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Career Memories and Identity Formation: A Qualitative Study of Professionals' Life Stories

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Abstract

This study introduces and analyzes the unique concept of 'Biographical Career Memory' - how individuals retrospectively construct and interpret their vocational experiences across their work life. Combining narrative approaches with identity and career decision-making theories, the research takes a novel approach to exploring how men near retirement remember and make meaning of their professional journeys. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 men, the study reveals how being interviewed about one's career can facilitate the formation of a new biographical identity, offering participants a renewed perspective on their occupational history. This aligns with findings on psychological flexibility, which plays a crucial role in how individuals process career-related experiences and adapt to their vocational narratives (Fuchs, H. et al., 2024). By reinterpreting their professional histories, individuals may gain a stronger sense of identity and purpose in later career stages. The findings, organized into four key themes, reveal distinct patterns in how participants recalled their professional lives: (1) Educational decisions were remembered as relatively straightforward, with few reported dilemmas; (2) Initial job searches were characterized as natural progressions from education; (3) Mid-career challenges were recalled with minimal drama, described instead as organic transitions; and (4) Overall career summaries demonstrated high levels of satisfaction and positive reframing of past experiences. Participants' retrospective accounts showed minimal emphasis on career obstacles or regrets, suggesting that career memories serve as components of positive self-definition and biography. These findings have significant implications for theory and practice, particularly in the field of career counseling and development. The study's insights into how individuals construct meaning from their career histories can inform practical approaches to helping younger professionals navigate career challenges and transitions. Additionally, the research demonstrates how retrospective career narrative construction can contribute to psychological well-being in late career stages, providing practical guidance for professionals in this field.

Keywords

Career, Biographic Memories, Vocational Experience, Work, Identity

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Introduction

'Biographical Career Memory' offers a fresh perspective, a novel lens to examine how individuals construct meaning from their professional lives. This study investigates how retired or soon-to-be-retired Israeli men remember and interpret their vocational experiences, arguing that these memories are essential to personal identity and narrative construction. While extensive research exists on career decision-making and development, little attention has been paid to how individuals make sense of their professional journeys retrospectively.

This research makes several significant contributions

Theoretical Contribution: The study introduces and develops the concept of biographical career memory, offering a new framework for understanding how individuals reflect on and interpret their occupational choices throughout their lives. This theoretical innovation bridges existing literature on career development, memory studies, and identity formation, shedding new light on the process of career reflection. Research suggests that psychological and cognitive flexibility are crucial in adapting to career transitions, as they enable individuals to integrate past experiences into their evolving professional identities (Fuchs, H. et al., 2024).

Methodological Contribution

This research demonstrates how one's career history can become a meaning-making process through in-depth qualitative interviews. The study reveals that the interview process often enables participants to construct new understandings of their vocational experience, as evidenced by comments such as "So I understand that I did have a career."

Practical Contribution

The findings offer valuable insights for career counseling and development practices, particularly in understanding how individuals integrate their professional experiences into their broader life narratives. This understanding can inform approaches to helping professionals at all career stages make sense of their career trajectories and transitions, providing them with a more comprehensive view of their career development.

Research Objective

The primary aim of this study was to develop a comprehensive understanding of career trajectories from the perspective of biographical memory, specifically examining how retired or near-retirement individuals reconstruct and interpret their professional lives. The research, conducted between 2021 and 2023, explores how people perceive and make meaning of their vocational experiences through a process we term

'retrospective narrative construction', which involves reflecting on and interpreting past career events to create a coherent narrative of one's professional life.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research design based on the critical narrative approach, drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Gabrieli Nouri (2018) and Spector-Marzel (2010). Additionally, research on organizational psychology underscores the importance of reflective narratives in leadership and career development, contributing to a broader understanding of vocational identity (Fuchs, A. et al., 2024). The methodological framework was chosen for its comprehensive approach to capturing the complexity of career memories and their role in identity construction. The research design emphasized the importance of allowing participants to construct their narrative understanding of their career trajectories while enabling critical analysis of the social and cultural contexts that shaped these narratives.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed career narratives while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging themes. The interviews explored participants' early career decisions and educational choices, significant career transitions and decision points, reflections on career satisfaction and meaning, and their current perspectives on past career choices. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in a location the participant chose to ensure comfort and openness in sharing their stories. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Sample Selection and Characteristics

The study comprised 18 Israeli men aged 55 and above, selected through purposive sampling. Participants represented diverse professional fields, including marketing and management, insurance and finance, healthcare, engineering and technology, education, self-employment, real estate and construction, and sports instruction. This diversity in professional backgrounds ensured a comprehensive exploration of career memories across different occupational contexts. Theoretically, saturation determined the sample size, and additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new insights.

Participant Recruitment

Initial contact with potential participants was established through personal and professional networks. The recruitment process involved initial phone contact explaining the purpose of research, clear communication about interview expectations and time commitment, explicit discussion of confidentiality measures, and obtaining informed consent for participation and recording.

Data Analysis

The analytical process followed a systematic approach based on Critical Discourse Analysis (Gabrieli, 2017). The analysis began with verbatim transcription of all interviews, followed by multiple readings of transcripts

to identify emerging themes and the development of preliminary coding categories. The thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns across interviews, analyzing narrative structures and storytelling approaches, and examining cultural and social influences on career narratives. The critical interpretation phase focused on analyzing underlying assumptions and cultural codes, examining how participants constructed meaning from their career experiences, and identifying patterns in defining career success and satisfaction. Validation procedures included [specific details about the validation procedures], member checking with select participants, and systematic documentation of analytical decisions.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines throughout the process, demonstrating respect and consideration for the participants. This included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality through pseudonyms, securing interview data, allowing participants to review their interview transcripts, and offering opportunities to withdraw from the study at any point.

Research Questions

1. What are the key characteristics of retirees' autobiographical memory, regarding their work period?
2. What factors have influenced occupational decisions?
3. How do individuals retrospectively summarize and interpret their work period?
4. What were the key dilemmas encountered during the work period?

Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The sample consists exclusively of male participants, limiting generalizability across genders. Additionally, the focus on Israeli professionals may reflect culture-specific career patterns. Finally, the retrospective nature of the accounts may be influenced by memory biases and current circumstances. These limitations were carefully considered in the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Literature Review

Career Development and Decision-Making

The concept of career has evolved significantly over time. Traditional perspectives viewed careers as hierarchical paths with upward advancement, primarily managed by organizations and based on the premise that career decisions are made once in a lifetime. However, contemporary definitions recognize careers as sequences of significant occupations throughout life, regardless of organizational or hierarchical form (Brott, 2012). Recent studies highlight the importance of flexible career planning, suggesting that adaptability is a key predictor of long-term career success and satisfaction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2023). Research on decision-making heuristics also underscores how individuals navigate career uncertainty through both rational and intuitive processes (Fuchs & Banaszak, 2023). This study adopts a holistic view, seeing career as a complete and uniform entity containing different phases that form part of a unified whole.

Career Stories and Identity Formation

Career stories represent more than just historical accounts of professional experiences. As Brott (2012) explains, these narratives are processes of connecting life events into meaningful patterns. These stories can be classified under Conway and Wood's (2006) concept of self-defining memories, which contribute to life stories and personal identity. While much research has focused on specific career events, this study expands the scope to examine the entire sequence of career-related decisions and experiences, particularly at the intersection of work-related decision-making and education.

Memory and Career Experience

The memory of one's occupational and biographical history falls within the domain of episodic memory, which Tulving (2002) and Schacter and Tulving (1994) define as a central neurological-cognitive system enabling conscious re-experience of past events. The ability to recall and reframe professional experiences is closely linked to cognitive flexibility, which plays a role in shaping occupational identity over time (Fuchs, H. et al., 2024). Studies suggest that professionals who actively reinterpret their career trajectories demonstrate higher levels of resilience and well-being (Fuchs et al., 2023). Unlike semantic memory, which deals with general knowledge, episodic memory encompasses events, interpretations, processes, and their interconnections as perceived by the individual. Research has shown that older individuals tend to emphasize positive emotions and events while minimizing negative ones (Singer, Rexhaj, & Baddeley, 2007; Blagov & Singer, 2004).

Work Meaning and Career Orientation

The meaning of work represents a vital component of wellbeing and identity formation (Smilansky, 2013). Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski (2010) and Harpaz & Meshulam (2010) identify three distinct orientations toward work: as a job (primarily for income), as a vocation (defining identity), and as a career (focused on advancement and status). These orientations significantly influence how individuals construct their career narratives and interpret their professional experiences. Similarly, research on career motivation highlights how personal and societal values shape career orientations, reinforcing the importance of meaning-making in professional identity (Fuchs, A. et al., 2024).

Career Decision-Making Under Uncertainty

Vocational decisions typically occur under conditions of ambiguity, requiring individuals to manage uncertainty and make compromises (Gati, 2020). The decision-making process involves gathering and processing information while considering values, tendencies, personal characteristics, and skills (Gati & Asher, 2005, 2001). Krieshok, Black and McKay (2009) note that both rational and intuitive processes are intertwined in career decision-making, challenging purely rational models of career choice. This perspective is supported by research on decision-making biases in educational and career contexts, which emphasizes the role of psychological flexibility in navigating uncertain vocational paths (Fuchs & Banaszak, 2023).

Educational and Early Career Choices

Research by Albeck (1983) indicates that choosing a profession and related education is not a single event but a continuous process integrated into individual development. The timing and nature of career decisions can

vary significantly by field, with natural science students typically choosing professions earlier (ages 17-19), compared to social science, who often make choices after gaining practical experience.

Future Orientation and Career Planning

Seginer (1998) introduced the concept of future orientation to study young people's mental representations when planning education and employment. However, there is a notable gap in research regarding past orientation and how individuals retrospectively interpret their career choices. While numerous studies examine forward-looking educational and employment choices, research about retrospective career decision-making remains limited (Praskova & Johnston, 2021).

Subjective Well-being in Career Context

In career contexts, subjective well-being (SWB) encompasses emotional and cognitive perceptions of life quality, particularly in work domains (Lent & Brown, 2008). Career construction theory suggests that using work for self-completion and deriving meaning contributes to SWB (Hartung & Taber, 2008). Key components of career well-being include transitions, relationships, performance, purpose, and work-life balance (Kidd, 2008). Retirement transitions can impact psychological well-being differently for men and women (Kim & Moen, 2002). Cognitive processes, especially in encoding positive life events, are associated with higher SWB (Seidlitz et al., 1997). Research on subjective career transitions highlights their importance in career development (Stephens, 1994). Work environments congruent with personality promote psychological health and satisfaction (Walsh, 2008). Overall, SWB is essential to general well-being (Diener et al., 1998), and vocational psychology, with its potential to foster optimal human strength and SWB in work contexts, is a field of great inspiration.

Findings

There were two kinds of response to my request for an interview: some interviewees responded enthusiastically and were delighted to participate in the research while Others hesitated or refused to participate, providing reasoning like "I didn't have a career or an interesting story"; "I am not a good example of a career"... These answers usually started with an apology and a statement that there was really no career and no importance in their personal story. Some even tried to connect me to others who might have a good story: "You should interview Shalom... he was a taxi driver and now he runs a large factory... my story is not interesting." One of the interviewees stated, "... for a career you should interview Bibi Netanyahu, Putin... for me it was just a job" "I don't have anything special..."

While some of the participants thought their story was important and appropriate, others strongly refused to participate using various arguments. Pinchas explained it this way: "...I don't want to remember. I'm not there anymore; it doesn't interest me." His response revealed that the request for interview brought back difficult memories of negative or unfavorable emotions, which is why he refused to tell his story (Blagov & Singer, 2004). The fact that some of the men perceived their employment as insignificant is insightful regarding what is considered meaningful career. According to this view, an appropriate career means something special, perhaps even heroic, which some of the interviewees had no part in.

In general, the responses can be defined on a binary axis: "There was no career / I have nothing special to tell" versus "I had a career / I'd be happy to tell." The binary axis reflects men's attitudes toward the concept of career: they did not treat a career as a collection of experiences but rather interpreted it as having or lacking significance.

I hypothesize that the binary responses originated from perceptions about appropriate career and employment choices. As mentioned, any work experience that did not seem compatible with social expectations in this regard was perceived as insignificant. The polarization in the responses can be explained based on the ethos of career achievement, according to which society promotes an achievement approach in the field of employment in the spirit of capitalism (Weber, 1958). On this basis, socialization processes take place, dictating the "right" model of career and employment decisions. In line with this approach, upon the request to be interviewed, people perform a preliminary analysis of their past and decide whether their story represents the ethos. Apparently, the further a person's employment history is from the ethos, the bigger the tendency to refuse an interview.

Choosing high school

The stories of choosing a high school major, show that most of the decisions, were neither structured nor future-oriented. There were also interviewees, such as Omri, who emphasized that he had made the wrong choice. Most of the interviewees described going with the flow and being influenced by environment. Few participants reported personal attraction to the chosen field. Most did not connect their choice to a future strategy. Peri: it was a time , I was a member of youth movement.. it was the most important thing" Mory: "My teacher asked me... what do you want to be, and I didn't have an answer... I was scared by the question... what is it? ..., I know nothing... today I want X, tomorrow I want... I was a teacher... I notice a few who know exactly what they want." Omri: "I remember being lazy, not thinking about school and not looking ahead... they send me to the air force technical school, and I agree. In retrospect, it was a mistake." Yuri: "I was already in a profession that was quite common in our family. I had an uncle who was.... I got close to this matter. " Hanoch: " I didn't choose the school... I went with the flow.... Avraham: "...there was a surrounding atmosphere... the whole neighborhood, friends... it was prestigious." Shaul: "I always thought that I wanted to be a financially successful person who would have a high status." Gadi: "Age 16, 17... I was influenced by my surroundings... I personally did not have this focus." Ariel: "I got the electronics kit at age 9. I had a very strong attraction to it from a young age..... I had one dilemma, which high school to go to in Basmat... my friend went to it... and I decided.... Basmat." Yair: "I remember that I was quite independent. From the age of 14 I went to work; I had to support my father... all my friends worked. We grew up in a neighborhood of 'Second Israel'... criminal families. Families in a difficult situation and everyone went to work... those who studied were the exception." Baram: "I grew up in Russia. At the age of 15, I was good at scientific and humanistic subjects, and I preferred humanistic..... I was very poor. I wanted to become an engineer to improve my economic situation." Daniel: "... life led me." Zeev: "I chose a major at the age of 14. ..I didn't want it... everyone was talking about it... my parents also said, 'you should go with a profession.' In the second year I realized it wasn't for me." Roni: "I studied at a Jewish high school. I didn't choose." Roni described a decision based on his desire to do like others: "Like my cousin who skipped class." He does not provide a reason except wanting to be like his cousin: "...before the end of high school I knew that I would study medicine." Victor: "In high school, I was a sports

fanatic. It was my dream to be a world Olympic champion." When he said that he was an athlete in a national team, I tried to find out if he thought of it as a career, but he refused to treat it that way. "... it was an ideology... you are born... you think about how to do something for the country (besides the country you also need to eat, I went to study at the Technion and worked in construction.)" When I asked why he chose to study at the Technion, he answered: "I can't say why, something from friends.

Analyzing those decisions indicates full of social experiences and interactions. Most of the decisions were not the result of dilemmas or a structured process of selection and it did not involve future-oriented considerations. Some described a tendency to go with the flow, involving social or family influences; others described hobbies or social pressures. The literature maintains that future-oriented decisions are already made in high school (Seginer, 1988; Seginer, 1998), and people are influenced by society and family, and begin to make plans regarding working life (Nurmi et al., 1993; Malmberg, 1996). The analysis of the interviews revealed that the memories of decisions were influenced by diverse factors, and most were not based on a clear future and employment strategy. Some interviewees even stated that the decision at the time were wrong considering their later career or their personality.

Military Service

From an occupational point of view, the military experience did not seem to influence vocational future and decisions. The interviewees did not link military experience to an employment dilemma. Most of them mentioned the military service as a break in the decision-making process, and some even ascribed the choice of a military path to other considerations, such as "I want to be a part of great things"; "I knew I wanted to go to a special unit..." Among those who decided studding first, there was more focus on future work. The findings of the study are consistent with the literature, indicating that in Israeli society, young people tend to postpone decisions regarding their professional future. While in OECD countries, the average age of completing a bachelor's degree is 21, in Israel it is 27. An emerging conclusion is that the military service in the IDF is a unique stage in young people's development, possibly making high school choices less critical for future employment. Research in the field of military service reinforces the finding that military experiences are not necessarily part of the path of social and occupational life (Rossman, 2002).

Decision professional studies

Most of the interviewees did not describe big dilemmas or a calculated process of decision-making and future planning. They had one or two directions, and the choice was relatively quick and easy, with reasoning such as: "I suddenly wanted... I thought economics was the next field and it would be easy for me to find a job... like my father, it sounded suitable to me... I switched to electronics engineering because it sounded more interesting. The neighbor professor convinces me to learn earth science".

The memory is that there was a kind of natural flow without hesitation. "I chose engineering. It's hard for me to say why..." Avraham: "...My whole future was open.... In 1980, Bill Gates began developing Windows... I decided that the world was going toward computers, and I enrolled in two classes of economics and computers. On the first day of university, I didn't understand... Next to me sits a student who makes comments to the professor and corrects him. Then I realized that computers are not for me. I left computing... and switched to economics and cinema... it's nice, lots of beautiful young girls." Gadi: "... I suddenly wanted to

study photography, I saw great photographic works.....It ruined the love... I was just not interested in becoming a photographer. Leon: "I was influenced by my father, who was in the industry... I also wanted to be a manager....I went to study industrial engineering, Zeev: " ... I didn't know about salary... the dream was to become a school principal..."yair:" I wanted to study agriculture... I also wanted social work, but I realized that I had a memory problem, so I went for the scientific field." Baram: "... Suddenly my humanitarian interest declined... the decision to study engineering also came to improve the economic situation – I was very poor and wanted to help the family. the teacher recommended studying production engineering....then I signed up with a friend for industrial engineering and management. And one day I caught a ride with the biology teacher who was a very intelligent person and during the ride he said that it was not for me, so I switched to electronics and it was smart decision Similar story was described by Rotem : "I wanted to study political science, but then our neighbor physics professor, convinced me to study earth sciences instead, and I was persuaded, ." Baram's decision changed while studying: "I caught a ride..." This ride affected the type of engineering he studied.

Analyzing participants' educational decisions shows that they only had a general future direction, based on various considerations (professional trends, desire to earn a lot, sudden interest, recommendation of a friend, family employment, etc.). Education choices depended on diverse factors and were only an initial stage in career development. The way this memory is described, has no great difficulty or hesitation. These findings are consistent with studies describing that choice of education can be separate from the vocational choice (Super, 1980; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994).

The memories do not indicate difficulty or challenge in the decision-making, but rather a natural flow with various options and considerations.

Finding first professional job

The transition from education to work is described as a relatively natural one, without dilemmas or difficulties. Participants described starting their first job using statements such as "I was lucky," "a place near the sea," "friends made a connection," Omri: "After graduating economics, I went to work at Bank." Shaul: "When I finished the army, I moved to the Ministry of Finance." There was no description of dilemma or difficulty. When I asked, how did you get there, Shaul said: "My friend. Roni: "...I remember there was a famous surgeon who was known to my family, and he asked if I could join, so that's how I started..." Avraham: "I gradually realized that I'm good at sales. ... then I became a salesman in the field of jeans." Gadi: "...I didn't know what to do... then I started working as a technician..." Leon: "While studying, I already worked in a project management company and then I was hired by a consulting company." Yair: "I finished my degree and the market was bad...at the end I found a small startup." Baram: "I didn't care where to start working. I preferred Jerusalem because there were shuttles to Jerusalem. This was the only thing that was important to me." Ze'ev: "I'm about to complete my degree and I see an ad in the newspaper: 'school guide wanted'... I grew up at this place every summer...after 6 months I realized this was not for me..." Daniel: "I left the army and started a business with a partner, from whom I separated after 7 months. Then I went to work for a large American company."

Almost all the interviewees described a natural transition without any substantial doubts. Even when asked to describe a difficulty or a dilemma in deciding on the first job, most answers were: "then I found..."; "then I set up..." and then I started." The choice of words indicates movement and continuity in the process, without hesitation.

Dilemmas during career

Analyzing both interviewees' words and their non-verbal language indicates that the biographical stories was not accompanied by great drama or dilemmas. The interviewees regarded the working years as a sequence of natural and continuous experiences and transitions between different employment situations. Most participants did not mention crisis, trauma, regret, or difficulty. An interesting exchange occurred during the interview with Roni, a physician (the interview took place in the presence of his wife). Roni described a sequence of pursuits and progress. Regarding difficulties, he said: "I didn't like the methods"; "I didn't feel this was how it should work." His wife suddenly intervened and said in a more determined manner: "He tried to block you." The gap between Roni's narrative and that of his wife suggests that a person's biographical memory is painted in a positive way, whereas those who know him may have a different interpretation. This may be because the person's positive memory is part of his mental well-being, while for the others, the career memory may relate to past challenges without causing emotional demands. A frequently used word in the interviewees was then:

When asked to explain what the dilemma was or why he decided to change jobs, Omri said: "I don't remember how it was exactly." The dilemma described by most of the interviewees concerned a gap between what the job market or the position offered and their personality or professional expectations. The conflict between the personal self and the role was usually the cause for a decision to change. Avraham: "I leave when I'm bored." Daniel: "It was a dull place and I'm energetic." Zeev: "I left .. because I realized that I could not develop there... I left the bank because I wanted to be authorized to sign and get promoted." Zeev described attempts to find a workplace that suited his ambitions and personality. When that didn't happen, he took the initiative and left. Leon: "I started thinking about becoming a manager and not just a consultant. I realized that it would be more interesting."

In general, the pattern shared by most interviewees is that the first job upon graduation corresponded with their education, whereas later, various events occurred - none of which is described as traumatic or serious - driving a decision of some to shift to another field. Most of the career dilemmas resulted from a disparity between personal ambition and occupational reality. However, even in these situations, the narrative did not reflect substantial difficulty.

Professor Carlo Rubelli, a physicist, in a daily newspaper article: "My lawyer advised me that, because they had found marijuana in my suitcase, it was not a good time to continue traveling... therefore I went to university... on the day of registration... I came across several lines for the various programs, and I quite arbitrarily chose the shortest path. It was only after I started studying... that I fell in love with it and discovered, to my surprise, that I am good at it..."(Lev, 2021). The beginning of the career of this world-renowned research physicist is described as random, which reflects the narratives of some of the interviewees...I didn't know in

advance... life led me..."; Shaul: it's not something I meant... each thing led to the other thing.... success in action leads me."

I tried to identify dilemmas and struggles. Instead, I found descriptions of resumes, a sequence of experiences without big drama. This was true even for those who had a dream. Zeev, for example, dreamed about working in education and being a school principal, but following a bad experience in education he realized that this was not right for him, abandoned his dream, and worked with all his energy to try new employment. He described coming to his senses quickly and moving on to sales without the thrill or pain of regret. The following thirty years of professional life were far removed from his childhood dream. Gadi described natural transitions between experiences from diverse fields: hi-tech, entrepreneurship in gardening, education. Ariel described leaving the startup company and turning to education in mid-life without hard feelings or hesitation. Most interviewees repeated the words "and then" or "from there". Shaul concludes: "Success has led me."

The positive tone of these narratives can be explained with the concept subjective well-being (Butler, 2002). According to Butler, when people emphasize positive aspects when telling their personal story, they resolve past conflicts and release negative emotions that may have existed. According to research (Shmotkin, 2005; Diener, 1984, 2000; Diener et al. 1985), this enables them to deal with the losses associated with old age and create a positive subjective experience that nurtures their mental well-being. As mentioned, when recounting their biographical career memory, people focused on perpetuating good experiences as a sort of "positive record".

Another surprising finding was that among most interviewees, employment-related choices represented a less structured and rational model, leaning toward a more random exploitation of opportunities. This finding revealed to the conclusion of Krieshok, Black, & McKay, (2009) that both rational and intuitive processes seem dialectically intertwined in vocational decision making. Moreover, the thought that a career is a pre-planned implementation of childhood dreams and adapting to personal tendencies originates from urban legends or "Cinderella stories", such as "from a young age I knew I wanted to be a..."

Career summary

At the end of each interview, I asked: "How would you sum up your career?" The answers revealed a certain degree of acceptance of the biographical narrative. Most of the participants did not indicate regret or pain. Specific regrets arose, but the general tone was contentment. The emerging conclusion is that the historical perspective moderates the difficulties. "I check-marked all my goals"; "By nature I am an optimist without hesitation. I feel that I took advantage of every opportunity"; "I'm sorry I didn't make a big deal"; "I was usually satisfied with things"; "Summing up my career with success that started randomly, and I was very lucky"; "I am thankful for the fact that I ended up, or chose, or my fate fell where it fell"; Yuri expressed some regret regarding his later choices to devote himself more to running the workplace and less to his home. "There are many nuances, it's not all black and white. I see that I have reached good things. If I sum up, I'm satisfied". Participants' summaries of their own careers demonstrate more satisfaction, mild pain and few regrets. For some interviewer telling the story changer their career perspective: Viktor, who at first refused to be interviewed explained that he did not have a career. Ended saying with surprise "managing a sports team... is a career".

Discussion and Conclusions

The initial motivation was to understand the dilemmas associated with vocational decisions as they are preserved in people's biographical memory. As a career consultant and researcher, I am exposed to dilemmas of employees. Learning about the dilemmas as they are experienced from a historic perspective was the main goal of this research. The interviews indicated a forgiving attitude of most interviewees toward the obstacles and dilemmas of the past. Moreover, among some of the interviewees it was evident that the memory of the occupational biography is more suitable for the definition of a semantic memory, in which the person refers to his personal past as technical facts. It is possible that just being interviewed and answering questions about decisions and dilemmas forced the interviewees to observe their career history with meaning and interpretation and less as technical facts, corresponding with the definition of episodic memory. In fact, the research demonstrates that the memory of career coincides to a certain extent with the definition of semantic memory.

The main findings are the following. First, the request for an interview revealed a binary response of agreeing versus refusing. Most of the refusals were based on the thought that these participants did not have a career. The second finding was that none of the interviewees reported significant dilemmas or decisions taken during their high school years.

Third, choosing the field of study was described as an organic step that depended on social interactions at the time. Fourth, the choices emerged as rather accidental and random, depending more on events that occurred at the time and less on in-depth introspection. Finally, career-related obstacles received mild expressions and produced a "positive record".

Participants' willingness or lack thereof to participate in the research revealed their attitude toward their occupational biography. The reasons given by those who declined the interview did not include utterances like "I don't have time" or "It doesn't suit me," but rather, "I don't have a story" or "I didn't have a career." That is, they did not perceive their narrative as valuable to themselves or to society. This attitude is possibly based on the social perception of what is considered a career.

The social ethos that achievement and professional identity are a substantial part of self-definition affected the answers to the interview request. Researchers (Weber, 1958; Harpaz, 1994; Conway & Wood, 2006) have emphasized the achievement ethos of work; it seems that those who wished not to participate in the research did not perceive themselves as part of this ethos. The biographical memory allows a renewed visit to the experience; if it does not provide a sense of well-being, a person would prefer not to share it. This raises a question about what is preserved in the biographical memory. Perhaps retaining the occupational past in one's memory depends on the subjective perception of that past: the further the memory is from the social ethos, the less likely it is to be preserved.

The first decision of what to study in high school is also generally directed by some kind of professional future orientation (Seginer, 1990; Albeck, 1988). The findings revealed that the choice, as reflected in participants' memory, was quite accidental and not the result of a structured process of thinking and decision making. Moreover, the future career story was often unrelated to the initial choice of the field of study. This

discrepancy between the chosen track in high school and one's future career or professional identity raises questions about the critical steps in professional choices. From the analysis of the answers we learn that participants' decisions were not always their own, as they were affected by the environment and influenced by diverse factors. These findings highlight the limitation of future-looking occupational counseling in adolescence and indicate that important professional choices take place under conditions of ambiguity at later stages and are part of a continuous developmental process (Gati & Asher, 2005).

Later on, for most interviewees, the military service was not part of the occupational career; rather, it represented a pause and a delay in employment decisions. For those who took the pre-military academic track, the career started earlier. Contrary to the view of the army as an educational factor that shapes an identity (Krebs, 2010, 2006; Calton, 1979), in the occupational biographical memory represented in this research, military service was not remembered as a significant phase: "What I did in the army was not related to my professional life." According to Rossman (2022), military service does not necessarily bridge gaps or redraws social boundaries, and one's experience in the army does not carry over to civilian life. This approach accounts for the disconnection between participants' position in the military and their later employment.

Participants' descriptions of their decisions regarding post high school education did not include great dilemmas. This is consistent with literature, which indicates the involvement of diverse factors, such as personal ambitions, work values, perception of the future, socioeconomic status, and social pressure (Dawis & Lofqouist, 1984). For some interviewees, the narrative of the choice of education did not match their occupational narrative. Studies (Tresty et al., 2000) indicate that the choice of profession develops at a personal pace, forming during an individual's course of study and work experience. In the current study, some of the interviewees emphasized that the decisions depended on successes.

First job: All the interviewees related to the choice of their first job as a natural and relatively simple decision that was in line with their field of study. The only difficulty indicated was for those who did not find a job immediately upon graduation. The interviewees remembered having many options and deciding on a job without much contemplation. Among most interviewees, there was even a sense of randomness or chance. Most of them described decision-making without a process of contemplating and weighing options. Possibly, their young age at the time contributed to the fact that they did not feel lost but had a broad perspective of the future.

Dilemmas during the career: the career memory indicated a sequence of actions and transitions with very few dramas or dilemmas. Career changes occurred when there was an internal conflict between the self and the demands of the job (Diener, 1984:2001). Those who experienced such a conflict initiated a change. Since work is a significant component of subjective well-being, the motivation for change originates from the desire to increase one's well-being. In terms of telling their story, the interviewees indicated a conscious choice resulting from conflict; yet no trauma or essential difficulty were reported. Studies emphasize that dissatisfaction with career development causes departure and change (Salleh et al., 2020; Home & Kinicki, 2001; Home & Griffeth, 1991). In the stories of the interviewees, there were no complaints against the organization but rather descriptions of internal conflict and then transition. Emphasizing natural transition in one's biographical memory probably serves a feeling of control over the choice, leading to subjective well-

being. Studies on memory have found that there is indeed a tendency to forget unpleasant experiences or events with low emotional intensity and tasks that have not been completed (Abu-al higa, 2015; Holmes, 1990; Howard & Tuffin, 2002). It is thus possible that for study participants, occupational changes and career transitions were indeed unpleasant experiences; however, from the perspective of time, participants focused on the sense of choice and control that served their emotional well-being.

The concluding words of most interviewees reflected a sense of satisfaction and acceptance, creating a "positive record". Few participants shared examples of regret or wrong decisions. Overall, obstacles or regrets, even if they were embedded in the memory, did not color the overall experiential memory. Since a person's memories are part of his or her self-definition, the "positive record" of the career story probably nurtured this positive feeling. This conclusion can lead to a practical recommendation for young people and workers relating vocational and studying:

1. At decision-making crossroads regarding studies and work, it is advisable to adopt a reconciliatory and flexible approach to opportunities.
2. The professional decisions throughout the career period result from mental flexibility and adaptation to environmental data rather than an analytical evaluation of options.
3. In retrospect, these decisions often appear to be correct and have a positive nature.
4. Career choices are made while actively participating in the workforce, and decisions regarding education, work, and career stem from diverse experiences and involve an element of randomness.
5. Professional and academic studies serve only as a foundation; later, personal inclination, achievements, and experiences will lead to a meaningful career.

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