

Nostalgia

Past, Present, and Future

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ABSTRACT—Traditionally, nostalgia has been conceptualized as a medical disease and a psychiatric disorder. Instead, we argue that nostalgia is a predominantly positive, self-relevant, and social emotion serving key psychological functions. Nostalgic narratives reflect more positive than negative affect, feature the self as the protagonist, and are embedded in a social context. Nostalgia is triggered by dysphoric states such as negative mood and loneliness. Finally, nostalgia generates positive affect, increases self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat.

KEYWORDS—nostalgia; positive affect; self-esteem; social connectedness; existential meaning

The term *nostalgia* was inadvertently inspired by history's most famous itinerant. Emerging victoriously from the Trojan War, Odysseus set sail for his native island of Ithaca to reunite with his faithful wife, Penelope. For 3 years, our wandering hero fought monsters, assorted evildoers, and mischievous gods. For another 7 years, he took respite in the arms of the beautiful sea nymph Calypso. Possessively, she offered to make him immortal if he stayed with her on the island of Ogygia. "Full well I acknowledge," Odysseus replied to his mistress, "prudent Penelope cannot compare with your stature or beauty, for she is only a mortal, and you are immortal and ageless. Nevertheless, it is she whom I daily desire and pine for. Therefore I long for my home and to see the day of returning" (Homer, 1921, Book V, pp. 78–79).

This romantic declaration, along with other expressions of Odyssean longing in the eponymous Homeric epic, gave rise to the term nostalgia. It is a compound word, consisting of *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain). Nostalgia, then, is literally the suffering due to relentless yearning for the homeland. The term nostalgia was coined in the 17th century by the Swiss physician

Johannes Hofer (1688/1934), but references to the emotion it denotes can be found in Hippocrates, Caesar, and the Bible.

HISTORICAL AND MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF NOSTALGIA

From the outset, nostalgia was equated with homesickness. It was also considered a bad omen. In the 17th and 18th centuries, speculation about nostalgia was based on observations of Swiss mercenaries in the service of European monarchs. Nostalgia was regarded as a medical disease confined to the Swiss, a view that persisted through most of the 19th century. Symptoms—including bouts of weeping, irregular heartbeat, and anorexia—were attributed variously to demons inhabiting the middle brain, sharp differentiation in atmospheric pressure wreaking havoc in the brain, or the unrelenting clanging of cowbells in the Swiss Alps, which damaged the eardrum and brain cells.

By the beginning of the 20th century, nostalgia was regarded as a psychiatric disorder. Symptoms included anxiety, sadness, and insomnia. By the mid-20th century, psychodynamic approaches considered nostalgia a subconscious desire to return to an earlier life stage, and it was labeled as a repressive compulsive disorder. Soon thereafter, nostalgia was downgraded to a variant of depression, marked by loss and grief, though still equated with homesickness (for a historical review of nostalgia, see Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004).

By the late 20th century, there were compelling reasons for nostalgia and homesickness to finally part ways. Adult participants regard nostalgia as different from homesickness. For example, they associate the words *warm*, *old times*, *childhood*, and *yearning* more frequently with nostalgia than with homesickness (Davis, 1979). Furthermore, whereas homesickness research focused on the psychological problems (e.g., separation anxiety) that can arise when young people transition beyond the home environment, nostalgia transcends social groups and age. For example, nostalgia is found cross-culturally and among well-functioning adults, children, and dementia patients (Sedikides et al., 2004; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, in press). Finally, although homesickness refers to one's place of origin, nostalgia can refer

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to a variety of objects (e.g., persons, events, places; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006).

It is in this light that we note the contemporary definition of nostalgia as a sentimental longing for one's past. It is, moreover, a sentimentality that is pervasively experienced. Over 80% of British undergraduates reported experiencing nostalgia at least once a week (Wildschut et al., 2006). Given this apparent ubiquity, the time has come for an empirical foray into the content, causes, and functions of this emotion.

THE EMPIRICAL BASIS FOR UNDERSTANDING NOSTALGIA

The Canvas of Nostalgia

What is the content of the nostalgic experience? Wildschut et al. (2006) analyzed the content of narratives submitted voluntarily by (American and Canadian) readers to the periodical *Nostalgia*. Also, Wildschut et al. asked British undergraduates to write a narrative account of a nostalgic experience. These narratives were also analyzed for content. Across both studies, the most frequently listed objects of nostalgic reverie were close others (family members, friends, partners), momentous events (birthdays, vacations), and settings (sunsets, lakes).

Nostalgia has been conceptualized variously as a negative, ambivalent, or positive emotion (Sedikides et al., 2004). These conceptualizations were put to test. In a study by Wildschut, Stephan, Sedikides, Routledge, and Arndt (2008), British and American undergraduates wrote narratives about a "nostalgic event" (vs. an "ordinary event") in their lives and reflected briefly upon the event and how it made them feel. Content analysis revealed that the simultaneous expression of happiness and sadness was more common in narratives of nostalgic events than in narratives of ordinary events. Also in Wildschut et al., British undergraduates wrote about a nostalgic (vs. ordinary vs. simply positive) event in their lives and then rated their happiness and sadness. Although the recollection of ordinary and positive events rarely gave rise to both happiness and sadness, such coactivation occurred much more frequently following the recollection of a nostalgic event. Yet, nostalgic events featured more frequent expressions of happiness than of sadness and induced higher levels of happiness than of sadness.

Wildschut et al. (2006) obtained additional evidence that nostalgia is mostly a positively toned emotion: The narratives included far more expressions of positive than negative affect. At the same time, though, there was evidence of bittersweetness. Many narratives contained descriptions of disappointments and losses, and some touched on such issues as separation and even the death of loved ones. Nevertheless, positive and negative elements were often juxtaposed to create redemption, a narrative pattern that progresses from a negative or undesirable state (e.g., suffering, pain, exclusion) to a positive or desirable state (e.g., acceptance, euphoria, triumph; McAdams, 2001). For example, although a family reunion started badly (e.g., an uncle insulting

the protagonist), it nevertheless ended well (e.g., the family singing together after dinner).

The strength of the redemption theme may explain why, despite the descriptions of sorrow, the overall affective signature of the nostalgic narratives was positive.

Moreover, Wildschut et al. (2006) showed that nostalgia is a self-relevant and social emotion: The self almost invariably figured as the protagonist in the narratives and was almost always surrounded by close others. In all, the canvas of nostalgia is rich, reflecting themes of selfhood, sociality, loss, redemption, and ambivalent, yet mostly positive, affectivity.

The Triggers of Nostalgia

Wildschut et al. (2006) asked participants to describe when they become nostalgic. The most frequently reported trigger was negative affect ("I think of nostalgic experiences when I am sad as they often make me feel better"), and, within this category, loneliness was the most frequently reported discrete affective state ("If I ever feel lonely or sad I tend to think of my friends or family who I haven't seen in a long time"). Given these initial reports, Wildschut et al. proceeded to test whether indeed negative mood and loneliness qualify as nostalgia triggers.

British undergraduates read one of three news stories, each based on actual events, that were intended to influence their mood. In the negative-mood condition, they read about the Tsunami that struck coastal regions in Asia and Africa in December 2004. In the neutral-mood condition, they read about the January 2005 landing of the Huygens probe on Titan. In the positive-mood condition, they read about the November 2004 birth of a polar bear, ostensibly in the London Zoo (actually in the Detroit Zoo). Then they completed a measure of nostalgia, rating the extent to which they missed 18 aspects of their past (e.g., "holidays I went on," "past TV shows, movies," "someone I loved"). Participants in the negative-mood condition were more nostalgic (i.e., missed more aspects of their past) than were participants in the other two conditions.

In another study, loneliness was successfully induced by giving participants false (high vs. low) feedback on a "loneliness" test (i.e., they were led to believe they were either lonely or not lonely based on the feedback). Subsequently, participants rated how much they missed 18 aspects of their past. Participants in the high-loneliness condition were more nostalgic than those in the low-loneliness condition. These findings were replicated among 9- to 15-year-old Chinese children, Chinese undergraduates, and Chinese factory workers (Zhou et al., in press).

Why might negative mood and loneliness trigger nostalgia? The psychological significance of nostalgia may reside in its capacity to counteract distress and restore psychological equanimity. But what are the pathways through which nostalgia exerts such palliative benefits?

The Psychological Significance of Nostalgia

Wildschut et al. (2006) randomly assigned British undergraduates to a nostalgia or ordinary-event condition. They induced

nostalgia in one of two ways. First, they instructed participants to think of a nostalgic (vs. ordinary) event from their lives, list four relevant keywords, and reflect briefly upon the event and how it made them feel. Second, they provided participants with the definition of nostalgia and instructed them to bring to mind a nostalgic autobiographical event, immerse themselves in the experience, and write about it for 6 minutes. Here, in the control condition, participants thought about the ordinary event as if they were observers, imagined the event as though they were historians recording factual details, and produced a factual account. (Notably, further studies have additionally contrasted nostalgia with reflections on positive events, positive future events, and autobiographical memories.)

Following successful nostalgia manipulation checks, Wildschut et al. (2006) assessed affect, self-regard, and social connectedness. They assessed affect either with the items “happy,” “content,” “sad,” and “blue” or with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). They assessed self-regard either with the items “significant” and “self-esteem” or with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Finally, they assessed social connectedness using (a) the items “loved” and “protected” (b) the Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), which indexes attachment anxiety and avoidance; and (c) the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmeister, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1998); the assessment focused on perceived competence in initiating social interactions, self-disclosing, and providing emotional support.

Wildschut et al. (2006) proposed that nostalgia serves as a repository of positive affect. Nostalgia has been characterized as a “joyous” experience that gives rise to “a feeling of elation” (Kaplan, 1987, p. 465). Indeed, nostalgic participants reported more positive (but not negative) affect than did control participants. Nostalgia generates positive affectivity.

Wildschut et al. (2006) also proposed that nostalgia enhances positive self-regard. Nostalgia has been theorized to bestow “an endearing luster” on the self and to cast “marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves in a positive light” (Davis, 1979, pp. 41–46). Indeed, nostalgic participants reported higher self-regard than did control participants. Nostalgia not only elevates positive self-regard, it also increases the implicit accessibility of positive self-attributes and attenuates self-esteem defence (Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008).

Moreover, Wildschut et al. (2006) proposed that nostalgia strengthens social bonds. Nostalgia is a social emotion; it has been said that, during nostalgic reverie, “the mind is ‘peopled’” (Hertz, 1990, p. 195). Symbolic ties with close others are affirmed, and close others come to be momentarily part of one’s present. Indeed, nostalgic participants manifested stronger social connectedness than did control participants: They felt more loved and protected, had reduced attachment anxiety and avoidance, and reported greater interpersonal competence.

Would nostalgia be capable of counteracting the negative effects of loneliness? Can nostalgia serve a coping function? Zhou et al. (in press) addressed this question. They found that loneliness is associated with, or triggers, perceived lack of social support. At the same time, loneliness is associated with, or triggers, nostalgia. Interestingly, nostalgia is associated with, or triggers, perceptions of social support. Loneliness directly reduces perceptions of social support, but indirectly increases such perceptions via nostalgia: Nostalgia magnifies perceptions of social support, thus counteracting the effect of loneliness.

Finally, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2008) proposed that nostalgia imbues life with meaning, which facilitates coping with existential threat. One of the primary human challenges is carving out a meaningful existence. Yet, awareness of inevitable mortality presents a major obstacle on the path to psychological equanimity. According to terror management theory, one can mitigate existential anxiety through shared beliefs about the nature of reality that imbue life with meaning. Nostalgia can contribute an overall sense of enduring meaning to one’s life. In several studies testing American undergraduates, Routledge et al. supported this existential function of nostalgia. After being reminded of their mortality (relative to an aversive dental procedure), the more nostalgic participants felt, the more meaningful they perceived their life to be. Also, after reminders of mortality (relative to a dental procedure or failing an important exam), participants who were more prone to nostalgia (e.g., had reported frequent engagement in nostalgia), or who had received a nostalgia induction, actually had fewer death-related thoughts. Nostalgia boosted perceptions of life as meaningful and assuaged existential threat.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Another key function of nostalgia is that it may facilitate continuity between past and present selves. Nostalgia may facilitate use of positive perceptions about the past to bolster a sense of continuity and meaning in one’s life (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008). An additional function of nostalgia may be its motivating potential. Nostalgia may boost optimism, spark inspiration, and foster creativity (Stephan, Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008). Recent research provides initial evidence for both of these possibilities. Of course, there may also be complex nuances that merit attention. Nostalgia may erode a sense of meaning in the present and may forestall motivation, if the individual is fixated on better days gone by.

Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) proposes that, with advancing age, people come to view their life span as limited. They shift attention away from future-oriented, knowledge-related goals and emphasize the importance of purpose and meaning in life and of being embedded in a social network. This raises two issues about nos-

talgia. First, are age-related changes in motivation reflected in the frequency and content of nostalgia? Older (compared to younger) adults may experience nostalgia more frequently and assign a more prominent role to close others in their nostalgic reverie. Second, does nostalgia acquire greater significance in older age? Bereavement and declines in physical health may render older adults especially vulnerable to social isolation, which, in turn, would impair the formation and maintenance of intimate friendships and social networks. Nostalgia, then, would have an important role to play in reestablishing a symbolic connection with significant others.

CODA

Regarded throughout centuries as a psychological ailment, nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength. It is part of the fabric of everyday life and serves at least four key psychological functions: It generates positive affect, elevates self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat. By so doing, nostalgia can help one navigate successfully the vicissitudes of daily life. More generally, nostalgia is uniquely positioned to offer integrative insights across such areas of psychology as memory, emotion, the self, and relationships. Nostalgia has a long past and an exciting future.

Recommended Reading

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- Davis, F. (1979). (See References). A scholarly introduction of the construct of nostalgia, and a review of available evidence.
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- Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., & Baden, D. (2004). (See References). A review of historical conceptions of nostalgia coupled with speculations about nostalgia's functions.
- Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Arndt, J., & Routledge, C.D. (2006). (See References). An exploration of the content and triggers of nostalgic accounts, as well as an empirical foray into the affective, self-regard, and social-connectedness functions of nostalgia.
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