



COMMENTARY

On the Nature of Nostalgia: A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

We raise issues about the philosophical claims made in this article regarding the nature of nostalgia. Drawing on psychological research, we contend that nostalgia is rooted in memory rather than time, is directed toward specific objects rather than being object-free, is predominantly positive rather than a form of mourning, and is focused on the past rather than the present or future.

Keywords

nostalgia, objects of nostalgia, valence of nostalgia, temporal forms of nostalgia

This lead article makes various claims about the nature of nostalgia from a philosophical standpoint. Key claims are that nostalgia is rooted in time, is object-free, is a form of mourning, and it can be focused on the past, present, or future. We discuss those claims informed by psychological data.

Is Nostalgia About Longing for Lost Time?

According to the lead article, nostalgia is about longing for lost time. Indeed, psychological research indicates that nostalgia involves mental time travel or mental transportation to experiences (Evans et al., 2021; Stephan et al., 2012). Fundamentally, though, nostalgia is about (sentimental) longing or wistful affection for one's *remembered* experiences.

Empirical verification for this assertion is provided by prototype studies. These studies probe laypersons' understanding of the construct "nostalgia," which is shaped by repeated occurrences and becomes cognitively organized around an abstract or loosely defined category known as a "prototype" (Wittgenstein, 1953/1967). The nostalgia prototype, like all prototypes, comprises features that are central or

more representative of the construct, and features that are peripheral or less representative of it (Rosch, 1978). Research has indicated that people all around the world rate the following five features as the most centrally prototypical of "nostalgia": memories, the past, fond memories, remembering, reminiscence (Hepper et al., 2012, 2014). The common theme of these features is memory. None of the 18 central and 17 peripheral features of nostalgia refers to the present or future. Also, content analyses of nostalgic accounts reveal that the core of nostalgia consists of memories, specifically momentous events from one's past (Abeyta et al., 2015; Wildschut et al., 2006).

Remembering a nostalgic event from one's life will lead to different psychological (e.g., affective, cognitive, behavioral) consequences than remembering an ordinary autobiographical event. A nostalgia induction technique, known as the event reflection task (Sedikides et al., 2015b; Wildschut & Sedikides, 2025) follows this logic. In the experimental condition, participants recall a nostalgic event from their lives, whereas in the control condition they recall an ordinary event from their lives. The two relived memories yield dramatically different psychological consequences or benefits across cultures (Hepper et al., 2024; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023a), as we describe below. In all, nostalgia is predominantly about memory, not about time.

Can Nostalgia Refer to Objects?

According to the lead article, nostalgia is not directed toward objects. The evidence is inconsistent with this proposition. Prototype studies show that nostalgia often pertains to memorabilia/keepsakes and social relationships (Hepper et al., 2012, 2014). Content analyses indicate that nostalgia is directed to persons (e.g., family members, friends, ex-partners, neighbors), pets, tangibles (e.g., toys, books, cars, jewelry,

clothing, antiques), and specific events (e.g., holidays, birthdays, reunions; Havlena & Holak, 1991; Holak & Havlena, 1992; Madoglou et al., 2017; Wildschut et al., 2006). Lastly, a validated nostalgia scale, the Nostalgia Inventory (Batcho, 1995), assesses nostalgia in terms of its reference to 20 objects from when one was younger (e.g., TV shows, music, your house, heroes, school, places to hang out).

Should Nostalgia Be Equated with Mourning?

The lead article presents an entirely unfavorable view of nostalgia, characterizing it as mourning (for the bygone times). The evidence does not support this view.

To begin, research has established the discriminant validity of nostalgia from alternative modes of thinking about one's past such as rumination (Cheung et al., 2018), brooding (Jiang et al., 2021), bereavement (Reid et al., 2021), homesickness (Sedikides et al., 2015b), and counterfactual thinking (Cheung et al., 2018). Contrary to those modes, nostalgia is positive and confers desirable psychological consequences.

Further, nostalgia is deemed by people as largely positive. Most of the central features that laypersons ascribe to the nostalgia prototype are positive (e.g., rose-tinted memory, personal meaning, happiness) rather than neutral or negative (Hepper et al., 2012). Individuals appraise nostalgia as positive compared to 11 self-conscious emotions (Van Tilburg et al., 2018), and as pleasant and unique compared to 31 general emotions (Van Tilburg et al., 2019). Participants describe their nostalgic experiences in more positive than negative terms (Abeyta et al., 2015; Wildschut et al., 2006). Additionally, whether experimentally induced or experienced during everyday life, nostalgia engenders substantially higher positive affect than negative affect (Leunissen, 2023; Leunissen et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020). It is no surprise, then, that people regard nostalgia as special, valuable, and an asset worth protecting (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2022; Zauberman et al., 2009).

Individuals who are dispositionally nostalgic or those who experience nostalgia momentarily (i.e., through experimental induction) reap crucial psychological consequences or benefits. A synopsis follows. Nostalgia is associated with, or increases, self-esteem (one's sense of self-worth; Evans et al., 2021; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2024), meaning in life (the sense that one's life is purposeful, significant, and coherent; Abeyta & Pillarisetty, 2023. Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018), authenticity (the feeling that one is being true to themselves; Baldwin et al., 2015; Kelley et al., 2022), social connectedness (a sense of acceptance, belongingness, and social support; Juhl et al., 2021; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019), and self-continuity (the perception of connection between one's past and present; Layous et al., 2022; Sedikides et al., 2016).

In his dissertation, consisting of a handful of interviews with Swiss mercenaries in the French army, Hofer (1688/1934) concluded that nostalgia is a medical or neurological

disease, manifesting symptoms like emotional lability (from despondency to weeping), anorexia, and even suicidal ideation. In the ensuing centuries, nostalgia was reclassified as a psychiatric disorder (symptomatic of sadness, anxiety, insomnia, and fever), a clinical malady (labelled obsessive mental state, repressive compulsive disorder, or immigrant psychosis), or an undesirable affliction confined to a few populations (e.g., seafarers, immigrants, soldiers; for reviews, see: Dodman, 2018; Sedikides et al., 2004). Hofer committed an inferential error that still persists today and shows itself in the lead article. He confused correlation with causation. He reasoned that nostalgia causes psychological malfunction, rather than simply covary with it. Extensive research has debunked this conclusion. The reverse causal direction is true. Psychological malfunction or discomfort (i.e., a psychological state often due to misfortune or adversity) triggers nostalgia, which in turn buffers the individual against the undesirable consequences of the malfunction or discomfort. In particular, nostalgia alleviates the deleterious implications of loneliness, social exclusion, meaninglessness, disillusionment, procedural unfairness at work settings, self-uncertainty, self-discontinuity, social anxiety, and stress (Dai et al., 2024; Sedikides et al., 2015a, in press; Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023a, 2023b; Zou et al., 2023). As a case in point, loneliness reduces social connectedness, but also increases nostalgia; in turn, nostalgia increases social connectedness, thus counteracting loneliness (Zhou et al., 2008, 2022).

In conclusion, nostalgia should not be equated with mourning. Nostalgia is a mostly positive emotion that protects the individual against adverse psychological states and confers key psychological benefits.

Does Nostalgia Refer to the Present and Future?

The lead article claims that nostalgia pertains not only to the past but also to the present and future. We are not sure.

As documented so far, nostalgia refers to a meaningful past or valued objects in one's past. Indeed, nostalgia is appraised as a temporally distant emotion (Stephan et al., 2012; Van Tilburg et al., 2019) and is felt as such (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides et al., 2015b). At the same time, nostalgia has psychological *implications for the present*. As per the synopsis above, nostalgizing about one's past augments self-esteem, meaning in life, authenticity, social connectedness, and self-continuity. Nostalgizing about one's past also has behavioral implications. For example, nostalgic (vs. non-nostalgic) individuals are likely to engage in cultural rituals (e.g., attending a festival; Yin et al., 2024), and are likely to transfer this tradition to their children (i.e., attend festivals together; Yin et al., 2023). Further, nostalgizing about one's past has *psychological and behavioral implications for the future*. For example, nostalgizing about one's past elevates approach motivation, growth orientation, creativity, inspiration, optimism, financial risk-taking, the pursuit of one's

important goals, and collective action participation (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016, 2020, 2023b; Smeekes et al., 2023).

Psychologists labor to establish discriminant validity among constructs and assign them to proper domains of meaning. Psychologists typically refer to future cognitions as prospection (e.g., wishfully thinking, planning). The target of prospection, then, is the future—unknown and amorphous—not the past. The constructs “nostalgia for the present” and “nostalgia for the future” lack discriminant validity, risking a dilution of the term “nostalgia” by applying it arbitrarily across an excessively broad conceptual scope. Nowhere is this clearer than in the lead article’s characterization of future nostalgia as “The sense of certainty that I will be deprived of a future I have been anticipating all along” (p. 22). Psychologists would refer to this simply as disappointment, an affectively negative state (Zeelenberg et al., 1998).

Coda

Informed opinions and reality are two ways of understanding the world. Data are psychologists’ bread and butter. We have argued in this commentary, based on data, that nostalgia is a sentimental longing or wistful affection for one’s remembered experiences, is directed to persons and objects, is predominantly positive, and refers to the past.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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