Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Experiences and motives of retirement-aged workers during the first wave of COVID-19 in Slovenia: “This was the first time in 40 years that I really saw spring”

Ursa Bratun a,b,*, Eric Asaba c,d,e

a Department of Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia
b Department of Social Gerontology, Alma Mater Europaea, Maribor, Slovenia
c Division of Occupational Therapy, Department of Neurobiology Care Sciences and Society (NVIS), Karolinska Institutet, Solna, Sweden
d Unit for Research, Education, Development, and Innovation, Stockholm Sjukhem Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden
e Department of Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
- Active aging
- Coronavirus
- Gerotranscendence
- Meaningful activity
- Prolonged work activity
- Qualitative study

ABSTRACT

Choosing to continue working after retirement eligibility can attract both negative and positive sentiments from the general public. Studies examining the motivations of older workers have so far been conducted in times of relative social and economic stability. However, little is known about what it means for older workers to work during a lockdown or pandemic situation. The present longitudinal study aimed to explore experiences of retirement-aged workers in Slovenia in relation to their motives for prolonged work activity amid the COVID-19 pandemic, using the theory of gerotranscendence as a theoretical framework. Nine workers were interviewed before and after the start of the pandemic. The qualitative analysis was based on 18 interviews and observations, juxtaposing two analytical methods in order to illustrate common themes across the data as well as tensions in specific situations within a narrative context. Four main themes are presented: Unchanged plans, Motive de...
past regular retirement age.

In December 2019, the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) caused a global crisis with profound consequences for health, economy and labour markets (Holmes et al., 2020). To slow down the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19, most governments introduced different protective measures, which required adjustments in the way people orchestrated their daily lives, social contacts and work activities (Brooks et al., 2020; Shimazu et al., 2020). While some of the measures were gradually abandoned as the epidemiological conditions improved, others persisted, impacting people’s daily routines, social contacts and activities for the foreseeable future. Workers involved in the areas that require continuity (e.g., healthcare, food provision, security), often experience increased strain and work in extremely stressful conditions during a crisis (Kristal & McNeil, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that studies of workers during the previous epidemics and pandemics caused by zoonotic outbreaks, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), Ebola virus disease (EVD) and swine flu (H1N1), focused predominantly on healthcare workers and occupational groups at high risk of infection (e.g., Ko, Yen, & Yang, 2006; Koh et al., 2005; Maunder, 2004; Mohammed et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2010). However, workers from other fields, who might work from home, have shorter working hours, or are on temporary leave, also face distinct physical and psychosocial stressors with which they must cope (Dingel & Neiman, 2020; Rossi et al., 2020; Shimazu et al., 2020), so studies related to mental health and stress management are also of interest (Koh & Goh, 2020).

Although COVID-19 affects all age groups, people over 65 were identified as particularly vulnerable to the virus, with case-fatality rates significantly associated with higher age (Li et al., 2020; Onder, Rezza, Brusafiero, 2020). In many countries, including Slovenia, stricter restrictions were, therefore, imposed on older people, including those who were still in active employment (Fraser et al., 2020). The focus on age, developed out of genuine concern for well-being, might have contributed to an additional increase in ageist stereotypes and greater exclusion of older workers whose valuable contribution to society was suddenly no longer acknowledged (de Medeiros, 2020; Fraser et al., 2020; Ong & Burrow, 2020). Several researchers working in the field of aging highlighted that the discourse surrounding the pandemic often devalued and misrepresented older adults as well as questioned their capacity to make safe decisions (Fraser et al., 2020). A study of Twitter content, conducted in March 2020, showed that ageist tweets became common, including the prevalent use of the Twitter hashtag #boomerremover to refer to the virus (Jimenez-Sotomayor, Gomez-Moreno, & Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020). These findings illustrate a rhetoric that is depicting older people as obsolete or a burden to society during the pandemic. The negative attitudes toward the Baby boom generation, which constitutes a significant proportion of today’s workforce (Eurostat, 2020b), are particularly alarming and ignore their ongoing contribution before and during the crisis. Little is known about what it means for older workers to work during a lockdown or pandemic situation. Furthermore, knowledge about how to best support this diverse population in a crisis situation is yet scarce.

Motives for prolonged employment

Scholars have examined the motives among people who want to work beyond regular retirement age from different perspectives (e.g., Björklund Carlstedt et al., 2018; de Wind, van der Pas, Blatter, & van der Beek, 2016; Fasbender, Wang, Voltmer, & Deller, 2015; Hofbrandt et al., 2019; Nilsson, Hydbom, & Bylander, 2011; Reynolds, Farrow, & Blank, 2012; Sewdas et al., 2017; Wang, Zhan, Liu, & Shultz, 2008). Incentives for prolonged work activity are both internal and external (Hofbrandt et al., 2019), with internal driving forces probably becoming more pronounced as people age (de Lange, 2010). Uninterrupted routine (Wolven & Hunt, 2015) and personal development (de Wind et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2012) have been recognized as some of the essential intrinsic rewards of delayed retirement. It has also been suggested that motivation in the last period of one’s work life may have implications for subsequent retirement (Henning et al., 2019). Björklund Carlstedt et al. (2018) argue that older people need to be willing, able and allowed to work longer, which requires the application of strategies aimed at the individual, the work environment and the socio-cultural context. Similarly, Shultz’s (2003) model of prolonged work life after reaching pensionable age includes three levels: micro (the person’s attributes), meso (work opportunities within the organization) and macro level (the wider social context). Those components are also represented in the Sustainable Working Life for All Ages model or the swAge model, which has been empirically developed in Sweden and promotes work sustainability at an older age by looking at different work-related factors (Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson, 2020).

In the gerontology literature, the most often cited theories that explain prolonged work are Atchley’s continuity theory (1989), Havighurst’s activity theory (Havighurst, 1961), life course perspective (Elder, 1992) and role theory (Ashforth, 2001). A historical examination suggests that when developed, some of these theories – particularly activity theory – contrasted the “disengagement model” and replaced it with an “activity model” that became dominant in gerontology (Ehni, Kadi, Schermer, & Venkatapuram, 2018). The activity approach to aging influenced the emergence of a successful aging model that describes the importance of activity continuation in old age, including work (Foster & Walker, 2015). Moreover, an occupational perspective and critique of how work is framed are central (Asaba, Aldrich, Gabrielson, Ekstrom, & Farias, 2021). However, most studies to date examined workers during a time of relative stability. We do not know if other theories and incentives might become more relevant during a crisis situation – such as a pandemic – when the continuity no longer applies and people’s activities and roles transform rapidly (Di Renzo et al., 2020). For instance, gerotranscendence could be one such theory as it provides an alternative to the previously mentioned sociological theories and questions the concept of “successful aging” that focuses on productivity, activity and independence. It describes positive aging and an individual’s gradual move toward maturity and wisdom (Tornstam, 1997, 2005; Tornstam, 1989). The theory assumes that certain life crises can accelerate the process of gerotranscendence, which is vaguely defined as “a shift in meta-perspective from a material and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one, usually followed by an increase in life satisfaction” (Tornstam, 1989, p. 60). It also argues that gerotranscendence is a natural process that can motivate the pursuit of positive development and transition (George & Dixon, 2018), Tornstam (2005) proposed three levels of change; cosmic transcendence (e.g., feeling the connection with the universe), coherence (e.g., discovering the self) and solitude (e.g., re-evaluating relationships and priorities). It has been suggested that gerotranscendence is unrelated to culture; however, some inter-cultural differences have been noted (Ahmadi Lewin, 2001) and the theory currently lacks empirical data from Central and Eastern Europe (Gerdina, 2020).

Study context

In Slovenia, a country of 2 million people that gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, people can retire on a full state pension if they are 60 years or older and have worked for at least 40 years. The pension is significantly lower than the worker’s previous income, currently amounting to 58.5% of previous salary for a full pension for men and 63.5% for women, with men’s sum expected to equalize with women’s in the next few years (Pension and Disability Insurance Act, 2020). If a person chooses to work after becoming eligible for retirement, they are entitled to receive both a full salary and 40% of the pension for the first three years, and 20% thereafter. Employment among people aged 55 or over in Slovenia is 48.6%, making it one of the lowest in Europe (Eurostat, 2020a). State incentives for working longer have mainly
focused on the material rewards (Pension and Disability Insurance Act, 2020). However, in a previous study by Bratun and Zurc (2020) it has been suggested that internal incentives of work can be also important for older workers in Slovenia. The motives for prolonged employment appear to be multidimensional in this group, including financial and non-financial rewards, such as the need to contribute and help, stay active and find a purpose in life (Bratun & Zurc, 2020).

In Slovenia, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on March 4th, 2020. The country declared the COVID-19 epidemic on March 12th, 2020 at 6 PM. Shortly after, the government established a de facto national quarantine. All non-essential businesses, such as shopping malls, hairdressers and beauty salons, as well as gyms and recreation centres, were closed by a government decree. Residents were asked to observe a stay-at-home recommendation, were not allowed to travel between counties or gather in groups and all educational institutions were closed. In practice, this meant that most people spent the majority of the day at home. Just before the health crisis was understood globally, the country also went through a political turmoil. In January 2020, the Prime Minister resigned, and on March 13th the new government was confirmed. This changed the political landscape in the country and prompted a series of non-violent protests against the government and its decisions. On May 15th, 2020, Slovenia was the first EU country to proclaim the end of the epidemic within its territory, which came into effect at the end of May. During the first wave of the pandemic, Slovenia was one of the less severely affected countries in Europe. By August 31st, 2924 people tested positive for COVID-19 and 133 had died (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020). In July and August 2020, however, there was already speculation of a second wave of the disease followed by the re-introduction of stricter containment measures in the fall of that year. On October 19th, the epidemic was declared again. Between October 2020 and April 2021, the country was placed under lockdown, which included a night-time curfew, restriction of social contacts and remote learning for all students. Beginning in late April, restrictions were slowly lifted and on June 16th, the end of the second wave of the epidemic was announced, though measures such as testing and mandatory face masks remained in effect. By July 11th 2021, 257,875 people in Slovenia had become infected with COVID-19 and 4765 had died as a result of the disease (National Institute of Public Health, 2021).

The present study aimed to explore experiences of older workers in Slovenia in relation to their motives for prolonged work activity amid the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it was of interest to narratively explore how COVID-19 impacted everyday reflections among workers who continue to work after fulfilling the retirement criteria. Gerotranscendence has been drawn on as a potentially useful framework for the understanding of retirement-aged workers’ motives and experiences during a crisis.

Methods

In this study, we used a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For nine months, we followed the life trajectories of a group of individuals who continued working in their career employment after fulfilling the retirement criteria, exploring their experiences and reasoning around work. By life trajectories, we mean the pathways of our participants and their decisions regarding work and retirement (that might change over time). We were interested to see how phenomenon unfolds over time, so the participants were interviewed in more than one time point to explore the development of their motives and how they reacted to changes in their environment; for example, if there were any turning points that shaped the life trajectory upward or downward (Bernardi, Huinink, & Settersten, 2019).

This study is a part of a larger project focusing on the motives of retirement-aged workers in Slovenia. The same group of workers will be interviewed at three time points, which will be followed by a quantitative phase that will include a larger sample of retirement-aged workers. The unforeseen situation of a pandemic that we were able to capture since the first set of interviews were conducted just before the start of the pandemic made this an important story to be told.

In the present study, we juxtaposed the work narratives and motives before COVID-19 with the narratives and motivations following the end of the first wave of COVID-19, basing the analysis on 18 interviews and observations.

Participants

Nine workers were included in this longitudinal study. At the time of the first interview, the participants ranged in age from 59 to 72 years with an average age of 63.7 years. The criteria for inclusion was that the person was eligible for retirement but continued to work full time in the same job role. To limit the effect of the geographic location on the experience, all the participants came from an urban area. Snowball sampling was used to recruit people from diverse backgrounds who were open to sharing their work and life experience. The first author approached people whose social network could include retirement-aged workers and asked them to identify potential participants. In this way, five participants were recruited. One of the participants referred three more candidates and one of them, an additional one. In this way, a total of six men and three women were recruited. They represented a diverse sample in terms of their education level, profession and job role. Although we did not collect information specifically about the socioeconomic status of the participants, we observed during the interviews that their financial situations likely varied. For example, while some mentioned owning several properties, others indicated financial difficulties and lived in more modest dwellings. Seven of the participants were married and their partners were also employed, one was widowed, and one had a partner who was retired. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym which was used during the analysis and presentation of the findings. Table 1 presents the participants’ characteristics and work conditions during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The study was conducted according to the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki. Formal ethical approval for the study was granted by the University Alma Mater Europaea (no. 4/2019–20, no. 8/2019–20). All participants signed a written, informed consent.

Data collection

The data were gathered in two rounds of interviews. Between December 2019 and March 2020, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with all the participants at a place of the participants’ choice (home, office or a café). The conversations followed an interview guide and covered topics related to the participants’ motives for prolonged work activity, their experience of working after fulfilling the retirement criteria and plans for the future. Every interview started with an opening question: ‘Can you tell me about your decision to continue working even though you can retire?’, followed by additional questions and probes. The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 min with an average length of 48 min. The main findings of this phase of the study were presented in a separate article that included a hierarchy of motives for delayed retirement (Bratun & Zurc, 2020).

Between June and August 2020, after the end of the lockdown in Slovenia, additional interviews were conducted by the first author, at the same locations as before. The second interview started with a brief summary of the first interview, after which the participants were invited to comment on the accuracy of the interpretation and provide additional comments. All participants agreed with the interviewer’s understanding of the main points of the first interview. A subsequent question was posed such as: ‘How did COVID-19 affect your work and employment?’. Depending on the response, additional questions and probes were used in line with an interview guide, such as ‘Can you describe what you did during the lockdown?’, ‘Did you change anything in your life?’, ‘How did the pandemic affect your relationships?’. Since there was familiarity
from the first interview, the individual conversations often followed up on the topics covered in the earlier interview; for instance, relationship with the partner, search for new activities, problems with certain people at work. However, the main focus of the second interview was on the individual’s experience of the COVID-19 crisis in relation to their work motives and retirement plans. The second interviews ranged in length from 20 to 68 min with the average duration of 38 min.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed near verbatim by the first author with the participants’ permission. A total of 166 pages of transcripts were included in the final analysis; 87 pages from the first round and 79 pages from the second round of interviews.

**Data analysis**

In this study, we integrated thematic and narrative analytic techniques. Both methods were applied to the same qualitative data set to provide distinctive interpretive scopes on the meaning making of prolonged work activity before and during a crisis situation. Thematic analysis enabled us to find patterns across cases (Patton, 2014). Although there is a strength in identifying commonalities across the data, there are also specific rich examples that sometimes are omitted (McAllum, Fox, Simpson, & Unson, 2019). It was therefore decided to simultaneously employ narrative methods, which have been shown to be relevant when examining how people make sense of different lived events and change (McAllum et al., 2019). During thematic analysis, we segmented the data and re-contextualized it in broader themes. In contrast, during narrative analysis, the text was considered as a whole; we did not parse it into meaning units, but kept the integrity of the text, deriving meaning from its plot.

The thematic analysis followed six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcribing and reading the interviews repeatedly to familiarise ourselves with the data, transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti, version 8 (Muhr, 2019) and assigned initial codes that consisted of meaning units or phrases that were used in the responses. We generated 288 codes. Examples of codes included: more engaged, fighting for the future, good challenge, invited to continue, satisfaction with the change, learning new skills. In the third step, codes were organized into potential themes. For instance, the above codes were joined in a subtheme “increased motivation”. In the fourth step, we reviewed the themes and started working on a thematic map that included themes and subthemes. We then refined and defined each theme, checking its internal coherence. In the last step, we produced a research report that included vivid examples of the data that helped align the results of the analysis with the research aim. The analysis followed an iterative process, moving back and forth between the data and the analysis, comparing the codes for meaning and interpretations and adjusting the themes until finding the best fit for the data set.

The narrative analysis was based on techniques described by Polkinghorne (2015). We used narratives as both a mode of reasoning in data generation and in the analysis of the data. In the analysis, we did not wish to ignore a single person’s unique lived experience, so we kept each life story and analysed it individually. Events were organized chronologically and examined for plots and significant events. We looked for the key events in each narrative that could help explain the unfolding of narratives over time and temporally and sequentially link different events and actions. We wrote several drafts for each of the participants that led to the development of the final narrative that included a coda or an evaluation of the meaning of the story (McAllum et al., 2019). Stories were later shortened for the purpose of the presentation.

**Findings**

Thematic analysis

Four themes were developed in the analysis; Unchanged plans, Motive developments, Psychological preparation for retirement and Views of society. The themes are briefly described in Table 2.

‘Unchanged plans’ emerged as a theme of salience through the analysis. Although participants had to (temporarily) adjust their lives and activities due to the pandemic and restrictions, this did not appear to affect their overall plans regarding work and retirement compared to what they shared in the first interview. They wanted to carry on working for as long as feasible or for as long as they had planned to prior to the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, during the lockdown, Paul was invited to work in situ when needed. Worked remotely (using technology).

### From the first interview, the individual conversations often followed up on the topics covered in the earlier interview; for instance, relationship with the partner, search for new activities, problems with certain people at work. However, the main focus of the second interview was on the individual’s experience of the COVID-19 crisis in relation to their work motives and retirement plans. The second interviews ranged in length from 20 to 68 min with the average duration of 38 min.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed near verbatim by the first author with the participants’ permission. A total of 166 pages of transcripts were included in the final analysis; 87 pages from the first round and 79 pages from the second round of interviews.

#### Data analysis

In this study, we integrated thematic and narrative analytic techniques. Both methods were applied to the same qualitative data set to provide distinctive interpretive scopes on the meaning making of prolonged work activity before and during a crisis situation. Thematic analysis enabled us to find patterns across cases (Patton, 2014). Although there is a strength in identifying commonalities across the data, there are also specific rich examples that sometimes are omitted (McAllum, Fox, Simpson, & Unson, 2019). It was therefore decided to simultaneously employ narrative methods, which have been shown to be relevant when examining how people make sense of different lived events and change (McAllum et al., 2019). During thematic analysis, we segmented the data and re-contextualized it in broader themes. In contrast, during narrative analysis, the text was considered as a whole; we did not parse it into meaning units, but kept the integrity of the text, deriving meaning from its plot.

The thematic analysis followed six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcribing and reading the interviews repeatedly to familiarise ourselves with the data, transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti, version 8 (Muhr, 2019) and assigned initial codes that consisted of meaning units or phrases that were used in the responses. We generated 288 codes. Examples of codes included: more engaged, fighting for the future, good challenge, invited to continue, satisfaction with the change, learning new skills. In the third step, codes were organized into potential themes. For instance, the above codes were joined in a subtheme “increased motivation”. In the fourth step, we reviewed the themes and started working on a thematic map that included themes and subthemes. We then refined and defined each theme, checking its internal coherence. In the last step, we produced a research report that included vivid examples of the data that helped align the results of the analysis with the research aim. The analysis followed an iterative process, moving back and forth between the data and the analysis, comparing the codes for meaning and interpretations and adjusting the themes until finding the best fit for the data set.

The narrative analysis was based on techniques described by Polkinghorne (2015). We used narratives as both a mode of reasoning in data generation and in the analysis of the data. In the analysis, we did not wish to ignore a single person’s unique lived experience, so we kept each life story and analysed it individually. Events were organized chronologically and examined for plots and significant events. We looked for the key events in each narrative that could help explain the unfolding of narratives over time and temporally and sequentially link different events and actions. We wrote several drafts for each of the participants that led to the development of the final narrative that included a coda or an evaluation of the meaning of the story (McAllum et al., 2019). Stories were later shortened for the purpose of the presentation.

#### Findings

**Thematic analysis**

Four themes were developed in the analysis; Unchanged plans, Motive developments, Psychological preparation for retirement and Views of society. The themes are briefly described in Table 2.

‘Unchanged plans’ emerged as a theme of salience through the analysis. Although participants had to (temporarily) adjust their lives and activities due to the pandemic and restrictions, this did not appear to affect their overall plans regarding work and retirement compared to what they shared in the first interview. They wanted to carry on working for as long as feasible or for as long as they had planned to prior to the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, during the lockdown, Paul was invited to...
renew his contract, which confirmed to him that his company still needed and wanted him in that job role. Margaret described how she enjoyed her time at home while she was on paid leave. However, when asked if the positive stay-at-home experience perhaps changed her mind about working longer, she replied: “No, no, there is a time for everything. It would be a shame for me to lock my knowledge away in the retirement kitchen. As I said previously, I enjoy working with patients and doing good deeds here.” Paul and Margaret were mentioning the altruistic aspects of their work in both interviews; a sense of belonging and contribution were important motivations for them.

Lyudmila, whose plan was to work only for nine more months, reported how she was able to overcome certain fears during the lockdown and enjoyed some aspects of her work more now. Nonetheless, her retirement plan remained unaltered. Even Felix, who was previously committed as before to continue working at his job. Darko who in his first interview described his love of work, which he perceived almost as a leisure time activity he would do even if he didn’t get paid, now said: “I’ll work for three more years, and not a day longer. Then I don’t know, but I’ll finish. I’ve had enough.” He felt that since the founder of the company, who was like a father to him, retired and the business was taken over by his son, things have changed. “The son doesn’t have the same feeling as the old man had; it’s different now.” Relationships at work and pressure from the employer were also dampening Felix’s motivation who now saw money as the main incentive to carry on working, whereas before money was not the essential factor to him (although it was important too): “Yes, I think that’s the main motivation now… If it wasn’t for the 40% extra, if there was only salary, which he [the employer] cut recently, I think I wouldn’t even consider working on.” Reduced motivation was not specifically related to the COVID-19 experience but more to inter-personal relationships and external pressures. Andrew was the only one who reported that his work satisfaction reduced because of the corona virus safety measures. He predicted that if he continues to work remotely, his motivation will probably decline with time, suggesting that the negative effects of COVID-19 on motivation might not be imminen; however, there was a risk.

In contrast, increased motivation seemed to be somewhat connected with the present coronavirus situation and the opposition to some of the government decrees. For example, Joe felt that the new reality was something he did not like and wanted to fight for his values by “being a counterbalance to all the stupidity.” He also repeatedly expressed that the new work situation was a positive challenge for him and he was eager to continue. Similarly, Lyudmila perceived the new situation as an opportunity that motivated her to learn new work-related skills.

The time of the lockdown in many ways served as a ‘Psychological preparation for retirement’, giving the participants an experience of life at home and what that entails. The experience was overall positive, which put them at ease and relaxed them about the future. Vilma said: “When I was on paid leave, I realized how easy it was to be at home. Even if I didn’t go… or, I wouldn’t really resent it if I had to stay at home for another month or so. I don’t know, there was nothing to complain about being at home.” In fact, when Vilma returned to work, she started feeling more annoyed with her manager’s actions and thought to herself: “Do I really need to put up with all this?”

Paul recognized during the lockdown how much he enjoyed being with his wife:

When my wife and I talked, we saw that we really like being together, that we are not together enough. We liked being together more, definitely. And, really, I often said to myself, so this is what it looks like when you’re retired. You’re here all day. You’re doing completely different things, but it’s not boring, no. Well, if you have good conditions and a good relationship, it’s nice. But if I had to be alone or I’d feel like running from home, it’s a different story then.

The lockdown situation also brought home the message of the importance of activity. Forced inactivity motivated some participants to look for replacement activities. It was more important for an activity to fill one’s life in a meaningful way and provide routine than to have a status of a paid job. In this way, some were laying the foundation for their future retirement activities. Darko, for example, started gardening for the first time in his life:

When I was at home, I started looking for a garden. I was looking every day where to find one. We were going ‘round and also looking on the internet. And I found one! I’ve never had a garden before. We [he and his son] built a little hut during the lockdown, as we had lots of time. We really enjoy gardening now, the whole family.

Darko plans to continue with the new activity; he is looking to buy land and already has plans for what he will grow next season, involving his children and grandchildren in the planning. Some participants even bent the rules a little to be able to pursue valuable activities during the lockdown. Marius admitted: “Where I play football, well, we continued playing during the corona. When it was forbidden, but they let us be…I don’t know, we just had enough. We obeyed it for a month and then we said, what if we play one game.” He jokingly concluded: “The main thing is, you have to do something. That’s the only cure for us oldies…”

On the other hand, some of the participants (Vilma, Andrew and Joe) struggled to motivate themselves sometimes and felt bad about the negative effect of inactivity on their health. Vilma said:

I have to admit, I’ve become more lazy (sic) now. Really. The first month of the quarantine, when it all started, I was still active and went out for a walk… But now I just lie down when I come home from work… I’ll have to kick myself. I should go for a walk instead of eating so much… I need to get into the habit of walking.

Andrew also observed how his muscles atrophied during the lockdown as he cut his physical activity while working from home, his only workout a cycle to the anti-government protests every Friday.

The participants also expressed fears regarding the future of the society and quality of relationships in the wake of the pandemic. The fourth theme, ‘Views of society,’ brought together their opinions that had an overall pattern of negativity. They were particularly worried about the lack of social contacts and the effect that will have on the younger generation. Paul was critical of technology taking over:

The technology progressed so much, that we can do most things from home. But I don’t support that… Those with neoliberal thinking might be happy about it. But we know where that will lead us. We will suspend certain rights and I don’t approve of that. I think social contact is very important. If we start to exclude that… As I said, the students suffered most, because they took that away from them. Maybe those that have a bit of social phobia like it, and I fear what happens if those prevail… People, we are social animals, so I don’t like this part.

The participants warned about the lowering status of the older generation in today’s society. Joe remembered an old fable:
All this trust in technology... What are they doing now? I think it will be a major mistake. And I think many older people will get fed up with this. To many, our experience will not seem relevant anymore, as in 'we don't need you.' But we have been through that many times before. Remember the fairy-tale about a king who got rid of all older people? And then one man hid his father and later won the princess because his father advised him.

Andrew also suggested that the looming economic crisis will widen the intergenerational gap and that younger people will probably start feeling less tolerant of people like him who continue working: 'There will be more unemployment and fewer jobs... and the nervousness of somebody who is waiting for me to go will increase, especially if I keep sitting here [points at his desk] and don't move [laughs].'

Felix described how he felt bad when he returned to work after a stay-at-home period and overheard one of his colleagues say that older workers should retire and give space to the younger generation. When he confronted the colleague, she said she was not referring to him.

On the other hand, Lyudmila found a positive consequence of the safety measures connected with COVID-19. She felt less judged about her age due to wearing a face mask. She said:

> Because your face is covered, they [other people] cannot tell how old you are. They can only see your eyes. And I've noticed that people look at you in a more holistic way. Now if you move in a youthful way, they don't know [how old you are]. My colleague said that when she came to the grocery store in the period when only 65+ were allowed to shop and she was turned away, she was very pleased about that [her friend is over 65].

**Narrative findings**

In the narrative analysis, we followed each of the participant's plots individually, identifying key moments in their narratives and providing the context for and contingency of events.

One of the participants was identified as extremely agentic and reflective, demonstrating self-transcending elements in relation to her preparation for retirement; therefore, we present a short vignette to contextualize and deepen the gerotranscending aspects of motivation that were followed in her account of the experience before and after the COVID-19 lockdown in Slovenia.

**Lyudmila's story: The Phoenix rises**

In 2017 and 2018, Lyudmila lost two close family members in short succession. She felt mentally and physically exhausted, so her plan was to retire from lecturing. However, the appointment of the person who was supposed to replace her was cancelled, so she agreed to prolong her employment for nine months. By the time she met the retirement criteria in January 2020, she was starting to recover from her losses, so she welcomed the additional time to gradually prepare for the retirement, as well as help the department for a bit longer. Lyudmila was very dedicated to finding activities that could replace work after she retired. As a part of the preparation for retirement, she and her friends started an informal group that met every two weeks. They discussed topics related to retirement; Lyudmila perceived it as a safe place where they could share thoughts, plans and fears. For instance, she realized that some group members were planning a lot of post-retirement occupations together with their partners. She, on the other hand, did not expect to do a lot of things together with her partner as they did not share many interests. Previously, she had planned to spend time with her sister, but her sister passed away unexpectedly. Her search for new meaning was, therefore, directed toward herself and discovering what she wanted to do in the future. She had a few ideas but felt she hadn't found that main purpose yet.

I have been talking to my daughters about volunteering in a nursing home; maybe I could read to those who don't have visitors or run some creative workshops. That would have a meaning. But my daughters are afraid it would bring me down. I've had so many losses in my life already...

Although Lyudmila enjoyed her work and had good relationships with co-workers, she did not want to extend her work for longer than nine months. She felt a younger person should take her position as she did not feel competent using modern technology in her work:

> Somebody younger should come into this position, with fresh ideas and new energy. Times have changed, this is the time of the internet and all those things that are too exhausting for us. Somebody new should come, who is good at it. Because it's needed when you teach. We [older people] are out of date. We are not even capable to comprehend and use all this.

Lyudmila wanted to step back and give an opportunity to a younger person. However, she was not disengaging from the world, but was actively searching how to meaningfully replace her work after she retired and wanted to craft a new life for herself.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Lyudmila was working from home. Her daily routine changed significantly. Instead of driving to work for an hour, she got up and went for a long walk, had breakfast and then started working. Or, sometimes, she worked only in the afternoons, enjoying the flexibility. She had to set up an online classroom, which encouraged her to learn more about IT. The experience made her realize that she was still able to learn. She overcame her previous fears of using technology, which contributed to a sense of empowerment and was a positive experience:

> Last time, I was telling you how all those gadgets are really stressful for me. And now I was forced, and it became clear to me that this wasn't connected with my age, but with some sort of phobia that I'm not able to do it. You might need a bit more time to grasp it all, but you do grasp it. All those different options. I even had to prepare my online exams as a quiz, which was a real challenge for me. A great challenge! I learnt a lot of new things under the guise of corona.

The time of coronavirus provided Lyudmila with some good ideas of what she will do after she retires: possibly write a manual on hand therapy and get involved with her grandchild and family more. She enjoyed the lockdown and observed how the nature around her changed in the spring:

> This was the first time in 40 years that I really saw spring!... For me, it was a time of transition, changing my patterns of everyday life. And, also, adding new, self-rewarding patterns, such as walking, experiencing the spring, cooking, reading... There was more freedom and work on myself. It also made me think about how much time we throw away every day... commuting, unnecessary chats, shopping, and all of a sudden you realise that we don't need all those activities. It made me re-evaluate my values and priorities.

Furthermore, during COVID-19, Lyudmila lost her attachment to workplace. She used to perceive work as a second home. However, upon returning to work after the lockdown, she did not feel the same anymore; the worker identity was slowly dissolving. She felt more distant from the decisions being made at the department. In a way, the time of corona was therapeutic for her as it provided her with an additional experience:

> If I retired directly in September, it would probably be a bit of a trauma, it would be traumatizing for me until September and then there would be a quick descent into retirement. But now, it was more gradual. I experienced it as a gradual change of habits. Because, at the end of the day, what is work if not a mix of habits? You get up, get ready, sit in the car, drive to work, work. And now I was forced to change it. Just like a smoker. A smoker won't stop smoking, but if
there is a health issue, they'll stop in a second. That's how I perceived it. This coronavirus came and we were not responsible for it, but our habits changed overnight.

Lyudmila feels ready to retire now, but she is also happy to assist her co-workers in the future if they needed her knowledge. In a span of three years, Lyudmila rose from the ashes of personal loss, accepted a change in the direction of her life and created a new path for herself. The adaptation was a gradual process and COVID-19 appeared to have played an important role in the transition process as it forced Lyudmila to change her established patterns and perceptions, as well as enabled her to discover new aspects of life and trust herself more.

Findings summary

The participants exhibited an overall stable pattern of work and retirement plans. They reported different positive experiences from the lockdown period, which gave them a unique insight into how life could be different, yet still satisfying. These experiences seemed to have contributed to the psychological preparation for future retirement, especially in terms of developing new habits and activity patterns. Although the life direction remained largely undisturbed (for now), the feelings surrounding work and future retirement changed for some of the participants, bringing fluctuations in the levels of motivation they described in relation to their work. Relationships emerged as vital to different aspects of the participants’ lives; including relationships at work and with family, relationships in the society and inter-generational relationships. Furthermore, there was a novel relationship with technology that was ambivalent. Technology enabled work; however, it was also a symptom of a changing society in which older people's experiences were losing value. Inter-personal relationships helped to contextualize a person's experience and their decisions about whether to continue working and for how much longer. For those who experienced work relationship challenges, the external rewards could become more important than previously. In contrast, those who were previously motivated by a sense of belonging and contribution, now described concern for the well-being of the society, especially younger people, and felt motivated to act and continue working. The negative aspects of the lockdown experience mainly included lack of activities, worries about the future and reactions to the increasing domination of technology.

Discussion

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this was the first qualitative study that explored how COVID-19 showed in the narratives of people who work beyond retirement and how it characterized their work-related motives and plans, especially in relation to the pre-pandemic experience. The findings revealed surprisingly positive experiences of the lockdown period and work amid the pandemic. This is contrary to the results of survey studies that examined the psychological effects of COVID-19 on adults in different countries and detected an overall negative effect (e.g., Liu et al., 2020; Pieh, Budimir, & Probst, 2020; Rossi et al., 2020). For instance, Rossi et al. (2020) found high rates of mental health problems in the Italian general population three weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown, including 37% of the participants reporting post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS). PTSS have also been reported during the SARS and H1N1 pandemics (Ko et al., 2006). A study that included 285 residents in Wuhan also recognized that severe health crises such as COVID-19 can provoke psychological contagion, resulting in widespread fear, anxiety and a variety of psychological problems (Liu et al., 2020). Sasaki, Kawakami, Kuroda, and Tsuno (2020) warned specifically about the social and psychological effects of COVID-19 on workers. On the other hand, some studies suggest that age can be a mediating factor in the experience of a crisis situation. For example, when Pieh et al. (2020) examined the effect of different factors on mental health amid the COVID-19 outbreak, they found that younger adults (<35 years) and those who did not have work (as well as women and those with a lower income) were at a higher risk to feel depressed and anxious. Similarly, studies from Iran and India found that younger people were more likely to experience stress and anxiety about COVID-19 compared to older adults (Kazmi, Hasan, Talib, & Saxena, 2020; Moghanibashi-Mansouri, 2020). It is possible that people who are eligible for retirement experienced the lockdown differently compared to other groups; for example, those with school-aged children who had additional responsibilities during this period or those who did not have the safety net of potential retirement and feared for their jobs. Pieh et al. (2020) suggested that restrictions related to a pandemic might affect younger people more, making their work conditions uncertain and leading to financial insecurity. All participants in this study were either able to work from home or received full salary, possibly optimizing their lockdown experience. We also need to consider that Slovenia had a relatively low death toll during the first wave of COVID-19 compared to some other European countries, so the participants did not necessarily interpret the situation as overwhelming and could distance themselves from the crisis. This study provides support to the idea that older workers might be a group of people less affected by mental stressors during a stay-at-home situation and that they handle the crisis situation better than their younger counterparts. It should also be considered that a sense of autonomy and freedom of choice can have a positive effect on retirement-aged workers, as previously suggested by Bratun and Zurc (2020). Retirement-aged workers are in a unique position that they can stop working at any time if they choose to without any dire consequences (if we disregard the lower pension); they have more control over this aspect of their lives compared to a younger worker. The need for autonomy is an essential part of self-determination theory and can help explain people's intrinsic motivation for activities, including work (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomous and self-sufficient self is also central to the theory of gerotranscendence as it allows a person to explore their “true self” (Tornstam, 2005). The positive coping strategies of older and retirement-ages workers might require further scientific attention to provide more evidence in relation to our findings.

The participants unanimously recognized the importance of activity for their well-being and health. Moreira et al. (2020) suggested that those who exercised, felt better during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been confirmed and expanded upon in this study as most of the participants were seeking ways to be active and engaged. Although exercising was encouraged during the lockdown in Slovenia – as long as it occurred outdoors and physical distancing was observed – the stay-at-home situation and lack of peer encouragement and social interactions reduced some participants' motivation to be active (e.g., Vilma, Andrew). This was recognized as a potential health problem that needed rectifying by finding new sources of motivation. Nonetheless, if the participants managed to occupy their time meaningfully, they did not appear to be too disturbed by the crisis. In fact, some accrued experiences and insights that improved their well-being and contributed to personal development, as demonstrated through the illustrations in this paper. In contrast, lack of meaningful activities was met with resistance, to the point of being prepared to break the rules and engage in behaviours that could increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission; for instance, by playing group sports or attending protests. Some of the participants showed a preference for liberty over safety, liberty being expressed in their choice of activities (or inactivity). The search for activities also provided novel opportunities and helped the participants negotiate some of their previous fears and anxieties, helping them transcend a potentially negative experience and infuse it with new meaning.

The participants mostly exhibited agentic identities, which manifested as self-stories of active agency (Polkinghorne, 1996). They knew what they wanted to accomplish and had a plan how to do it, despite the inhibiting circumstances. It appeared that participants who explored new, meaningful occupations felt positive, which also characterized the narratives they shared. Felix was the only participant who found it more difficult to adjust and separate from his worker role, seeking ways to...
postpone his retirement. However, he, too, was trying to take control over his life, showing more purpose and commitment in his second interview. A move from a victim to an agentic identity is an inherent process, considered central to a person's ability to cope with change and gain the power to engage with the world (Polkinghorne, 1996). Interestingly, the directions of the participants' narratives were not unidimensional and could vary depending on a person's area of life. For instance, the work activity and retirement plots appeared to be diametrically opposite in some participants; if they started feeling more comfortable about the retirement transition, they became more critical of the work circumstances and contemplated retirement (e.g., Vilma, Darko). Based on the findings of this study, we argue that in crisis and transitional situations, the development of agentic identity in older workers could be best supported using meaningful activities (paid or unpaid). By developing an agentic identity, the workers might be in a better position to make decisions that reflect their inner motivations and desires about work and retirement, going beyond fear and conformity.

The findings of this study illustrate examples that can be explored using both gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1997, 2005; Tornstam, 1989) and concepts of doing, being, becoming and belonging from occupational science (Wilcock, 1998; Yerxa, 1993). The theory of gerotranscendence describes how a person can become more selective in their activities as they age, giving priority to solitude and contemplation and moving toward non-material dimensions of life (Tornstam, 1997). Some of the participants became more selective in the way they used their time and were discovering the hidden aspects of the self, which is congruent with the theory of gerotranscendence. However, identification of meaningful activities and connection with others appeared to have played a crucial role in this process, which introduces a slightly new perspective on gerotranscendence in the time of COVID-19. Tornstam (2005) regarded “activity theory” as complementary to gerotranscendence. What this study adds is the reflection on the qualitative dimensions of the activity choices from the perspective of an individual. It also provides empirical material that helps to distinguish gerotranscendence more clearly from the theory of disengagement, which has previously been described as problematic (Jewell, 2014). Elements of gerotranscendence were observed in those who found new, meaningful activities during the lockdown (e.g., Lyudmila, Darko) or were engaged in activities that they perceived as meaningful and important for the society (e.g., Paul, Margaret, Joe). The participants who managed to transcend the crisis via their occupations, got a sense of peace and purpose from the new activity pattern, as well as an increased sense of connection with others. In other words, it was not important to just “do”, but also what you did and with whom or for whom. In occupational science, activities that are central to a person's narrative and are infused with positive meaning are referred to as “engaging occupations”. They usually exhibit at least some connection to other people or the community (Jonsson, Josephsson, & Kiellhorn, 2000).

Participants' responses suggested that the ageist sentiments intensified with the crisis. Some became more aware of the intergenerational conflict and the diminishing value society placed on their experience and expertise as expressed by Joe, Felix and Andrew. Lyudmila felt that ageism was reduced to some extent while wearing a face mask that concealed her chronological age by covering her face. Her experience suggests how the society judges people based on their appearance and values them less if they appear older. Although Lyudmila welcomed the new experience, attitudes did not change; the face mask only temporarily prevented people from scrutinizing each other. Previous research on intergenerational relationships in the workplace suggests that the tensions between generations are often related to ageism (Lagace, Van de Beeck, & Firzly, 2019). A study conducted in Slovenia confirmed international findings and showed that older workers are often stereotyped because of their age. They are viewed as less productive, less motivated, less innovative and less adaptable. There is also a belief that they require more time to learn new things and complete their tasks (Rozman, Treven, & Cancer, 2020).

Previous studies demonstrated that relationships at work, both with co-workers and managers, are often considered a prerequisite for workers to continue working beyond retirement (Hovbrantt et al., 2019; Nilsson, 2020) and affect the worker's well-being in and outside work (Marchiondo, Fisher, Cortina, & Matthews, 2020). In addition to what is already known about the importance of relationships, this study suggested that focus on external rewards (i.e., financial incentives) might become more obvious not in the absence of material sufficiency (as one might assume), but in the absence of good quality relationships or work camaraderie. This could be further explored in future studies on motives for prolonged labour activity to ascertain the relationship between internal and external motives and contextual factors in this group of people. We argue that an effective long-term national strategy that wants to encourage work activity should focus on the development of workplaces where workers over the age of 60 feel welcome and appreciated and can guide with their wisdom and maturity. This might become particularly pertinent if we want to prevent intergenerational conflicts and increase a sense of belonging and solidarity, especially in times of a crisis.

Study limitations

We employed qualitative methodology to explore an unknown phenomenon of work motives and experiences amid COVID-19 in a group of retirement-aged workers. When the lockdown was initiated, we had to terminate data collection, bringing the total number of participants to 9. We chose to re-interview these 9 people when the restrictions were eased. Although we do not claim that theoretical saturation was achieved, no new relevant themes were emerging from the data and we felt that the material was of sufficient depth (Bryman, 2012).

Although our sample was relatively small, the participants were interviewed over a period of time that allowed for experiences and reasoning to develop in dialog longitudinally. In order to address the potential limitation of applying qualitative analyses to a relatively small data set, we employed different techniques throughout the study to increase the trustworthiness of the findings; including juxtaposing different analytical methods, using the second interview for member checking, and rigorously documenting the collection procedure as well as keeping a detailed description of the analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

One aspect that was not considered in our interpretation was the marital status of the participants. It is possible that having a partner who is employed can motivate a person to continue working in order to synchronize their occupational pattern with that of their life partner (Bratun & Zurc, 2020). The relationship between an individual's personal relationships, including the quality of those relationships, and their intention to continue working requires further scientific attention. It should also be considered that two of the participants were university faculty and one a medical doctor, representing occupational groups that often have a high proportion of individuals who opt to work longer (Dorman, 2000). Nonetheless, during the analysis, we observed common patterns of motives among the participants regardless of their social, professional or economic status.

Conclusions

This study explored a group of people who decided to work after becoming eligible for retirement and did so for different reasons. During the COVID-19, their desire to either continue working or retire was not altered; however, there was a subtle shift in the direction of their motivation. Workers that exhibited an agentic identity looked for meaningful, replacement activities and gathered new insights that contributed to their personal development amid a pandemic. The lockdown was an opportunity to experience the landscape of retirement and adjust habits and activity patterns. The study proposes the importance of the theoretical perspective of gerotranscendence in combination with
occupational science to examine the life trajectories of older workers. Gerotranscendence in conjunction with the concepts of occupational science could form an original theoretical framework for crisis situations, such as a pandemic, increasing the understanding of older people’s motives and actions, as well as providing guidance toward a meaningful outcome amid a transitional situation, which should be explored in future studies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

Ahmadieh, F. (2001). Gerotranscendence and different cultural settings. *Ageing & Society, 21*(4), 395-415. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X0108285

Asaba, E., Aldrich, B., Gabrielson, H., Ekstam, L., & Farias, L. (2021). Challenging conceptualisations of work: Revisiting contemporary experiences of return to work and unemployment. *Journal of Occupational Science, 28*(1), 81-94. https://doi.org/10.1080/14486981.2021.1820896

Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Atchely, R. C. (1989). A continuity theory of normal aging. *Gerontology, 29*, 183-190. https://doi.org/10.1159/000221281

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chiesa, R., Toderi, S., Dordoni, P., Henkens, K., Fiabane, E. M., & Setti, I. (2016). Older Onder, G., Rezza, G., & Brusaferro, S. (2020). Case-fatality rate and characteristics of COVID-19. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 921-920. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)34460-8

Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine in contained coronavirus atal. Lancet, 395(10227), 921-920. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)34460-8

Bullmore, E. (2020). Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic. *Science, 368*(6489), 473-476. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adaa075

Cohen, J., Kessler, R. C., & Wolk, M. (1996). Social support and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 119*(2), 56-66. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.119.2.56

Dingel, J. I., & Neiman, B. (2020). How many jobs can be done at home? *JAMA, 323*(18), 1775-1780. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.1228

Dingel, J. I., & Neiman, B. (2020). How many jobs can be done at home? *International Journal of Epidemiology, 49*(3), 767-782. https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyaa064

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dorff, L. T. (2000). Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
