



Brief Report

Nostalgic recollections of high and low narcissists

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ABSTRACT

Two functions of nostalgia are consistently documented in the literature: self-positivity and social connectedness. These reflect agency and communion, respectively. Such dimensions are polarized no more than in narcissists, who are high in agency and low in communion. In three studies we tested whether high and low narcissists differ in the content of nostalgic recollections, whether they become nostalgic about different objects, and whether nostalgia serves different functions for them. High (versus low) narcissists made more agentic references in their narratives and manifested nostalgic proclivity toward agentic objects. Furthermore, nostalgia served a self-positivity function, but not a social connectedness function, for high (versus low) narcissists. Findings highlight the relevance of personality–narcissism, in particular—for the experience of nostalgia.

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1. Introduction

The emotion of nostalgia, defined as “a sentimental longing for the past” (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998), has recently been the focus of burgeoning empirical and theoretical developments. Central research foci are its triggers, content, and functions (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). Two key nostalgia functions have consistently been documented: self-positivity and social connectedness. Nostalgia increases *self-positivity*. Nostalgic (compared to control) participants manifest a heightened accessibility of positive self-attributes (Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010) and higher explicit self-esteem (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Relatedly, nostalgia, due to its self-positivity, reduces the need for defensive responding: Nostalgic (compared to control) participants show a marked attenuation in their self-serving attributions following negative performance feedback (Vess et al., 2010). Nostalgia also fosters *social connectedness*. Nostalgic (compared to control) participants report feeling interpersonally competent, securely attached, socially supported, and loved (Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, & Cordaro, 2010; Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008). Relatedly, consumption of nostalgic products (e.g., mu-

sic, movies, confectionary) reconnects individuals with important figures from their past with whom they shared the experience (Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010).

The self-positivity and social connectedness functions of nostalgia map onto the agency (or competence) and communion (or warmth) dimensions that underlie interpersonal evaluation (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). An agentic orientation entails a concern for independence, competence, and status, whereas a communal orientation entails a concern for interdependence, warmth, and intimacy. The self-positivity function of nostalgia, then, is agentic, and the social connectedness function is communal.

The agency and communion dimensions are polarized no more than in narcissists: they are high on agency and low on communion. Symptomatic of their strong agentic orientation, narcissists are ambitious and dominant, strive to be successful, effective and competent, and believe they possess these characteristic to a greater degree than their average peer. Symptomatic of their weak communal orientation, narcissists score low on agreeableness and affiliation, are rather insensitive to others' concerns, derogate feedback-givers when the latter are seen as a threat to the self, and show reduced interest in warm interpersonal relationships (Horton & Sedikides, 2009; Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011).

We have proposed so far that: (a) nostalgia serves self-positivity and social connectedness functions, (b) these functions are instances of agency and communion, respectively, and (c) narcissists are high on agency and low on communion. But how would nostalgia manifest itself in narcissists? The emotion of nostalgia is universal (Boym, 2001; Hepper, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010) and occurs

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relatively frequently (approximately three times a week; Wildschut et al., 2006). As such, we would expect for high narcissists to engage in nostalgic reverie as much as low narcissists do, and we addressed this issue in a Pilot Study. However, we would not necessarily expect for the content of nostalgia to be identical among high and low narcissists. Rather, we would anticipate for agentic references to be made more frequently in the nostalgic narratives of high than low narcissists, and for communal references to feature more prominently in the nostalgic narratives of low than high narcissists. We addressed this issue in Study 1. Study 2 provided a conceptual replication of Study 1 by testing whether high narcissists engage habitually in nostalgia about agentic objects and low narcissists about communal objects. Furthermore, Study 2 explored whether nostalgia serves a self-positivity function for high narcissists, and a social connectedness function for low narcissists. Finally, Study 3 offered a conceptual replication of Study 2, using a more diverse sample. This final study explored the degree to which music-evoked nostalgia strengthens self-positivity and social connectedness for high and low narcissists.

2. Pilot study

This online pilot study tested whether high versus low narcissists differ on nostalgia proneness. Participants were 128 University of Southampton undergraduate psychology student volunteers (112 female, 14 male, two unidentified; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.80$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.03$). They completed two measures in random order. We assessed *nostalgia proneness* with the 5-item Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008). Sample items are: “How often do you experience nostalgia?” and “How important is it for you to bring to mind nostalgic experiences?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .91$). We assessed *narcissism* with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Sample items are: “If I ruled the world it would be a much better place” [high-narcissistic response] versus “The thought of ruling the world frightens the hell out of me” [low-narcissistic response]. Higher scores indicate higher levels of narcissism ($\alpha = .84$).

Narcissism was uncorrelated with nostalgia proneness, $r(95) = -.02$, $p = .86$, suggesting that high and low narcissists are equally likely to be nostalgic. This null effect, however, may mask differences in (1) the content of the nostalgic experiences of high and low narcissists, and (2) the psychological functions nostalgia serves for high and low narcissists. Therefore, in Studies 1 and 2, we examined whether the content of nostalgic recollections of high versus low narcissists differ in line with their basic personality structure. In Studies 2 and 3, we examined whether nostalgia serves different functions for high versus low narcissists.

3. Study 1

In Study 1, participants thought about and described a nostalgic event from their lives (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). We used a text analysis program to break down the narratives, thus probing for word usage differences as a function of narcissism. In so doing we followed previous research showing that individual differences are reflected in language use (Pennebaker & King, 1999). Here we focused on the question: Will nostalgic recollections of high (versus low) narcissists be more agentic and less communal?

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Participants were 63 University of Missouri–Columbia undergraduate student volunteers (32 female, 31 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.98$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.92$).

3.1.2. Procedure and measures

We presented materials in a single printed booklet. First, participants completed the 40-item NPI ($M = 16.78$, $SD = 7.28$; $\alpha = .76$). Next, they completed a writing task. They were instructed: “We would like you to write about a nostalgic event. Immerse yourself into this experience. Describe the experience and how it makes you feel nostalgic. Be as thorough as possible in describing how you are feeling.” Event age was unconstrained, thus, recollections ranged from early childhood experiences to more recent events.

3.1.3. Data analytic strategy

We examined the narrative content with the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). The LIWC checks each word against an internal dictionary. Each word is assigned to one or more linguistic categories. The total number of words falling into each category is then reported as a percentage to account for between-subjects differences in text length.

To test whether high narcissists would recall nostalgic events featuring more agentic and less communal references than low narcissists, we created an agency-communion dictionary on the basis of a literature review, extant agency-communion measures (Judd et al., 2005; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996; Wiggins, Trapnell, & Phillips, 1988), and consultations with collaborators. A total of 190 agency words or word stems featured in the agency category. Examples are *achieve*, *competitive*, *competent*, *dominant* and *leader*. A total of 188 communal words or word stems featured in the communal category. Examples are *charitable*, *cooperate*, *listen*, *thoughtful* and *understanding*. (The full word list is available upon request.)

4. Results and discussion

Zero-order correlations revealed that high narcissists reported a greater proportion of agency words in their nostalgic narratives than low narcissists, $r(58) = .30$, $p < .02$. Level of narcissism was not significantly associated with proportion of communal words, $r(58) = -.18$, $p = .16$. Narcissism and narrative length were not associated, $r(58) = .13$, $p = .31$.

5. Study 2

Nostalgic narratives, in Study 1, contained more agentic references for high (compared to low) narcissists. The association between narcissism and communal references was not significant. We continued to explore this issue in Study 2. This study provided a conceptual replication for Study 1 by testing whether high narcissists are more prone to nostalgia for agentic (i.e., self-oriented) rather than communal (i.e., other-oriented) objects. A second objective was to find out whether nostalgia serves different functions for high and low narcissists. Does nostalgia serve a self-positivity function for high, but not low, narcissists?

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

We tested 99 participants (36 female, 63 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 25.79$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.84$) in an online experiment. No two participants shared the same IP address.

5.1.2. Procedure and measures

Participants completed the 40-item NPI ($M = 14.67$, $SD = 7.08$; $\alpha = .85$). Next, they received a definition of nostalgia (“sentimental longing for the past”) and read: “Please bring to mind a nostalgic event in your life. Specifically, try to think of a past event that makes you feel nostalgic.” Participants were instructed to list four

keywords relevant to this event (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). Afterward, participants rated (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which thinking about this event made them experience self-positivity and social connectedness. Each function statement was preceded by the stem “Thinking about this nostalgic event . . .” Four items assessed *self-positivity* ($\alpha = .90$), with statements such as “makes me feel good about myself” and “makes me feel I have many positive qualities”, and four items assessed *social connectedness* ($\alpha = .85$) with statements such as “makes me feel loved” and “makes me feel connected to loved ones.” We derived composites for self-positivity and social connectedness functions by summing the four items, respectively.

Lastly, participants completed a measure of their nostalgic proclivity towards agentic and communal objects. This comprised 18 objects, half of which were agentic and half communal (Appendix A). The construction of items was informed by the narratives of Study 1 and a review of common nostalgic themes (Wildschut et al., 2006). Participants indicated how nostalgic they were at that moment (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) for both the agentic ($\alpha = .87$) and communal ($\alpha = .80$) objects. As above, we derived composites for agentic and communal objects.

6. Results and discussion

6.1. Nostalgia for agentic and communal objects

In a conceptual replication of Study 1, high (compared to low) narcissists were significantly more nostalgic for agentic objects, $r(96) = .20$, $p < .05$. Narcissism was again not significantly associated with nostalgia about communal objects, $r(96) = .09$, $p = .38$.

6.2. Nostalgic functions

Importantly, nostalgia more strongly served a self-positivity function for high (compared to low) narcissists, $r(96) = .25$, $p < .01$. Narcissism was not significantly associated with the social connectedness function of nostalgia, $r(96) = .16$, $p = .12$.

In summary, high (compared to low) narcissists were significantly more nostalgic for agentic objects and derived significantly more self-positivity from nostalgia. However, as in Study 1, narcissism was not associated with communion-related aspects of nostalgia.

6.3. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 found significant associations between narcissism and agency-related aspects of nostalgia. But does this pattern indicate that there is something unique about narcissism or can the findings be explained in terms of higher-order, domain-level personality factors? Study 3 addressed this question by examining the unique association of narcissism with the self-positivity and social connectedness functions of nostalgia, controlling for the Big Five personality factors.

Wildschut et al. (2006) reported that participants regarded music as a common sensory trigger of nostalgia. Indeed, burgeoning research on music-evoked emotions shows that bringing to mind or listening to songs from one's past can conjure up warm feelings and treasured memories (Barrett et al., 2010). Does narcissism predict the degree to which such music-evoked nostalgia strengthens self-positivity and social connectedness, respectively? We tested these associations in an online survey. Dutch participants were asked to bring to mind a nostalgic song and rate how much this nostalgic song made them feel good about themselves (self-positivity) and connected to close others (social connectedness). We

hypothesized that narcissism would significantly predict increased self-positivity (but not social connectedness).

7. Method

7.1. Participants

Five hundred and thirty-four members of the Dutch general public responded to an online survey. Complete data were obtained from 529 participants (270 females). Mean age was 40.10 ($SD = 12.63$; range = 13–64). Materials were presented on a website hosted by Tilburg University. Participants completed the survey after having visited a website associated with “Top 2000,” a popular Dutch radio and television program that is aired annually around Christmas. That website included an invitation to participate in research, and interested visitors could click a link to the online survey.

7.2. Procedure and measures

After providing demographic information, participants completed the NPI (16 items; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006; $M = 4.55$, $SD = 2.87$; $\alpha = .68$) and the revised Ten Item Personality Inventory (Denissen, Geenen, Selfhout, & Van Arken, 2008), whereby respondents rate themselves (1 = *extremely like the left adjective pair* to 7 = *extremely like the right adjective pair*) along five bipolar items (Extraversion: *extraverted, enthusiastic* versus *reserved, quiet*; Agreeableness: *critical, quarrelsome* versus *sympathetic, warm*; Conscientiousness: *dependable, self-disciplined* versus *disorganized, careless*; Neuroticism: *anxious, easily upset* versus *calm, emotionally stable*; Openness to Experience: *open to new experiences, complex* versus *conventional, uncreative*). Next, participants were instructed to bring to mind a nostalgic song and to report the name of the song and performing artists. Participants then rated (1 = *not at all applicable to me*, 5 = *highly applicable to me*) how much the song made them feel “good about myself” (*self-positivity*; Vess et al., 2010; Wildschut et al., 2006) and “connected with the people I care about” (*social connectedness*; Wildschut et al., 2006, 2010).

8. Results and discussion

The previous findings were replicated. Thinking about a nostalgic song more strongly served a self-positivity function for high (compared to low) narcissists, $r(527) = .09$, $p < .03$. A weaker non-significant association emerged for narcissism and the social connectedness function of nostalgia, $r(527) = .06$, $p = .18$. We then conducted regression analyses, controlling for the role of age and gender (Step 1), and Big Five personality factors (Step 2). We entered narcissism in Step 3. Narcissism significantly predicted the extent to which participants reported deriving self-positivity from listening to a nostalgic song ($\beta = .10$, $SE = .28$, $t = 1.99$, $p < .05$), and did so above and beyond the contributions of age, gender, and the Big Five. Narcissism marginally ($\beta = .09$, $SE = .29$, $t = 1.82$, $p = .07$) predicted the extent to which participants reported deriving social connectedness from listening to a nostalgic song (Table 1). Thus, we replicated Study 2 findings, even when controlling for the Big Five personality factors and using a diverse sample with a wide age range.

9. General discussion

Research on personality markers of the nostalgic experience is scarce. The reported studies address this issue by exploring differences in propensity, content, and functions of nostalgia between high and low narcissists. Although high and low narcissists do

Table 1

Study 3: Regression analyses with narcissism as a predictor of nostalgic functions, controlling for age, gender, and Big Five personality indices.

Predictor	Function of music-evoked nostalgia	
	Self-positivity	Social connectedness
<i>Step 1</i>		
Age	.13**	.14**
Gender	.10*	.09*
Model	$R^2 = .02$, $F(2, 524) = 6.22$, $p < .002$	$R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 524) = 6.66$, $p < .001$
<i>Step 2</i>		
Age	.11*	.06
Gender	.06	.10*
Neuroticism	.01	.03
Extraversion	.09	.06
Openness	.04	.05
Agreeableness	.14**	.15**
Conscientiousness	.07	.11*
Model change	$\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(5, 519) = 3.72$, $p < .003$	$\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(5, 519) = 4.54$, $p < .001$
Model	$R^2 = .06$, $F(7, 519) = 4.48$, $p < .001$	$R^2 = .07$, $F(7, 519) = 5.21$, $p < .001$
<i>Step 3</i>		
Age	.11*	.06
Gender	.08	.12*
Neuroticism	.03	.05
Extraversion	.04	.02
Openness	.04	.04
Agreeableness	.15**	.16**
Conscientiousness	.07	.11*
Narcissism	.10*	.09***
Model change	$\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 518) = 3.96$, $p < .05$	$\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 518) = 3.32$, $p < .10$
Model	$R^2 = .06$, $F(8, 518) = 4.44$, $p < .001$	$R^2 = .07$, $F(8, 518) = 4.99$, $p < .001$

Note: Table entries are standardized betas. Participant gender was coded 0 for males and 1 for females.

Supplementary analyses examined the narcissism X gender and narcissism X age interactions in a fourth step. Neither interaction term was significant or marginal in analyses for self-positivity or social connectedness.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .10$.

not differ in overall propensity to become nostalgic (Pilot Study), they differ in the content of their nostalgic recollections: high (compared to low) narcissists' nostalgic narratives generally contain more agentic references (Study 1). Furthermore, high (compared to low) narcissists are more prone to be nostalgic about agentic objects (Study 2). Finally, high and low narcissists differ in terms of "what they get" out of nostalgia: High, more so than low, narcissists derive self-positivity from the nostalgic experience (Study 2 and 3). Consistent with current theorizing, narcissists use agentic self-goals to organize the self-system and to boost their narcissistic self-esteem (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Morf et al., 2011). Whereas narcissism was consistently associated with agency-related aspects of the nostalgic experience, it was only weakly associated with communion-related aspects of nostalgia. These findings for communion are perhaps surprising in light of existing evidence that high (compared to low) narcissists generally have a weak communal orientation (Morf et al., 2011; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). However, reminders of interpersonal closeness can strengthen narcissists' communal orientation (Finkel, Campbell, Buffardi, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009). It is possible that the nostalgic recollections of high narcissists still included sufficient reminders of interpersonal closeness to offset their otherwise weak communal orientation. It is also possible that completing the NPI differentially primed narcissistic tendencies which in turn influenced their responses to the nostalgia measures.

Alternatively, the results may reflect a narcissistic indifference to communal goals when an opportunity arises to self-enhance on more central agentic goals. This is an interesting topic for future investigation.

Our findings are generative. *First*, in the present research, high and low narcissists were left unconstrained, when bringing to mind and describing nostalgic events. It is thus perhaps not surprising that they were equivalent in other aspects of the reflections (e.g., narrative length). Participants in future research, though, could be guided in their nostalgia recollections (Sutin & Robins, 2005) to bring to mind either agentic or communal events. This would allow for testing the ease or difficulty with which they bring to mind such events (e.g., coding for fluency). Narcissists' agentic orientation may make it relatively easy to narrate an agentic event but relatively difficult to narrate a communal event, illustrating how personality might predict features of nostalgic reverie construction. *Second*, the present studies lay a foundation for studying how personality predicts triggers of nostalgia. For example, loneliness has been identified as a trigger of nostalgia (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). But is loneliness likely to be an equally potent trigger for high and low narcissists? More specifically, what kind of loneliness would elicit nostalgia in high and low narcissists? The current findings would seem to suggest that, whereas social isolation would elicit nostalgia in low narcissists, a relative paucity in achievements or awards would elicit loneliness in high narcissists.

In conclusion, high (compared to low) narcissists are characteristically described as fond of themselves but care far less about others: they are high on agency but low on communion. We found that the content and functions of nostalgic recollections supports their needs for feeling good about their agentic self. The findings open up a new research agenda on the relevance, not only of narcissists, but personality in general, for the nostalgic experience.

Appendix A

Measure of nostalgic proclivity towards agentic and communal objects used in Study 2.

Agentic objects	Communal objects
Past successes/achievements	My family (B)
Having time to myself	Someone I loved (B)
Having dreams and aspirations	My friends (B)
Being able to focus on what I want	Having someone to depend on (B)
Having no-one to depend on me	My pets (B)
Feelings of mastering something	The way society was (B)
Having confidence in myself	Being part of a group or community
Overcoming challenges	Vacations with others
Expanding my horizons	Reunions with family or friends

(B) = items from original Batcho Nostalgia Inventory (1995).

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