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Past Forward: Nostalgia as a Motivational Force

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Abstract

Nostalgia has endured a negative reputation, being branded an unhealthy preoccupation with one's past. This reputation is unwarranted. Nostalgia has remarkable implications for one's future. It strengthens approach orientation, raises optimism, evokes inspiration, boosts creativity, and kindles prosociality. Far from reflecting escapism from the present, nostalgia potentiates an attainable future.

Keywords: nostalgia, motivation, optimism, inspiration, creativity, prosociality

Nature of Nostalgia

Nostalgia has a 3000-years history, beginning with its poetic depiction in Odysseus's travels [1]. In the last four centuries, nostalgia has suffered reputational malaise (Box 1). At its best, it has been pigeonholed as an ossifying emotion that entrenches the individual in the past. This grim account is due to an inferential error. Scholars drew an inference from the temporal coincidence of nostalgia and misfortune, concluding that nostalgia causes psychological problems. Instead, they should have concluded that misfortune triggers the onset of nostalgia as a coping mechanism [1].

Contemporary evidence promises to rehabilitate nostalgia's standing. We define nostalgia as sentimental longing for one's past [1], a definition shared by laypersons across 18 cultures [2]. The emotion is self-relevant albeit deeply social, and is bittersweet, albeit predominantly positive. It arises from personally meaningful recollections of momentous (i.e., atypical) life events (e.g., graduations, anniversaries, vacations) that center on close relationships (e.g., family, friends, partners) or childhood. In nostalgic reverie, the mind is "peopled," as one re-establishes symbolic connections with important others. One views the past fondly through rose-colored glasses, misses it, and may yearn to return to it; one feels tender and content, yet tinged with longing [1,3,4].

Nostalgia may refer to the past, but it is surprisingly forward-looking. It links and assimilates one's past with one's present and, crucially, future [1] ("When I stare at my family photo, I smile and think of all the good times to come."). It is a dynamic, motivational force that enables the individual to look ahead and take proactive action. We addressed experimentally the forward-looking property of nostalgia. We typically induce nostalgia with the Event Reflection Task: Experimental participants reflect on a nostalgic event from their lives and write a brief narrative, whereas control participants reflect on and write about an ordinary event. We also induce nostalgia with song lyrics, music, or scents. Subsequently, we assess the relevant outcome along with the mechanism(s) thought to underlie it [1]. The effects we report are independent of transient affective states (e.g., positive mood) that nostalgia may elicit (Figure 1).

Nostalgia Fosters Approach Orientation

Nostalgia ignites an approach orientation. In separate experiments, following nostalgia induction, participants completed measures of approach motivation (Drive: e.g., “I go out of my way to get things I want;” Fun Seeking: e.g., “I will often do things for no other reason than that they might be fun”) or exploration (e.g., “I would like to explore someplace that I have never been before”). Nostalgic (vs. control) participants reported higher approach motivation [5] and exploratory intentions. [6]

Nostalgia Raises Optimism

Optimism is defined as having positive (and not negative) expectancies for the future. After nostalgia induction, we assessed optimism (e.g., “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best”) [7]. Nostalgia raised optimism. But how so?

We identified two mechanisms, social connectedness (sense of belongingness and support: e.g., “feel connected to loved ones”) and self-esteem (positive evaluation of one’s self; e.g., “feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others”). The former provides the psychological scaffolding for the latter. Nostalgia, as a genuinely social emotion, fostered social connectedness, which in turn augmented self-esteem, leading to higher optimism.

Nostalgia Evokes Inspiration

Inspiration reflects the transcendence of the self or routine preoccupations. Following nostalgia induction, we assessed inspiration (e.g., “filled with inspiration”), and determination to pursue one’s important goals (e.g., “want to put more time and effort into my goal pursuit”). Nostalgia evoked inspiration, which, in turn, galvanized goal-pursuit [8].

We wondered how nostalgia evokes inspiration and subsequent goal-pursuit. Informed by the literature, and as with optimism, we focused on social connectedness and self-esteem. Indeed, nostalgia nurtured social connectedness, which, in sequence, led to increases in self-esteem and higher inspiration.

Nostalgia Boosts Creativity

Creativity is defined as an idea or action that is original and useful. Following induction of nostalgia, participants composed 30-minute stories that involved either “a princess, a cat, and a racecar” or a “mysterious noise on a cold winter evening.” The stories were independently coded for creativity. Nostalgic participants wrote more creative stories than controls [9].

How does nostalgia boost creativity? We identified openness to experience as a prime candidate, given nostalgia’s expansive capacity, that is, its evocation of approach orientation and inspiration. Indeed, experimentally-induced nostalgia increased openness. We proceeded to test the relation among nostalgia, openness, and creativity. Under the influence of nostalgia (vs. control), participants wrote a creative sentence about each of 10 words (e.g., sun, eating). The sentences were independently coded for creativity. Nostalgia increased both openness (e.g., “I see myself as someone who likes to reflect, play with ideas”) and creativity. Crucially, the effect of nostalgia on creativity was transmitted via openness.

Nostalgia Kindles Prosocial Behavior

Given its inherent sociality, nostalgia ought to manifest its motivational potency in the social domain as well. It does. Following nostalgia induction, we assessed, in separate experiments, four indices of prosocial behavior: physical proximity, helping, donations to charity, and willingness for intergroup contact. First, nostalgia decreases proximity between oneself and another person. Participants were led to believe that they would interact with a person waiting in an adjacent room. In preparation, they were instructed to place two chairs (one for themselves, one for the other person) in that room. Nostalgic (relative to control) participants placed the chairs in closer proximity to each other [5]. Second, nostalgia facilitated helping. A confederate walked into the experimental room while participants were in wait, and clumsily dropped pencils on the floor. Nostalgic participants helped more (i.e., picked up a higher number of pencils) than controls [5]. Third, nostalgia increases donations to charity. Nostalgic participants evinced stronger donation intentions toward a children’s charity and donated more money to it, compared to controls [10]. Finally, nostalgia facilitates intergroup contact. Participants reflected either nostalgically or not on an encounter with an outgroup member—in

this case, an overweight person. Nostalgic (vs. control) participants expressed more trust toward the outgroup member and reported less intergroup anxiety (e.g., if they had to interact with an outgroup person, they would feel less “self-conscious,” “awkward,” “defensive”). Critically, nostalgic participants reported stronger willingness for intergroup contact with an outgroup member (e.g., “talk to them,” “find out more about them”). Further, the effect of nostalgia on willingness for intergroup contact was transmitted via increased outgroup trust and reduced intergroup anxiety. These findings were conceptually replicated, when the outgroup member was a person with mental illness [11,12]. Taken together, nostalgia for an encounter with an outgroup member breeds trust for, and curtails anxiety about, the entire outgroup, culminating in stronger willingness for contact with the outgroup.

Concluding Remarks

Burgeoning experimental evidence indicates that nostalgia does not deserve its gloomy reputation. Far from being a feeble escape from the present, nostalgia is a source of strength, enabling the individual to face the future. Notably, like experimentally-induced nostalgia, dispositional nostalgia proneness is positively associated with approach motivation [5], optimism [7], inspiration [8], and creativity [9]. Nostalgia, then, is a deposit in the bank of memory to be retrieved for future use. This was indeed Homer’s original view of nostalgia in his portrayal of history’s most famous itinerant. Finally, nostalgia has managed to come full circle.

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Box 1: A Historical Synopsis of Nostalgia

Nostalgia has been perceived in a number of ways – all unfavorable -- over the last few centuries [1].

Nostalgia as a Medical Disease (17th–18th Century)

Nostalgia is considered “a cerebral disease of essentially demonic cause.” Other postulated causes include “the quite continuous vibration of animal spirits through those fibers of the middle brain in which impressed traces of ideas of the Fatherland still cling,” “a sharp differential in atmospheric pressure causing excessive body pressurization, which in turn drove blood from the heart to the brain, thereby producing the observed affliction of sentiment,” and the unremitting clanging of cowbells in the Alps, which inflict serious damage to the eardrum and brain cells.

Nostalgia as a Psychiatric Disorder (19th to early 20th Century)

Nostalgia is considered a psychosomatic disorder with symptoms of sadness, anxiety, anorexia, insomnia, and fever.

Nostalgia as a Psychological Malady (mid-20th Century)

Psychodynamic approaches consider nostalgia a “regressive manifestation closely related to the issue of loss, grief, incomplete mourning, and, finally, depression,” and also labeled it “immigrant psychosis,” “monomaniacal obsessive mental state causing intense unhappiness,” and “mentally repressive compulsive disorder” arising for subconscious yearning to return to fetal state.

Nostalgia as a Condition Affecting the Marginalized (end of 20th Century)

Nostalgia is considered a highly aversive state afflicting marginalized populations (seamen, soldiers, immigrants, first-year boarding/university students).

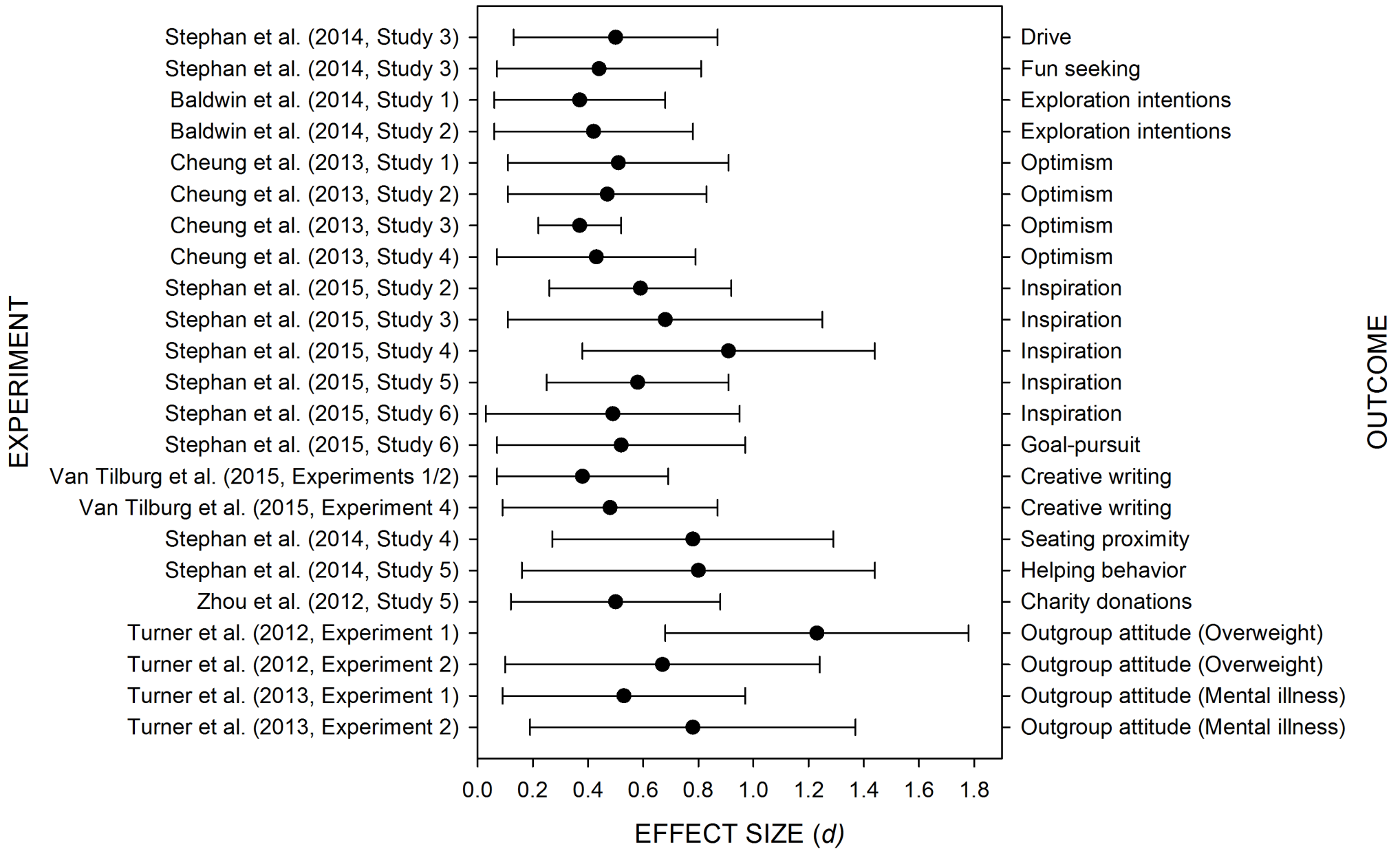


Figure 1. Forest Plot of the Effects of Nostalgia on Future-Oriented Outcomes. Plotted values are standardized effect sizes (d) and 95% confidence intervals (error bars).