

A thematic analysis of how men and women post 56 years unwind from work during their free time

Mark Cropley^{a,*}, Isabella N. Da Silva^a, Leif W. Rydstedt^b and Maria I.T. Olsson^b

^a*School of Psychology, University of Surrey, Surrey, UK*

^b*Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, HHS, Department of Psychology, Lillehammer, Norway*

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Recent research indicates that as men age, their tendency to ruminate about work decreases, while ruminating remains high in women, which poses an increased risk for impaired health among older women.

OBJECTIVE: This study explored gender differences/similarities in the process of unwinding from work in men and women aged between 56–65 years.

METHODS: Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted online with eight men and eight women, recruited from a UK leading organization that provides health care solutions between May and June 2022. Participants were asked about their job role and responsibilities, their leisure time activities, how they unwind post work, and their experiences of thinking about work related thoughts outside of work. Transcripts were analyzed using an inductive analysis.

RESULTS: Three superordinate themes were identified that underpinned their ability to unwind: ‘Work style’, ‘Creating work-life balance’ and ‘Switching off from one’s responsibilities’. Women reported a more perfectionist approach, they set high standards for themselves, were worried about making mistakes, and demonstrated, if in a supervisory role, a more nurturing and holistic approach to their colleagues/subordinates, while men, were more focused on task completion. Most women, but not men, also described difficulties in psychologically switching off from work, and stated they could only truly relax outside the home, when they are away from household activities.

CONCLUSION: The study provides nuanced insights into the experiences of unwinding from work, and the findings suggest the need for person-centric approaches in developing interventions to help workers over 56 years to psychologically disengage from work.

Keywords: Age, gender, work, work-related rumination, affective rumination, problem-solving pondering, leisure activities

1. Introduction

In the context of occupational health, work-related rumination has been defined as the process of experiencing reoccurring thoughts or dwelling on thoughts relating to work outside of working hours [1]. There are of course, several explanations for why an individual may ruminate about work matters during their free

time. A person for example, may ruminate about their workload, an impending deadline, or about uncompleted tasks [2, 3]. An individual may also ruminate about the social aspects of work, such as a negative comment made by or to a colleague [4]. Potentially, there are many reasons why work could play on our minds during our leisure time, and in some respects thinking about work outside of work is normal, especially if one has a rewarding and stimulating job. It is only when work-related thoughts appear uncontrollable and play on our minds, that this may have consequences for our health and wellbeing.

*Address for correspondence: Dr Mark Cropley, School of Psychology, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, UK.
E-mail: mark.cropley@surrey.ac.uk.

There is now a wide body of research demonstrating that ruminating about work has a negative impact on health [5]. For example, work-related rumination has been associated with anxiety, burnout, depression [6, 7], embitterment [8], exhaustion [9–11], fatigue [12], poor sleep [12–14], and negative mood [15]. Moreover, not being able to mentally switch off from work has been associated with an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease [16]. Conversely, psychologically detaching from work after working hours has been associated with greater task performance and positive mood when employees return to work [17, 18]. It is therefore evident that the extent to which workers disconnect from work-related thoughts during their leisure time is critical for their health, wellbeing, and work performance.

Cropley and Zijlstra [1] identified two general forms of work-related rumination: affective rumination and problem-solving pondering. Affective rumination is where an individual experiences frequent negative and invasive work-related thoughts whereas problem-solving pondering is where an individual thinks about solutions to work-related problems or evaluates their work to improve their performance. Both affective rumination and problem-solving pondering have been associated with health outcomes [6, 19]. Importantly, however, problem-solving pondering is associated with lower levels of chronic and acute fatigue [12]. Affective rumination, on the other hand, is associated with increased chronic and acute fatigue, suggesting problem-solving pondering is not detrimental to one's wellbeing, whereas affective rumination is. Thus, affective rumination may impair one's ability to switch off from work successfully and as a result negatively impacts one's mental recovery from work during leisure time [9, 10, 20–22].

1.1. Work-related rumination, gender, and age

As reported above, there is a substantial growing body of evidence on the association between work-related rumination and poor health. Less is known however, about how certain social groups unwind mentally from work, and their post-work ruminative thinking. In a recent study of nearly 4,000 workers, researchers categorized women and men into five age groups between 18 to 65 years [23]. Consistent with previous literature on depressive rumination [11, 24], the results showed gender differences, with women reporting higher rumination, relative to men, across all age groups. The unique and novel finding,

however, was that, while affective rumination was found to significantly decline in the older age groups (46+yrs.), the largest gender difference in affective rumination was observed in the 56–65 age category. That is, relative to women, men in the 56–65-year age bracket appeared to mentally switch off and detach from work with ease, while women ruminated about work to the same degree across the age span. Such findings have important health implications, suggesting that older working women are at an increased risk of experiencing a host of distress symptoms. Moreover, as retirement age is set to rise in most westernized countries, leading people to work later in life, this inevitably adds to the risk health profile of women.

Unfortunately, it was not possible within the aforementioned study to identify factors that may explain those gender differences. The authors speculated that the effects may be due to women being more likely to share emotional thoughts relative to men, or to men engaging in more hobbies/sports, as such distraction activities have been associated with lower ruminative thoughts [25, 26]. Cropley et al. [23] proposed that future research, utilizing qualitative studies, are needed to illuminate the underlying factors that could account for such gender differences. In line with this call, in the present study we explored experiences of unwinding and relaxing from work in women and men aged between 56–65 years. We adopted a process-oriented qualitative approach [27], to examine the process of psychological detachment from the perspective of the individual. Moreover, we took a critical realist epistemological position, whereby participants' experiences are based within some form of objective reality [28]. We conducted interviews with 16 full-time employees. To our knowledge, no study has yet examined the gender differences in recovery from work in older adults. We sought to identify the content of work-related rumination among women and men; specifically, whether there are important gender differences. By learning more about the process of unwinding from work in older adults, researchers will be in a better position to develop interventions to help older female and male workers to unwind and mentally switch off from work.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants and recruitment

Sixteen participants (8 women, 8 men) were recruited via posters and through personal contacts,

Table 1
Participant demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation
Adam	Male	60	Brazilian	Service manager for a hostel
Brian	Male	58	Black Caribbean	Chartered accountant
Christopher	Male	62	White British	Recovery worker
Ryan	Male	58	Asian Indian	Government advisor
Nathan	Male	65	White British	Discretionary investment manager
Andrew	Male	56	Asian Indian	Teacher with middle management
John	Male	56	Black African	Project maintenance
Jack	Male	56	Black African	Service manager of supported accommodation
Amy	Female	61	Black Caribbean	Admin assistant
Eva	Female	61	White British	Director financier
Flora	Female	60	White British	Forensic recovery worker
Harriet	Female	59	Black Caribbean	Forensic recovery worker
Molly	Female	56	Asian Indian	Housing solutions team manager
Rachel	Female	65	Asian Indian	Director of a research center/Professor
Rihanna	Female	56	Black Caribbean	Service manager of supported accommodation
Sabrina	Female	56	Black African	Deputy manager of supported accommodation

Note. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

from a UK large organization that provides health care solutions. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted online between May and June, 2022. The number of participants recruited is in line with recommendations for qualitative research [29, 30] and previous studies using thematic analysis [31]. All participants were residing and working in the U.K., but from ethnically diverse backgrounds (see Table 1 for details). The inclusion criteria requested that participants had to be aged between 56–65 years, in full time employment (i.e., working at least 35 hours per week), free from a diagnosed mental health condition, and reported English to be their primary language. Workers who did not meet the inclusion criteria were ineligible to participate.

The participants worked as teachers, mental health professionals, personal and administrative assistants, and government advisors. Eight participants had managerial roles (4 women, 4 men). The ethnic background, age and occupational status was similar across gender groups. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Surrey Ethics committee (ID number FHMS 20-21145EGA), and participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. No participants withdrew from the study.

2.2. Design and methodological assumptions

Using a qualitative design, we explored the process of unwinding from work from the perspective of the individual, and explored what they thought facilitated or hindered their disengagement from work related

thoughts. The researchers, while having acquainted themselves with the literature and being cognizant of the possible theoretical application, nevertheless approached the data collection and analysis with an open minded, impartial perspective; the interview questions were not directed by previous literature or specific theory. This method presupposes that individual responses reflect an accurate account of their actual experience [32]. An interview schedule was devised to guide each interview which consisted of nine main questions with an additional open-ended question “Is there anything else you would like to add?” The interviews followed a semi-structured flexible approach, and prompts were used where necessary to encourage dialogue and clarity. To ensure that the interview questions were appropriate and could be easily understood, questions were refined with the help of two participants, one, female, one male (not involved in the main interviews) between the ages of 56–65 years. See Table 2 for the full list of questions.

2.3. Procedure

Participants who had expressed an interest in taking part in the study and who met the inclusion criteria were emailed, a copy of the participant information sheet detailing the exact study procedure, a consent form to sign prior to participation, and a form requesting demographic information. In the information sheet as well as at the start of the interview, participants were informed that the interview was strictly confidential, and that although the interviewer

Table 2
Interview questions

-
- 1) As you know I am looking at how men and women relax and unwind during their free time. Could you start by telling me about your job and your responsibilities within your role?
E.g., does your role include line management responsibilities, what is your relationship with work colleagues? Is this a role you enjoy?
Time pressures? Demanding?
 - 2) If you had not completed your tasks for the day and your shift or working hours has ended, what would you tend to do?
Can you explain how you would feel?
Can you expand on this?
 - 3) What steps, if any at all, do you take to actively avoid thinking about work-related thoughts?
Can you expand on this?
 - 4) Can you tell me how you spend your time during your break at work?
 - 5) How would you describe your work ethic?
 - 6) Can you tell me anything you like to do to help you unwind after work?
Can you expand on this?
 - 7) Can you tell me how you spend your time during the weekends?
 - 8) Can you tell me about any responsibilities you may have outside of work?
Looking after family, responsibilities within the community.
 - 9) Can you tell me if you have experienced your work life ever conflicting with your home life?
Can you expand on this?
For example, family and social obligations, or personal needs.
How do you manage this?
 - 10) Is there anything else you would like to add?
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would be recording the conversation and transcribing it, any identifying information would be anonymized. Participants were also informed that during the interview they would be asked to reflect on how they coped with work-related issues and thoughts outside of work.

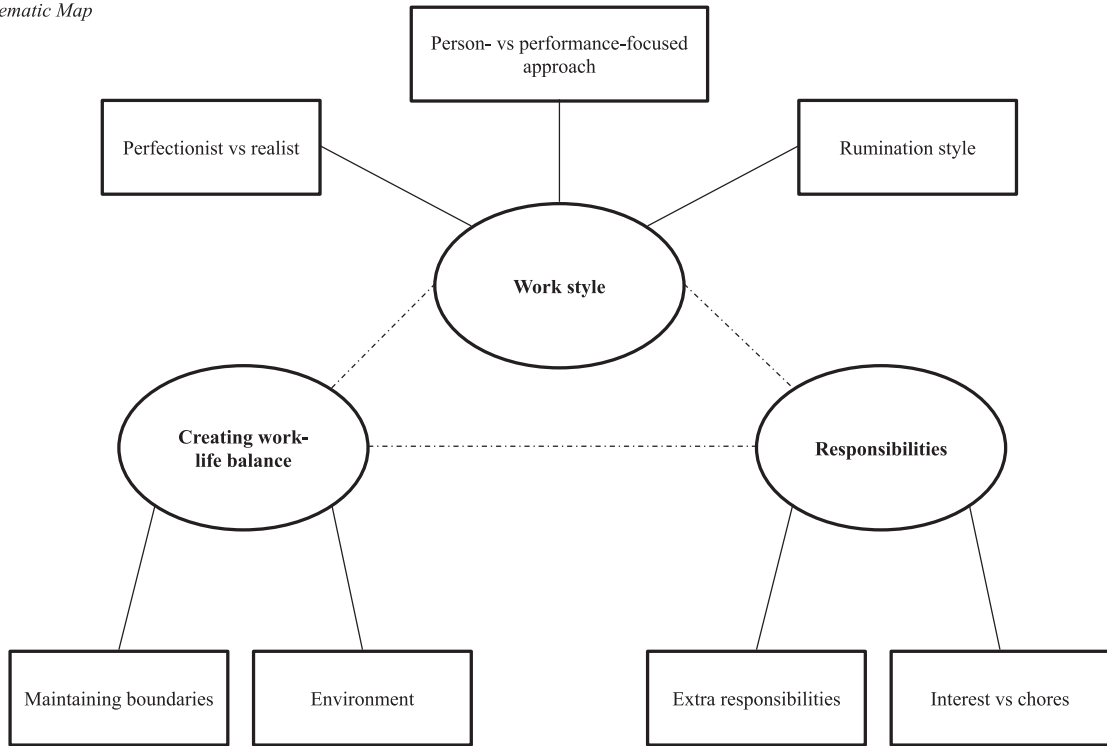
The interview started broadly, with a reminder of what the study was about, and questions relating to the person's role and job responsibilities before moving on to more detailed questions. For example, "As you know I am looking at how men and women relax and unwind during their free time, could you therefore start by telling me about your job and your responsibilities within your role?"; "If you had not completed your tasks for the day and your shift or working hours has ended, what would you tend to do?"; "What steps if any at all, do you take to actively avoid thinking about work-related thoughts?". Interviewees were encouraged to avoid giving one-word answers. Prompts such as "Can you expand on this" were used in the interview to avoid participants giving one-word answers and encourage a more detailed response. The time to complete the interviews ranged from 40 min to an hour. Each interview was digitally recorded and was then transcribed verbatim. Immediately after the participants had completed the interview, they were sent an email which attached the debrief form, providing them with a full explanation of the study.

2.4. Data analysis approach

Thematic analysis was chosen as the most suitable method for analyzing these data due to its flexibility and data-driven nature, contrasting with approaches tied to specific theoretical frameworks [32]. Given the limited prior research in this participant age group, this method facilitated primarily inductive analysis, capturing the authentic lived experiences of participants. Thematic analysis proved effective in providing a comprehensive overview and summary of a substantial amount of data, especially relevant for an underexplored topic like this, and yielded what Braun and Clarke [32] term 'unexpected insights'.

Transcripts were read multiple times by two of the research team (ID-S, MC) to familiarize themselves with the data. Semantic and latent notes were made on each transcript; different color schemes were used for male and female participants to address similarities as well as differences in their experiences of unwinding and relaxing from work. The notes on each transcript were clustered together, and superordinate themes and subthemes were identified. Themes were then reviewed and defined, and a thematic map including superordinate themes with subthemes was created (see Fig. 1). Four principles, namely, 'sensitivity to context', 'commitment and rigor', 'transparency and coherence', and 'impact and importance' were used to ensure the fundamental principles of qualitative

Thematic Map



Note. Dashed lines indicate relationship between themes.

Fig. 1. Thematic map: Superordinate themes with subthemes.

research were adhered to [33]. Commonalities and differences in the individual interviews were identified. The initial codes underwent discussion and cross-verification with the authors on this paper.

3. Results

The thematic analysis revealed three superordinate themes: ‘Work style’, ‘Creating work-life balance’, and ‘Switching off from one’s responsibilities’, each theme capturing men and women’s experiences of unwinding from work (see Table 3 for subthemes).

3.1. Work style

This theme highlights the way in which participants perform at work and how this forms a central part of their experiences in their ability to unwind and switch off from work. The following subthemes were constructed, *approach taken towards completing tasks*, *managerial style*, and *rumination style*. These subthemes captured factors influencing men’s

Superordinate Themes	Subthemes
3.1 Work style	3.1.1 Approach taken towards completing tasks 3.1.2 Managerial style 3.1.3 Rumination style
3.2 Creating work-life balance	3.2.1 Maintaining boundaries 3.2.2 Environmental context
3.3 Switching off from one’s responsibilities	3.3.1 Levels of responsibilities 3.3.2 Perception of household activities

and women’s experience of switching off from work in further detail.

3.1.1. Approach taken towards completing tasks

The way in which participants were satisfied with their performance and approached their tasks at work, played an integral role in their ability to mentally detach from work during their leisure time. The majority of female participants described a ‘perfectionist’ approach towards completing their tasks,

where they ruminated on their performance at work, setting high standards for themselves:

“... it is for my peace of mind, it’s for my sanity that I have to get things to a certain standard... I just think if you are going to do something you should do it well” (Molly, housing solutions team manager).

“... it’s difficult to say umm to sort of think well this is good enough I don’t need to be perfect, I mean it’s something that I have learnt over my lifetime to say well that’s good enough...” (Rachel, director of a research center/professor).

Similarly, Eva and Amy highlighted their fears of imperfection at the workplace:

“... I don’t want people to think I’m not doing what I need to do or correctly so I probably tend to start early because then you can kind of get ahead of the game sort of thing...” (Eva, director financier).

“I worry about stuff, so I try to be, I try to do things properly... if it’s something you don’t do that often or you are unsure of you are going to be a bit more careful to avoid making any mistakes and you are going to be a bit more focused on it” (Amy, admin assistant).

Whilst the majority of female participants seemed to express feelings of reaching ‘perfectionism’ when completing tasks and fear of failure, male participants articulated that their main goal when completing tasks was to complete and finish the work as opposed to focusing on their performance of the task:

“Umm I would say I do the work I need to do, but I do the bare minimum and that’s it and that’s the truth, I do the work in my working hours and then I get ready to go home...” (Brian, chartered accountant).

Brian expressed that he does the “bare minimum” implying that he does not exhort himself at the workplace. Brian also demonstrated a carefree and relaxed attitude towards completing his tasks. Interestingly, Adam appeared to adopt similar attitudes towards completing tasks:

“... the end goal is to complete the work that has deadlines for that day, do what you can, then after that you can relax for the rest of the day, go home and not think about it...”.

Thus, whereas female participants were critical about their performance at work, worried about making mistakes, and made references to shortening their leisure time to avoid being perceived as imperfect, male participants appeared to be more focused on completing tasks during working hours, so that they could utilize their leisure time, as a time to relax from the pressures of work.

3.1.2. Managerial style

Male and female managers differed in their approaches in supervising their staff. For example, female managers made more references to the well-being of their staff as well as looking at their staffs’ performance at work:

“... I have a holistic approach because I believe that you always talk about providing a holistic approach to our clients and to our customers but if your staff are not 100 percent how can you expect them to provide the best service they can, so I do believe that if you invest in your staff, they will give you much better back...” (Molly, housing solutions team manager).

Similar to Molly, Rihanna (a service manager of supported accommodation) expressed a nurturing style when supervising her staff:

“... one of the staff at work is currently going through something at home and she is currently on sick leave so I have been calling her on a daily basis, checking up on her on my way home you know, it’s difficult to understand how much I can intervene, I worry because you want the best for them...”.

It thus appeared that the female managers presented a nurturing element and an emotional investment when managing their staff, which potentially could lead to emotional exhaustion and poor recovery, as they articulated that they often worry about their staff outside of working hours, during their leisure time. In contrast, the male managers appeared to focus solely on the performance of their staff:

“... I am the line manager of two individuals, so I do their performance management, I meet up with them regularly to talk about their professional development, where do they want to go, what do they want to do, what do they potentially want to get out of their particular role of their jobs...” (Andrew, teacher with middle management).

3.1.3. Rumination style

The way in which female and male participants viewed work related rumination also differed, as for the majority of male participants, rumination was perceived as positive copying style. This was especially true for Nathan (a discretionary investment manager):

“... I generally absolutely absorbed in it. Therefore it is not that I want to shut anything out because it is [not] in any sense stressful or annoying, umm its actually the other way around ironically...”

Nathan implied that he finds work-related thoughts, enjoyable, and he describes them as not being “stressful or annoying.” Nathan expressed that he did not want to “shut anything out”, suggesting that he welcomes work-related thoughts during his leisure time, implying that work related rumination does not have a negative impact on him, but is a rather positive experience. Similarly, Ryan (a government advisor) perceived work-related rumination as a positive copying strategy to enhance his performance at work:

“... I don't think its necessarily a bad thing that I am thinking about work away from work sometimes, because it gives me time to think and that's really helpful. ... because of the role I do I think that it's a lot of problem solving, and they are quite complex problems... sometimes you need time and more considerations to think through before you try and go in and do something..”

This style of thinking post work is in direct contrast to Sabrina (a deputy manager of supported accommodation) who reported that she worries and stresses about her work behavior:

“... when you get home, you are just thinking about it more. You don't just forget about it, you just keep thinking about it, especially if you are going past the deadline you are thinking about the consequences of that.”

Molly (a housing solutions team manager) describes how her worries about work affect her sleep:

“... when you are trying to go to sleep and stuff, I am thinking oh my God I didn't do x or Y oh my god, I can't remember the last time I had a good night sleep because of work. ...”

Thus, whereas the majority of female participants described work-related rumination to have a negative impact on their recovery, the majority of male participants reflected on work related rumination in a more positive and constructive way.

3.2. Creating work-life balance

The second theme described participants' experience of balancing both work and leisure time. Participants made references to ‘maintaining boundaries’ between the demands of work and maintaining time for themselves away from stressors of work. Additionally, one's ‘environment’ was highlighted as a key element in creating a work-life balance.

3.2.1. Maintaining boundaries

Some participants articulated difficulties in maintaining boundaries between work and leisure time, which consequently impacted on their ability to mentally disengage from work. Whereas difficulties of maintaining boundaries was highlighted in both male and female participants, the experience was expressed more frequently by female participants:

“... so I have my wife who pretty much tells me every day and she is able to tell me like, she tells when I am stressed, and she will tell me to take time out for myself and she will distract me because she knows that is less time for me to focus on work. ...” (Andrew, teacher with middle management).

“... I am trying to find that balance now, when is it ok to be doing things and finding time to do things for myself, that's a tricky one for me and I need to get the balance right. ...” (Rachel, director of a research center/professor).

Thus, Rachel reported she finds it difficult to switch off from work during her leisure time and is still exploring ways to find this balance. This was also expressed by Molly (a housing solutions team manager):

“... I know it is my lunch break and someone has called me I will answer it and they will be like oh are you on your break and I will be like yeah and then they will be like oh I will call you back later and I will be like oh no don't worry about it you might as well just tell me because I know that I am going to have to deal with it anyways. ...”

In contrast, several male participants articulated more control over work-related thoughts in their leisure time and reported they tried to set clear boundaries:

“Sometimes if I want to switch off, I will switch off but then sometimes I choose not to switch off. I feel like I am in control, but that comes with experience...” (Ryan, government advisor).

“... I want my job to be that I just go to work, I do my hours and then what I do in my personal time is my business and that’s how it should be.” (Brian, chartered accountant).

3.2.2. Environmental context

Participant environment appeared to be an important factor when being able to unwind from work. The majority of female participants expressed the need to escape from their current home environment to unwind and switch off from work. For example, Sabrina (a deputy manager of supported accommodation) said:

“Travelling really helps me to unwind, I have to be physically be away from work to not think about work, because of travelling and being in a new environment, being surrounded by new people, learning about the culture really just takes your mind away from it...”.

In contrast, male participants expressed that they were able to unwind in their home environment:

“I like gardening, that gives me the satisfaction of like mentally I don’t think about work or what I have to do the next day, so gardening is my passion, just relax and chill out or I will do some housework, there is always something that needs to be fixed, so I am always able to keep myself busy and entertained.” (John, project maintenance).

3.3. Switching off from one’s responsibilities

This theme highlighted the way participants’ level of responsibilities at work and at home influenced one’s ability to switch off after work. Additionally, one’s perception of household activities also contributed how successfully participants were able to disengage and relax in their free time.

3.3.1. Levels of responsibilities

Male and female participants alike reported responsibilities at work and outside of work, but these

were expressed differently. Male participants referred to their responsibilities outside of work, as in the past and implied that these responsibilities had reduced over time, suggesting they have less demands in their leisure time. In contrast, female participants reported utilizing their leisure time to continue to support others. The levels of responsibilities between male and female participants also differed in the workplace:

Female participants appeared to have nurturing roles outside of work:

“... so outside of work I have this umm, so I am the named person for someone who has mental health issues, who umm who I am constantly worried about. Then I also provide support for quite a few people (Par: laughter) who are in difficult situations...” (Rachel, director of a research center/professor).

“... my sister, she was very ill a few years ago. So, I do her shopping for her and umm I go around chat with her, support her, especially during lockdown... it’s important that I visibly see her because I worry, she umm she tends not to eat, she tends to drink...” (Flora, forensic recovery worker).

In contrast, male participants appeared to report less communal responsibilities outside of work:

“I used to be involved with the local council, but I don’t have that responsibility no. In terms of responsibility, no not really. Fortunately, nothing too dramatic, the kids are big now.” (Nathan, discretionary investment manager).

Similarly, Christopher articulated lack of responsibilities outside of work:

“... I don’t have kids and my girlfriend has but they are all grown up, so we don’t have to worry about that...”.

John said:

“Since I started this job, I don’t think about work [at home]. When I used to be a store manager, in a higher position that time I used think a lot about work, it was difficult to switch off, but now over the last 3 years, as soon as leave work I switch off. It’s just something to do until I decide to retire...”.

Thus, whereas the male participants appeared to be reducing their responsibilities in the workplace and thinking about retirement, the female participants

seemed to be increasing their workload, which in turn added to their worries, potentially making it more difficult for them to switch off from work. These findings support the results of the quantitative study discussed in the introduction [23].

3.3.2. Perception of household activities

There appeared to be differences in how household chores were perceived between male and female participants. Specifically, the way in which these chores influenced their ability to unwind. For female participants cooking appeared to an added-on responsibility that was inconvenient:

“... then it’s time to cook my dinner, I know there are some people who cook to relax but that’s just a job to do, I don’t find it particularly relaxing, then there is the washing up...” (Eva, director financier).

Molly expressed similar views on cooking:

“... I used to enjoy cooking now cooking because I need to eat, before when I was by myself if I didn’t cook, I am quite happy eating toast, like I am not fussed but where now my husband has to have a cooked meal...”

In contrast male participants appeared to have a different perception on household chores, as well as engaging in different household chores than women.

“... it’s mainly maintenance stuff, housework umm DIY stuff, if it’s broken all that stuff, it’s something to keep you busy and I enjoy doing...” (Christopher, recovery worker).

“I fortunately can switch off quite easily so I will think about football, or I will think about cooking.” (Ryan, government advisor).

4. Discussion

This study explored the experiences of older female and male workers in unwinding and relaxing from work during their leisure time. The analysis revealed three superordinate themes that underpinned their ability to mentally detach from work: ‘Work style’, ‘Creating work-life balance’ and ‘Switching off from one’s responsibilities’. Within these themes, we identified similarities and differences between female and male participants.

The first theme, ‘Work style’, revealed the different approaches participants took towards completing

tasks, their managerial styles, and their rumination styles. It was observed that female participants tended to adopt a more perfectionist approach, setting high standards for themselves, and often worrying about making mistakes at work, when not at work. In contrast, male participants appeared to focus more on completing tasks efficiently and demonstrated a more relaxed attitude towards work-related thoughts during their leisure time. Some male, but not female participants also perceived work-related rumination as a positive coping strategy, particularly in problem-solving situations. This has implications for gender disparities in health, as this type of thinking outside of work has been associated with more positive health outcomes and work engagement [22, 34, 35].

Male and female participants (in managerial positions) also appeared to demonstrate differences in their supervisory styles (for similar findings see [36, 37]). Female managers in the present study, described a more nurturing and holistic approach when supervising their colleagues/subordinates, and appeared to be emotionally invested in their staff offering support for their wellbeing as well as caring about their performance. This style is consistent with a so called ‘communal leadership style’, which can be contrasted with an ‘agentic leadership style’ typically attributed to men [38, 39]. While a feminine leadership style has been shown to be more effective [40], this type of leadership style appeared to come at a cost, as some female participants reported they often found it difficult to switch off during their leisure time as they tended to worry about their employees’ personal stressors. In contrast, male managers appeared to be focused on their employee’s work performance within working hours.

The second theme, ‘Creating work-life balance’, highlighted the challenges participants faced in maintaining boundaries between work and leisure time. Female participants, in particular expressed difficulties in finding the right balance and many reported finding it difficult to mentally switch off from work. In contrast, men appeared to have more control over work-related thoughts, as they expressed the ability to set clear boundaries between work and leisure time. Participants’ ability to unwind and relax seemed to be influenced by their surroundings, with some male participants finding solace in their home environment or doing tasks around the home. By contrast, female participants reported they can only truly relax when they are physically away from their home environment as when they are at home, they are conscious

of household activities. Moreover, most women saw domestic activities as more of a duty rather than an enjoyable task. These differences are perhaps a reflection of traditional gender roles [41, 42]. It is, however, not possible in the present study, to infer that differences in gender roles relate to an individual's actual ability to mentally disengage from work.

The third theme, 'Switching off from one's responsibilities', examined the impact of work and non-work responsibilities on participants' ability to disengage from work during leisure time. The majority of female participants highlighted 'worrying' and experienced 'negative' work-related thoughts during their free time and reported taking on extra responsibilities outside of work, such as caring for family members, which appeared to influence their ability to unwind after work. A recent study found that women tend to have the main responsibility for planning home and household activities [43]. In contrast, male participants mentioned fewer responsibilities outside of work, as well as, and more opportunities for relaxation. Male participants also appeared to positively reflect on work and perceive themselves as able to control and manage their work-related thoughts during their leisure time.

As outlined earlier, previous research has identified two general forms of rumination: affective rumination and problem-solving pondering [1]. This study highlighted gender differences in these rumination styles. Some female participants articulated their worries and stressors when reflecting on their work-related tasks during their free time, suggesting they used more affective rumination styles. As affective ruminative style has been associated with increased reporting of negative health [9, 10, 20–22], this suggests that women who habitually demonstrate this form of rumination, could be at an increased risk of developing negative health symptoms long-term. Male participants, on the other hand, reflected on work-related task in a positive way, and expressed it helped them solve problems at work when thinking about work during their free time, suggesting men engage in more problem-solving pondering. This finding, however, differs from previous research that found women between the ages of 56 and 65 years, also engaged in more problem-solving thinking style outside of work, relative to men [23].

Currently there is limited knowledge concerning how older workers mentally unwind from work, and there is less knowledge specifically relating to gender differences within this age group. The present

study has added to our understanding by exploring qualitatively the experience of unwinding from work in men and women post 56 years. Consistent with previous work [23], the overarching finding from our analysis was that female workers, over 56 years old, reported more difficulty mentally unwinding from work, relative to their male colleagues. Moreover, female workers also expressed attitudes and described behaviors which have been associated with delayed psychological recovery from work. While some behaviors reported seem to concur with feminine and masculine gender roles, it is not possible however to conclude that these behaviors are directly related to gender. Nonetheless, as retirement age is predicted to rise, and delayed recovery is associated with an increased risk of experiencing distress symptoms, these findings thus, highlight the need for organizations to initiate training or information provision, to help employees to switch off from work during their leisure time. Current psychological interventions aimed to help workers to mentally disengage from work include cognitive behavior therapy [44], and mindfulness-based techniques [45], which are gender neutral. However, the current findings suggest that instead of a one size fits all approach, interventions could also contain elements that are tailored towards a person specific interests and the difficulties they have in mentally disengaging from work.

As with most qualitative studies, the findings are specific and situated within the unique experiences of those being interviewed. The qualitative approach however, employed in the present study, allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and provided rich data for thematic analysis. The sample size of 16 participants, evenly distributed between genders, was deemed appropriate for the study's scope [29, 30, 31]. Thus, it should be noted that the findings may not be generalizable to the entire population of older workers, especially those outside the UK or working in different professions to the participants in this study. Also, the sample was relatively small and specific to certain occupations (i.e., knowledge workers/white-collar occupations) and ethnic backgrounds. It is therefore not possible with any true conviction to generalize to the wider population or make broad claims of gender differences. This study, to our knowledge, is however, the first, to specifically examine gender differences in the process of unwinding from work within an older age group, and thus provides a basis for expanding the findings with a larger dataset or within different methodological study designs.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined how men and women between 56–65 years relax, mentally unwind, and utilize their free time. The analysis revealed differences and similarities in the type of work-related thoughts experienced and activities pursued outside of work among women and men. These insights are crucial, considering the predicted retirement age rise, and the implications for the health and well-being of older workers. Future research could further explore the underlying factors contributing to these gender differences and investigate the effectiveness of person-centered interventions targeted at reducing work-related rumination in older workers.

Ethical approval

University of Surrey, University of Surrey Ethics Committee No: FHMS 20-21145EGA.

Informed consent

Informed consent was taken from all respondents.

Conflict of interest

None.

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