to plateau after age 40.

The goal of this research is to determine which functions young adults attribute to their own reminiscing, as compared to the functions they attribute to older persons. The views of young adults will also be contrasted with the reports of older persons concerning the functions of their reminiscences. This investigation serves to identify the stereotypes of the young regarding this mental activity in later life. To our knowledge, these stereotypes have never been studied in a systematic way.

Specifically, three hypotheses were proposed. First, based on previous research, we anticipated that young adults would report higher use of the functions of Boredom Reduction, Bitterness Revival, Identity and Problem-Solving whereas older adults would report more frequent use of the functions of Death Preparation, Intimacy Maintenance, and Teach/Inform. No age difference was expected for the function of Conversation. Second, it was assumed that young adults would report that older adults reminisce for Boredom Reduction, Death Preparation, Intimacy Maintenance, Bitterness Revival, and Teach/Inform to a greater extent than they do. These functions refer to several prevalent stereotypes of the older person: experiencing a boring life with lots of unstructured time to fill (Boredom Reduction), anxiously preoccupied by the issue of death (Death Preparation), caught in thoughts about the deceased (Intimacy Maintenance) and in endless ruminations about a negative past (Bitterness Revival), or eager to share lessons of experience with the younger generations (Teach/Inform). No difference was expected for the other functions. Finally, based on the stereotypical assumption that older adults are generally caught in thinking about and reliving the past, young adults were anticipated to overestimate the use of all functions of reminiscence among older adults.
Method

Participants
Seventy-six undergraduate psychology students participated in the first part of the study to assess their uses of reminiscence ($M = 22$ years of age; range: 20–29). Of this group, 46 completed the second phase of this research which addressed the functions of reminiscence among older adults. The group which participated only in the first phase did not differ from the group which participated in both phases of data collection in terms of age or gender. The vast majority were women (85%), and single (93%). The older adults were 83 persons participating in University-based continuing education ($M = 67$ years of age; range: 57–92; 66% women). The majority were married (56%), with 2 per cent living common law, 18 per cent widowed, 12 per cent divorced or separated, and 12 per cent single. Fifty per cent of the older sample had completed secondary education and 43 per cent post-secondary education.

Measures
In addition to a socio-demographic questionnaire, participants completed the Reminiscence Functions Scale (Webster, 1993, 1997). This scale comprises a total of 43 items. Each item refers to a particular use of reminiscence. On six-point Likert-type scales, participants indicate the degree to which they reminiscence for that particular purpose (from “never” to “very frequently”). Items are grouped within eight subscales: (1) Boredom Reduction (6 items: to maintain a form of activation when not occupied or stimulated); (2) Death Preparation (6 items: to reduce fear concerning death and to confront one’s own mortality); (3) Identity (6 items: to find meaning and continuity in one’s life); (4) Problem-Solving (6 items: to review previous coping strategies); (5) Conversation (5 items: as content for social interaction); (6) Intimacy Maintenance (4 items: to keep alive the memory of someone who died); (7) Bitterness Revival (5 items: to reactivate memories of old injustices and bad times); (8) Teach/Inform (5 items: to inform others about life in a past period).

Reliability and validity estimates for the RFS have been reported elsewhere (Webster, 1993, 1997; Webster & McCall, 1999). The RFS has a robust factor structure and good internal reliability. Internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) for the whole scale and the subscales is typically above .80.

In the present study, indices of internal consistency calculated on the young sample (own use, first administration) were high, ranging from $\alpha = .83$ to $\alpha = .86$.

Procedure
Participants in both age groupings were asked to complete the Reminiscence Functions Scale with respect to their own uses of reminiscences. The instructions to complete were the standard ones accompanying the scale.
Table 1

Discriminant function analysis of functions of reminiscence – age differences in reported uses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Correlations of Predictors with Discriminant Function</th>
<th>Univariate F(1,157)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boredom Reduction</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>51.99***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>31.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach/Inform</td>
<td>-.37</td>
<td>22.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>21.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitterness Revival</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>12.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>6.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy Maintenance</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death Preparation</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canonical R</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < .001
* p < .05

(Webster, 1993, 1997) and indicated that the questionnaire concerned the why, or functions, of their reminiscence. That particular sentence read: "...What purpose does reminiscence fulfill, what goal does retrieving certain memories help you accomplish?". Two weeks after the first administration, young participants were asked to answer the questionnaire with the instructions now indicating that it concerned the reminiscence of older adults: "... According to you, what purpose does reminiscence fulfill for people over 65, or, what goal does retrieving certain memories help the older adults accomplish?".

Data Analysis

Discriminant function analysis was the method used to contrast the answers of the two age groups. A first discriminant function analysis was performed in order to examine age differences in reported uses of reminiscence. It considered the eight functions as predictors of membership in the two age groups. A second discriminant function analysis was executed in order to reveal stereotypical beliefs of young adults. It contrasted the uses of reminiscences by young adults with their beliefs regarding older adults' functions of reminiscence. Again the eight functions were taken as predictors of membership in the two groups in order to extract the most stereotypical features. The third discriminant function analysis was undertaken to compare these beliefs with what older adults themselves report. It contrasted the assumptions of young adults with the reports of older adults, with again the eight functions of reminiscence as predictors of membership in the two age groups.
Table 2
Discriminant function analysis of functions of reminiscence — views of young adults on older adults' uses of reminiscence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Correlations of Predictors with Discriminant Function</th>
<th>Univariate F(1,120)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death Preparation</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>172.80***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach/Inform</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>110.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy Maintenance</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>40.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom Reduction</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>26.79***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>14.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitterness Revival</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>4.78*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canonical R</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001
*p < .05

Results

Age Differences in the Functions of Reminiscences
One single function, accounting for the total between-group variability, was calculated in the identification of which functions of reminiscence significantly differentiated the two age groups [$\chi^2 (8) = 109.67, p < .0001$]. As reported in Table 1, the loading matrix of correlations between predictor variables and the discriminant function indicated that the best predictors for distinguishing between the young and the old age groups were Boredom Reduction, Problem-Solving, Teach/Inform, and Identity. Compared to older adults, younger adults reported more reminiscence for Boredom Reduction (means = 16.25 vs. 10.02), for Problem Solving (means = 22.51 vs. 17.53), and Identity (means = 24.26 vs. 19.84). In contrast, older adults reported more reminiscence for Teach/Inform (means = 18.93 vs. 15.13). A cut-off of .33 was chosen for significance of predictor loading. Predictor variables with loadings lower than .33 were not interpreted. This discriminant function allowed the correct classification of 84.28 per cent of the total sample.

Views of Young Adults on Older Adults' Uses of Reminiscence
One single discriminant function, accounting for the total between-group variability, was calculated to identify which functions of reminiscence significantly differentiated the actual uses of young adults compared to their beliefs about older adults [$\chi^2 (8) = 134.71, p < .0001$]. As shown in Table 2, the loading matrix of correlations between predictor variables and the discriminant function indicated that the best predictors for distinguishing between the two groupings were Death Preparation, Teach/Inform, and Intimacy Maintenance. Compared to themselves, younger adults consid-
Table 3
Discriminant function analysis of functions of reminiscence – confronting the views of young adults on older adults' uses of reminiscences with older adults' accounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Correlations of Predictors with Discriminant Function</th>
<th>Univariate F(1,127)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boredom Reduction</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>195.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death Preparation</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>117.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach/Inform</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>56.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>40.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>39.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitterness Revival</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>31.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>30.29***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy Maintenance</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>23.29***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canonical R</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < .001

It was observed that older adults reminisced more frequently for Death Preparation (means = 12.07 vs. 24.41), for Teach/Inform (means = 15.13 vs. 24.37), and Intimacy Maintenance (means = 14.25 vs. 19.59). For the other predictors, the loadings were less than .33 and they were not interpreted. This discriminant function allowed the correct classification of 92.62 per cent of the total sample. Thus, a higher reliance on the functions of Death Preparation, Teach/Inform and Intimacy Maintenance best characterizes young adults' assumptions regarding the uses of reminiscence by older adults when the benchmark is their own uses of reminiscence.

Confronting the Views of Young Adults on Older Adults’ Uses of Reminiscences with Older Adults’ Accounts

One single discriminant function, accounting for the total between-group variability, was calculated to identify which functions of reminiscence best differentiated the beliefs of young adults with the accounts of older adults [χ² (8) = 128.95, p < .0001]. As shown in Table 3, the loading matrix of correlations between predictors and the discriminant function indicated that, except for Intimacy Maintenance (loading less than .33), all the other functions of reminiscence were good predictors for distinguishing between the two groupings. Compared to older adults' reported uses, younger adults overestimate the uses of Boredom Reduction (means = 21.91 vs. 10.02), Death Preparation (means = 24.41 vs. 13.13), Identity (means = 25.65 vs. 19.84), Problem-Solving (means = 23.39 vs. 17.53), Conversation (means = 19.82 vs. 14.95), Bitterness Revival (means = 15.71 vs. 10.98), and Teach/Inform (means = 24.37 vs. 18.93). This discriminant function allowed the correct classification of 89.92 per cent of the total sample.
Discussion

Higher uses of the functions of Boredom Reduction, Identity and Problem-Solving best characterized the young adults when compared with older adults. This is in full agreement with previous findings (Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999).

Elevated reminiscence for Boredom Reduction among young participants suggests that thinking about the past is a mental activity in which young persons engage when current stimulation is lacking. Such interpretation is in line with Webster’s (1993, 1995, 1997) view of Boredom Reduction as reminiscence filling in for an understimulating environment. This view is supported by earlier findings on reminiscence functions in adulthood showing a curvilinear distribution for Boredom Reduction, with the young and very old (80-year olds) presenting the highest uses of this function of reminiscence (Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999). Presumably, individuals in both these age groups have more unstructured time at their disposal than middle-aged adults, during which they seek stimulation in reminiscence. This being said, other findings (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, in press; Webster & McCall, 1999) suggest a somewhat more negative view of Boredom Reduction as tapping an avoidant tendency, akin to finding a refuge in the past (Wong & Watt, 1991). Indeed Webster & McCall (1999) found that use of reminiscence for Boredom Reduction correlated negatively with happiness. Furthermore, a lack of desire to be on the move and to seek new challenges was the single existential attitude found to predict a higher use of this reminiscence function among a sample of older adults (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, in press). If that line of reasoning is followed, it could be argued that the use of reminiscence for Boredom Reduction is concurrent with negative affectivity and that not only an understimulating current environment but also perhaps some difficulty with future plans and projects prompts this kind of reminiscence.

Young adults are progressing through an intensive period of definition of identity and life goals. This may explain why reminiscence for identity and problem-solving is particularly salient for that age group. The well-established tendency of adults to report a larger than expected number of memories from the period of late adolescence and early adulthood has been related to the process of identity formation in that period of life (Elnick, Margrett, Fitzgerald, & Labouvie-Vief, 1999). In the same vein, young adults report a greater likelihood of reminiscence in times of uncertainty, transition, and change than do older adults (Parker, 1999).

In agreement with previous research, older adults in this study were most clearly characterized by use of reminiscence for teaching and informing. This form of reminiscence entails the transmission of knowledge and experience to others (i.e. to the younger generations). Webster (1995) has suggested that this form of reminiscence gains importance when individuals reach 30 and become parents. Our older participants were recruited...
among individuals in University-based continuing education programs, who are drawn to these educational and cultural activities by a desire to expand and share their knowledge. This may have contributed to an even sharper emphasis on the use of reminiscence for the transmission of personal experience and life lessons.

Contrary to expectations, older adults were not characteristically different from younger adults in their uses of reminiscence for Death Preparation and Intimacy Maintenance. This may be due to the fact that, compared to previous research (Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999), our older sample included relatively young seniors ($M = 67$ years). A closer look at data in these previous reports indicates that only those individuals in their 70s and 80s, but not those in their 60s, scored significantly higher than those in their 20s. The issue of death, and consequently reminiscing for this purpose, may only become salient in later years. Also a majority of our participants were currently married. This may explain the lack of difference for the purpose of Intimacy Maintenance, which relates primarily to memories of the deceased. It should be noted that in their more recent study Webster and McCall (1999) also reported no age difference for this function of reminiscence. In any case, the lack of age differences for Death Preparation and Intimacy Maintenance challenges the stereotypical belief that thoughts and memories of older adults are dominated by anxious concerns and ruminations about death and deceased family members.

The absence of age differences for the function of Conversation underscores the previous finding that reminiscing contributes to social interactions as much among young people as among older adults (Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999). The lack of differentiation for the function of Bitterness Revival goes against the stereotypical view of older adults excessively caught up in ruminations about a negative past. In effect, it is a general linear decline with increased age which has been reported (Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999). Could this be an expression of increased emotional maturity and wisdom? There is indeed some evidence suggesting a better emotional regulation with age (Carstensen, 1995; Labouvie-Vief & DeVoe, 1991; Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopal, & Dean, 1992).

The second and third set of findings clearly revealed the stereotypes surrounding the functions of reminiscences of older adults from the point of view of young people. As anticipated, for functions not readily tied to late adulthood such as Identity and Problem-Solving, young adults do not think that older adults reminisce more than they themselves do. But for other functions, young adults believe that older adults use reminiscences more frequently than they do. This is particularly marked for the functions of Death Preparation, Teach/Inform and Intimacy Maintenance. In answering this way the young participants indicate that, in their view, coping with issues of death and losses, as well as transmission of knowledge, are core reasons for older adults to reminisce.
When these views are checked against the reports of older adults themselves, it becomes clear that young adults overestimate almost all uses, especially Boredom Reduction, Death Preparation and Teach/Inform. It seems that, for this sample of university students, the stereotypical views of older adults incorporate high frequency of memories for addressing the issue of death and for transmitting experience and knowledge, but not for rekindling bitter times. It seems that, for this sample of psychology students, views on older adults’ reminiscence does not include the most negative stereotype of older adults caught in endless ruminations about the past. Additional research with a more heterogenous sample is needed to test the generalization of this finding.

Limitations of the present research should be acknowledged. The design of the study is cross-sectional, and thus limited to a study of age differences at a particular point in time. Longitudinal research would be required to investigate the evolution of reminiscence uses in the same individuals across the lifespan and in different cohorts. Our older participants were relatively young (in their late 60s, on average), healthy, educated, socially and intellectually active. The profile of reminiscence found in this research is likely to be different for adults who are even older and confronted by health problems and functional limitations. Further research should address how these variables may affect the uses of reminiscence. The young sample was also particular in that it was entirely composed of undergraduate students in psychology. It may be hoped that these individuals have acquired information and developed some ideas inconsistent with a stereotypical view of older adults. Therefore, we believe that, with a sample more representative of that age group as a whole, the stereotypes found in the present study might actually be more pronounced. In addition, both age samples were largely composed of women. The present findings cannot be readily generalized to both genders, although so far gender differences on the RFS have only been found and replicated for the Identity function (i.e. women scoring higher than men; Webster, 1995; Webster & McCall, 1999).

All young adults reported on older people after they had answered for themselves first. This procedure made sense since we were primarily concerned with the views of young adults on the uses of reminiscence by older adults, with their own uses as benchmarks. We believe that priming the young participants to evaluate their own uses of reminiscence sharpened the contrast, thus exposing the latent stereotypes in a clearer way. However, the issue of methodological artifact can be raised: that the findings would be very different if young adults first answered for older adults and then for themselves. Clearly, this issue will only be resolved by a subsequent study counter-balancing the order of presentation.

Finally, this study did not include an independent assessment of stereotypes of aging and of older adults among the young adults. These stereotypes were empirically derived in a contrast with the reports of the older adults themselves. It would be interesting to examine how the stereotypes
of reminiscence uses fit within a larger picture of knowledge and stereotypical views on aging.

This research has several interesting implications. With respect to training in gerontology, it underlines the importance of addressing, and eventually correcting, ideas on the functions of reminiscence. We are aware that, among health care workers, implicit theories about reminiscence uses by older persons have a strong influence on the acceptability, evaluation of usefulness, and indicability of clinical interventions based on reminiscence. Research addressing the functions of reminiscence in older adults as viewed by health care professionals in institutional settings would be a logical extension of the present study.

References


