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NOSTALGIA AND POPULISM

An Empirical Psychological Perspective

For centuries, nostalgia denoted homesickness, but current dictionary definitions indicate that these concepts have parted ways and acquired unique meanings. However, it is one thing to demonstrate that contemporary definitions of nostalgia and homesickness are distinct; it is another to show that the way people think about nostalgia and its characteristics corresponds with this lexicographic knowledge. Erica G. Hepper and colleagues therefore asked lay persons about ten years ago to identify which features they considered most characteristic of the construct ‘nostalgia’ and found that respondents conceptualized nostalgia as a predominantly positive, social, and past-oriented emotion. In nostalgic reverie, one brings to mind a fond and personally meaningful event, often involving one’s childhood. The person tends to see the event through rose-coloured glasses and may even long to return to the past. As a result, he or she feels sentimental, typically happy but with a hint of sadness.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over the past 15 years, psychological research on nostalgia has expanded rapidly. As a result, the seemingly straightforward question ‘what is the relation between nostalgia and populism?’ requires a nuanced answer. To begin to address it, we need to develop a taxonomy for organising pertinent research. The first dimension in this taxonomy is the distinction between personal and collective nostalgia. Personal nostalgia refers to a longing and affection for a personally experienced past. It is not contingent on thinking of oneself in terms of a particular social identity or group membership (e.g., one’s nation). When individuals become part of a group, however, that group, its members, and events or objects related to it acquire emotional significance.[[2]](#footnote-2) Collective nostalgia*,* then, *is* contingent on thinking of oneself in terms of a particular group membership, and pertains to the people, experiences, and objects associated with this ingroup. The second, cross-cutting dimension is the distinction between momentary, short-lived, transient episodes of nostalgia (i.e., state-level nostalgia) and relatively stable, enduring, dispositional tendencies regularly to experience, and ascribe importance to, nostalgia (i.e., trait-level nostalgia). In everyday parlance, someone who is high in trait-level nostalgia may be said to have a ‘nostalgic personality’. We review illustrative research within the four cells of the resultant 2 (personal vs. collective) × 2 (state vs. trait) taxonomy. Along the way, we describe the diverse ways in which populism – a broad construct – has been operationalised in psychological research. One defining aspect of populism that has attracted empirical attention is outgroup derogation and prejudice, often manifested as opposition to immigration and immigrant rights. Another key feature of populism that has been studied is ingroup bias, manifested as glorification of the qualities, achievements, and products of the ingroup – typically one’s nation.

1. State-Level Personal Nostalgia

When individuals nostalgise about a personal experience they shared with an outgroup member, they feel more confident about forming relationships with other members of said outgroup. This connection between state-level personal nostalgia and positive outgroup attitudes has been demonstrated with regard to four stigmatized groups: overweight individuals,[[3]](#footnote-3) individuals suffering from mental illness,[[4]](#footnote-4) older adults,[[5]](#footnote-5) and immigrants.[[6]](#footnote-6) Given its focus on immigration, the latter work is most relevant to our present discussion of populism.

Migration is a global phenomenon, but immigrants continue to be greeted with suspicion and seen as less than fully human by locals.[[7]](#footnote-7) Gravani and colleagues asked if personal nostalgia could reduce anti-immigrant sentiment.[[8]](#footnote-8) They conducted their experiment in Greece, a country that has experienced increased immigration from Africa and the Middle East in recent years, and seen a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment.[[9]](#footnote-9) It involved an interesting twist: Greek participants (*N* = 99) were first instructed to bring to mind a Greek person they know well, who has emigrated from Greece to another country. That is, participants brought to mind a familiar ingroup member who, by emigrating from Greece, had joined the ranks of immigrants. Participants randomly assigned to the nostalgia condition were instructed to recall and write about a nostalgic experience they had shared with the familiar émigré. Participants assigned to the control condition were instructed to bring to mind an ordinary experience they had shared with the familiar émigré and to write an objective account of that event. The researchers then assessed participants’ attitudes toward immigrants in general using semantic differentials (e.g., ‘friendly – hostile’). Reflecting on a nostalgic (compared to ordinary) experience shared with a compatriot who had become an immigrant reduced generalized anti-immigrant sentiment.

2. Trait-Level Personal Nostalgia

Dispositional, or trait-level, personal nostalgia has implications for prejudice reduction, as well. This was demonstrated by Cheung and colleagues in four studies focusing on White Americans’ attitudes toward African Americans.[[10]](#footnote-10) In their first study (*N* = 183 online participants), the researchers assessed trait-level personal nostalgia with five statements that described behaviours related to characteristic features of nostalgia (e.g., ‘I bring to mind rose-tinted memories’).[[11]](#footnote-11) Participants rated how frequently they engaged in each behaviour and how important they regarded this behaviour. The responses were averaged to form an index of trait nostalgia. Next, participants completed a 9-item subscale of the Motivation to Control Prejudiced Reactions scale, assessing concern with acting prejudicially in the eyes of others and oneself (e.g., ‘I get angry with myself when I have a thought or feeling that might be considered prejudiced’).[[12]](#footnote-12) Participants higher on trait nostalgia were more concerned with acting prejudicially. In Study 2 (*N* = 289 online participants) and Study 3 (*N* = 192 online participants), the researchers assessed trait nostalgia with the 7-item Southampton Nostalgia Scale (e.g., ‘How often do you experience nostalgia?’). Three items measure the extent to which participants find nostalgia valuable, important, or significant (e.g., ‘How valuable is nostalgia for you?’). Another four items measure proneness to nostalgia (e.g., ‘How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?’) or frequency of nostalgic engagement (e.g., ‘Generally speaking, how often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences?’).[[13]](#footnote-13) Then, they measured concern with acting prejudicially with the same scale as in Study 1. Finally, they assessed prejudice against African Americans with the 20-item Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scales.[[14]](#footnote-14) The highly correlated subtle prejudice component (e.g., ‘African Americans living here teach their children values and skills different from those required to be successful in America’) and blatant prejudice component (e.g., ‘African Americans come from less able races and this explains why they are not as well off as most American people’) were averaged to create an overall prejudice index. Trait nostalgia predicted greater concern with acting prejudicially, which, in turn, predicted reduced prejudice. The fourth study (*N* = 664 online participants) replicated these findings.

3. State-Level Collective Nostalgia

In contrast to personal nostalgia, collective nostalgiaarises when a particular social identity or group membership is salient, and pertains to the people, experiences, and objects associated with this social entity. For example, students may experience collective nostalgia when they reflect on meaningful experiences shared with other students, such as field trips or graduation.[[15]](#footnote-15) The prominent social component of nostalgia has led scholars to speculate that the emotion can solidify shared social identity, as exemplified by the ‘Red Nostalgia’ (i.e., nostalgia for the communist past) in Eastern Europe.[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, there is compelling empirical evidence that state-level collective nostalgia pertaining to one’s university, work organisation, or nation strengthens ties to, and confers benefits on, these ingroups.[[17]](#footnote-17) In light of our focus on populism, research demonstrating the effect of collective nostalgia on ethnocentric consumer preferences is particularly informative.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In three experiments with Greek participants, Dimitriadou and colleagues demonstrated that state-level collective nostalgia strengthens consumer preferences for ingroup (domestic) versus outgroup (foreign) products, a form of consumer ethnocentrism.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the first experiment (*N* = 208), the researchers induced collective nostalgia both idiographically (i.e., focusing on characteristics of the person and her or his autobiography) and nomothetically (i.e., focusing on characteristics shared by a generation, with the person being a member of this generation). The ideographic induction entailed participants recalling either a nostalgic event that they had experienced together with other Greeks or an ordinary event that they had experienced together with other Greeks. The nomothetic induction entailed participants reading either a nostalgic description of childhood experiences that were common for members of their generation (e.g., types of games children used to play) or a neutral text (i.e., a practical guide to photography). Next, all participants indicated whether they would prefer to listen to a Greek or foreign song. Regardless of induction method, participants in the collective-nostalgia condition chose more frequently a domestic (compared to foreign) song than did those in the control condition. The second experiment (*N* = 121) replicated this finding, using two product categories. Participants experiencing collective nostalgia were more likely than controls to prefer domestic (compared to foreign) songs and TV clips. The third experiment (*N* = 90) identified collective self-esteem as the mechanism through which collective nostalgia increases consumer ethnocentrism. Collective self-esteem refers to one’s evaluation of the significance and value of the social groups to which one belongs and it is positively associated with group-benefiting outcomes,[[20]](#footnote-20) including the belief in the superiority of domestic over foreign products.[[21]](#footnote-21) The researchers induced collective nostalgia with the idiographic method, then administered the Collective Self-Esteem Scale,[[22]](#footnote-22) and, finally, assessed domestic (compared to foreign) song preferences. Participants in the collective-nostalgia condition (compared to controls) reported higher collective self-esteem, as well as increased preference for the domestic song. Importantly, higher collective self-esteem mediated the effect of collective nostalgia on this form of ethnocentrism. A more recent experiment among a representative sample of the Dutch population (*N* = 516) corroborated the link between state-level collective (i.e., national) nostalgia and populism, specifically prejudice toward immigrants and Muslims.[[23]](#footnote-23)

4. Trait-Level Collective Nostalgia

This final cell in our taxonomy comprises the largest number of relevant studies. Space limitations do not permit an exhaustive review, but suffice it to say that the preponderance of evidence supports a positive association between trait-level collective nostalgia and various indices of populism. Research on the link between trait-level national nostalgia and opposition to immigration offers an illustration. Scholars have proposed that national nostalgia forms a key ideological component of populist radical right parties,[[24]](#footnote-24) and is an integral piece of a new master-frame employed to increase allure of these parties among their electorate.[[25]](#footnote-25) Indeed, the rhetoric of national nostalgia deployed by leaders of populist radical right parties in various European countries emphasises a sharp discrepancy between the nation’s ostensibly sunny past and gloomy present, and attributes this downturn to low-status outgroups (e.g., immigrants, refugees).[[26]](#footnote-26) Studies by Smeekes and colleagues corroborate the notion that trait-level national nostalgia predicts anti-immigrant sentiment.[[27]](#footnote-27) In their initial study (*N =* 112Dutch undergraduates), these researchers first assessed trait-level national nostalgia (e.g., ‘How often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences related to the way the Netherlands was in the past?’), followed by autochthony beliefs (i.e., the idea that the first inhabitants of a territory deserve preferential treatment; ‘The Netherlands belongs more to native Dutch than to immigrant minorities, because native Dutch were here first’) and attitudes toward Muslim expressive rights (e.g., ‘Muslims should be allowed to build mosques’, ‘… found Islamic schools’). Trait-level national nostalgia was positively associated with autochthony beliefs, which, in turn, predicted increased opposition to Muslim expressive rights. A larger follow-up study among a representative sample of the Dutch adult population (*N =* 933) replicated these findings.

Still, the implications of trait-level collective nostalgia need not be uniformly negative. A study among Australian participants from former Yugoslavia (*N* = 87) demonstrated that collective nostalgia can reduce outgroup derogation.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the wake of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, many Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs settled in Australia. Could collective nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia predict positive contact among these former enemies? Participants first completed a measure of identification with the superordinate group, Yugoslavia (e.g., ‘I identify strongly with the Yugoslavian people’). Next, they completed a measure of trait-level collective nostalgia that referred to Yugoslavia (e.g., ‘I get nostalgic when I think back of Yugoslavia in the past times’). Finally, they reported on their contact with Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The question read: ‘How often do you hang out with people from the following ethnic groups living in Australia? This can be at your work or study/school, as well as in your neighbourhood and in your free time.’ Identification with Yugoslavia predicted more intense collective nostalgia for Yugoslavia, which, in turn, predicted more contact with members of the three ethnic groups from former Yugoslavia.

5. Discussion

We used a 2 (personal vs. collective) × 2 (state vs. trait) taxonomy to categorise evidence pertaining to the link between nostalgia and populism. Transient, state-level personal nostalgia for experiences shared with an outgroup member has the potential to improve attitudes toward the entire outgroup. This beneficial effect of momentary personal nostalgia was demonstrated with regard to immigrants – an outgroup frequently vilified by populists. Stable, trait-level personal nostalgia also has positive implications for intergroup relations. Higher levels of dispositional personal nostalgia are associated with reduced prejudice, and this relation is mediated (i.e., accounted for) by increased concern with acting prejudicially. Personal nostalgia is antithetical to populism.

Collective, and especially national, nostalgia can conduce to ethnocentrism. Experimental evidence links state-level national nostalgia with increased preference for domestic (compared to foreign) consumer products. Higher levels of collective self-esteem mediate this effect of in-the-moment national nostalgia on consumer ethnocentrism. Correlational studies reveal that trait-level national nostalgia can be positively associated with outgroup derogation, and in particular with opposition to immigration and immigrant rights that is rooted in autochthony beliefs. Yet, collective nostalgia for a superordinate group can also unite former adversaries, as illustrated by Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats bonding over collective nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia. One way to counter the adverse implications of national nostalgia among populism-curious persons may be to frame cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity as a time-honoured national tradition.[[29]](#footnote-29) Political messages that convey liberal ideals with a past focus (vs. future focus) weaken conservatives’ opposition to liberal policies. German political opinion about the Syrian migration crisis is a case in point. Politically conservative Germans were more receptive to Syrian immigration when it was presented as an old phenomenon that dates back to the earliest days of German history (past focus) than when it was described as a recent phenomenon that presents new opportunities to forge connections between Germans and Syrians (future focus).[[30]](#footnote-30) Finally, conservatives are not the sole purveyors of collective nostalgia; liberals also long for aspects of their nation’s past. But whereas conservatives hark back to a time when their nation was (ostensibly) more homogeneous, liberals fondly evoke a time when the nation was more open to different cultures and traditions.[[31]](#footnote-31) Going forward, then, achieving a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relation between nostalgia and populism will be crucial for bridging political divides.

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