**The Psychological, Social, and Societal Relevance of Nostalgia**

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**Abstract**

Research on nostalgia has grown exponentially. This special issue features 27 articles that sketch out the relevant literature. The articles are arranged under five themes: Archaeological, historical, and sociological perspectives; the fundamentals of the emotion; psychological functions of nostalgia; varieties of nostalgia; and the social and societal significance of nostalgia. The introduction provides an overview of the content of the five themes.

*Keywords*: nostalgia; emotion; nostalgia functions

**Introduction**

Nostalgia has a turbulent history. Despite its prominence in Homer’s Odyssey, the emotion has been neglected or regarded as a malaise. In the last couple of decades, though, nostalgia is experiencing a renaissance. Interdisciplinary scholarship points to its prevalence, potency, and benefits as well as liabilities.

Nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, is a complex, bittersweet, identity-based, and social emotion with existential undertones [1,2]. It links the past with the present and future, and confers numerous psychological gains at the individual or relational level, but can be a double-edged sword at the collective level [3,4]. In this special issue, 27 essays from leading scholars representing a variety of disciplines paint a comprehensive, vivid, and up-to-date portrait of this essential human emotion, highlighting its psychological, social, and societal relevance. The special issue is divided into five parts: (1) Archaeological, historical, and sociological perspectives, (2) The fundamentals of the emotion, (3) Psychological functions of nostalgia, (4) Varieties of nostalgia, and (5) The social and societal significance of nostalgia.

**Archeological, Historical, and Sociological Perspectives**

Nostalgia has a prehistory, a thesis that Knight [5] endorses on the basis of the archeological record. People living in Europe, Mediterranean, and elsewhere were interested in their own past, and sought to revive it by reusing or reappropriating older artefacts or settlements of importance. These materials or places had affective qualities similar to nostalgia—qualities that facilitated a connection with the past. For example, ancient people retained and curated heirlooms, perhaps as a way to nurture valued memories.

Nostalgia’s history originated in 1688, when a medical student at the University of Basel, Johannes Hofer, wrote his dissertation on the topic. He coined the term by combining the Greek words “nostos” and “algos,” equating nostalgia with suffering caused by yearning for a return to one’s homeland. Dodman [6] traces the history of this “protean emotion” from a psychological liability (i.e., homesickness) to a psychological resource.

Nostalgia has captured the interest of not only archeologists and historians, but also sociologists. Jacobsen [7] provides examples of contemporary sociological foci. These include links of nostalgia with identity, cultural loss, and social change.

**The Fundamentals of the Emotion**

How is nostalgia measured? Wildschut and Sedikides [8] review the four most popular scales of trait nostalgia: Nostalgia Inventory, Southampton Nostalgia Scale, Nostalgia Prototype Scale, and Personal Inventory of Nostalgic Experiences. The scales are adequately described in a one-factor model across participants from two cultures (China and USA). Stated otherwise, the four scales capture the vital elements of the construct nostalgia. More accurate measurement of the emotion will be achieved by controlling for confounders or other ways in which people habitually reflect on their past (e.g., brooding; [9,10,11]).

Yang et al. [12] summarize a cognitive neuroscience approach to the study of nostalgia. They document that nostalgia implicates brain regions underlying emotion regulation, reward processing, self-reflection, and autobiographical memory. Further, nostalgia buffers against threat by modulating brain region activities involved in emotion regulation and reward processing. These insights have clinical relevance.

Van Tilburg [13] seeks to position nostalgia among other emotions. Nostalgia emerges comparatively as approach-oriented and social. It is also related both to loss and love, or as a bridge from loss to love. Leunissen [14] similarly zeros in on the structure of nostalgia. He reviews evidence (prototype-based, cross-sectional, experimental) on its bittersweet character. He concludes that nostalgia is more sweet than bitter—a joy tinged with yearning.

**Psychological Functions of Nostalgia**

What is nostalgia for? Sedikides and Wildschut [15] argue that nostalgia has motivational relevance. For example, by being approach-oriented, it increases optimism and inspiration, nourishes one’s authentic self, galvanizes goal-pursuit, and precipitates changes to unwanted (e.g., addictive) behavior. Nostalgia may be past-directed, but it entails implications for one’s future.

Nostalgia is also a deeply social emotion, as Juhl and Biskas [16] articulate. For example, nostalgic narratives reflect close others or events in which the narrator is surrounded by close others. Further, nostalgia strengthens social connectedness, a sense of belongingness, acceptance, and social support. In addition, nostalgia engenders interpersonal consequences. It raises empathy, increases the pursuit of relational goals and prosocial behavior, and empowers the individual to seek help from others when needed.

Moreover, nostalgia is imbued with meaning: Nostalgic events typically comprise momentous events from one’s life. As Abeyta and Pillarisetty [17] show, nostalgia promotes meaning in life, often by increasing social connectedness. Also, nostalgia sustains or restores meaning in life by safeguarding against existential threat [18,19]. By bolstering meaning, nostalgia contributes to psychological well-being.

Hepper and Dennis [20] address more directly the relation between nostalgia and psychological well-being (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction). This relation is positive in a variety of contexts. Further, nostalgia augments eudaimonic wellbeing (e.g., vitality, environmental mastery, positive relationships). Also, nostalgia counteracts threats both to psychological well-being and eudaimonic wellbeing, as recent research on its role during the pandemic indicates.

The psychological well-being benefits of nostalgia invite an intervention approach to which Layous and Kurtz [21] turn. They discuss, for example, an intervention in which nostalgia (vs. control) was induced weekly for six week. Well-being was assessed at baseline, mid-intervention (after three weeks), immediately post-intervention, and one month post-intervention. At mid-intervention, nostalgic (vs. control) participants reported higher positive affect, satisfaction with life, and eudaimonic well-being, and reported lower negative affect. However, these well-being benefits did not persist at the two post-intervention points. The authors consider mechanisms through which nostalgia enhances well-being and boundaries of this effect.

Is nostalgia beneficial for physical health? Kersten and Cox [22] answer the question in the affirmative. They demonstrate that nostalgia cultivates positive attitudes toward physical health, intensifies physical activity, augments healthy nutrition decisions, weakens behaviors that put one’s health at risk, and lessens physical distress. The authors discuss the need to assess nostalgia’s potential for the long-term promotion of physical health.

Zou and Petkanopoulou [23] highlight a broader function of the emotion, that of acculturation. For example, nostalgia conduces to higher self-continuity (a sense of connection between one’s past and present) among immigrants and sojourners who move between cultures, facilitating acculturation. Nostalgia for one’s host-culture also aids acculturation of immigrants of sojourners.

**Varieties of Nostalgia**

The experience of nostalgia can be tethered to varying stimuli or contexts. Green et al. [24] focus on scent and taste as elicitors of the emotion (the Proust Effect). Accompanying memories are self-relevant, intense, and particularly positive. Nostalgia evoked by scents or tastes confers psychological functions, such as social connectedness, meaning in life, and self-esteem.

Batcho [25] emphasizes nostalgia generated by reading literature and memoir. Such nostalgia is likewise associated with higher social connectedness, meaning in life, and self-esteem. However, reflecting a richer diversity of life experiences, such nostalgia also plays a role in conflict resolution and coping with loss or change.

Cheung [26] is concerned with anticipated nostalgia, the expectation that one will feel nostalgic for upcoming life events when looking back on them. Anticipated nostalgia can be elicited by a variety of triggers, most frequent of which are interpersonal relationships (e.g., loved one) and meaningful social interactions (e.g., playing with children and imagining them growing up). Anticipated nostalgia is associated with savoring the present. Moreover, anticipated nostalgia about an important life transition (e.g., graduation) predicts nostalgia a few months later, which in turn conduces to social connectedness, meaning in life, and self-esteem.

Fetterman and Evans [27] focus on romantic nostalgia, that is, nostalgia for experiences shared with one’s romantic partner. Romantic nostalgia imparts relational benefits. Examples include closeness, commitment, and satisfaction.

Lastly, Wohl et al. [28] survey collective nostalgia, namely, nostalgia for the past of one’s group (including one’s nation). Collective nostalgia is often instigated when people perceive a discontinuity between the group’s past and present. Collective nostalgia can play a homeostatic role by cementing social identity or mobilizing a return to what is seen as the group’s authentic past. However, there are several, if not many, historical or political pasts. As such, the content of collective nostalgia determines the type of social identity that will be cemented or the kind of mobilization that will occur.

**The Social and Societal Significance of Nostalgia**

Articles in the final section of the special issue consider the role of nostalgia beyond psychology and in the social or societal realm. Weingarten and Wei [29] link nostalgia with consumer behavior. Nostalgia is heavily implicated in advertising, improves product attitudes, and increases consumption of goods. Nostalgia’s inherent sociality, or generated social connectedness, is in part responsible for its influence on consumer behavior.

Bowman and Wulf [30] address video game nostalgia. People in their 30s experience such nostalgia, and this drives their behavior in playing video games with their children. Game-evoked nostalgia benefits psychological well-being. Niemeyer and Siebert [31] similarly address media nostalgia—media as a referent of nostalgia and a platform for the expression of it. Media have played a healing role during the pandemic by reinforcing the emotion.

Nostalgia is also relevant in organizational life. Van Dijke and Leunissen [32] appraise the impact of nostalgia on organizational outcomes. Nostalgia is elicited in the presence of organizational threats (e.g., change, injustice) and subsequently counteracts the negative consequences of threats. For example, nostalgia strengthens organizational identification and elevates work meaningfulness.

In addition, nostalgia is advantageous for intergroup relations. Specifically, as Turner and Stathi [33] emphasize, nostalgia promotes intergroup contact. By becoming nostalgia about a prior interaction with a member of a minority or marginalized group (e.g., people with mental health conditions, people who are overweight, older adults), an individual comes to develop favorable attitudes toward that group and a willingness to interact with new members of the group. The authors discuss mechanisms that account for the beneficial role of nostalgia, such as incorporating the interactant outgroup member into one’s self-concept and reducing intergroup anxiety, and call for interventions. Furthermore, nostalgia, personal or collective, is relevant to political preferences, as Lammers [34] contends. The emotion stirs individuals in the directions of their pre-existing ideologies. For example, when nostalgic, liberals express nostalgia for a more progressive time, whereas conservatives express nostalgia for a more traditional time.

Sports, leisure, and tourism are additional domains in which nostalgia is effective. As Cho [35] indicates, in terms of sports and leisure, nostalgia can be a marketing tool, can act as a buffer against the psychological impact of unfavorable events, can contribute to psychological well-being, and can stir profitable behavior. As Wang [36] describes, in terms of tourism—be it heritage, sport, film, or contemporary—nostalgia for a visited place can motivate revisiting.

**Conclusion**

Nostalgia has come of age. Advances across disciplines have established it in the pantheon of emotions, and have documented its psychological, behavioral, social, and societal value. We hope that this special issue serves as an impetus for novel research paths and exciting findings.

**Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest on relation to contents of this article.

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