



Induced nostalgia increases optimism (via social-connectedness and self-esteem) among individuals high, but not low, in trait nostalgia[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, is not merely a past-oriented emotion, but has implications for the future. Experimentally induced nostalgia fosters optimism by increasing social-connectedness (a sense of acceptance and belongingness) and self-esteem. Do these effects depend on trait nostalgia (i.e., proneness to nostalgic engagement)? Consistent with past research, induced nostalgia fostered optimism, and this effect was mediated by social-connectedness and self-esteem. More important, these effects uniquely applied to participants who were high, but not low, on trait nostalgia. That is, induced nostalgia (vs. control) was indirectly linked to heightened optimism through social-connectedness and self-esteem, for nostalgia prone individuals. Proneness to nostalgic engagement, when coupled with momentary nostalgia, confers benefits, not only in terms of greater social-connectedness and self-esteem, but also in terms of higher optimism.

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1. Introduction

Nostalgia is “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (Pearsal, 1998, p. 1266). Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2012; see also Hepper et al., 2014) examined laypersons' conceptions of nostalgia using a prototype approach, which identifies features related to the construct of interest (Rosch, 1973). They found that laypersons conceptualize nostalgia as an emotion that refers to fond recollections of events involving one's childhood or important others (e.g., family members, partners, friends). These meaningful recollections are predominantly positive, albeit with tinges of sadness or longing. Indeed, recollections of nostalgic events usually, but not always, raise positive affect (PA). Such recollections rarely have a significant impact on negative affect (NA) and, when they do, the direction of the effect varies (Sedikides et al., 2015).

Nostalgia is not merely a past-oriented emotion. It has implications for the future. In particular, nostalgia entails psychological growth. For example, in their nostalgic narratives, participants list words that denote growth (i.e., change, desire, future; Hepper et al., 2012). Furthermore, nostalgia is associated with, and gives rise to, an approach motivational orientation (Stephan et al., 2014). Finally, nostalgic (vs. control) participants report growth-related self-perceptions (e.g., curiosity, inclination toward new experiences) and growth-related behavioral intentions

(i.e., engagement in novel or self-expansive activities; Baldwin & Landau, 2014), show greater inspiration (Stephan et al., 2015), and manifest higher creativity (Van Tilburg, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2015).

Another future-related implication of nostalgia involves optimism. Optimism is beneficially associated with a host of psychological wellbeing outcomes (e.g., proactive coping, educational attainment, fulfilling interpersonal relationships; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010) and physical wellbeing outcomes (e.g., immune system, pain, cancer; Rasmussen, Scheier, & Greenhouse, 2009) across cultures (Gallagher, Lopez, & Pressman, 2013). Such findings have spurred forays into the genetic (Mosing, Zietsch, Shekar, Wright, & Martin, 2009) or developmental (Ek, Remes, & Sovio, 2004) origins of optimism and optimism interventions (Fosnaugh, Geers, & Wellman, 2009).

Cheung et al. (2013) contributed to this literature by focusing on a state-level antecedent of optimism, nostalgia. They (Studies 2–4) demonstrated that experimentally induced nostalgia enhances optimism. Moreover, they (Study 4) proposed two mechanisms through which nostalgia fosters optimism: social-connectedness and self-esteem. Each step of this extended mediational chain (induced nostalgia ⇒ social-connectedness ⇒ self-esteem ⇒ optimism) had received direct or indirect support. Nostalgia augments social-connectedness (Hepper et al., 2012; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Also, theories (contingencies of self-worth: Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; sociometer: Leary, 2005; terror-management: Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) and pertinent evidence identify social-connectedness as a basis for self-esteem. Moreover, self-esteem is positively associated with optimism (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000). Cheung et al. (Study 4) indeed found that nostalgia elicited social-connectedness, which lifted

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self-esteem, which subsequently raised optimism. This extended mediational chain outperformed alternative models that involved optimism being placed in different parts of the chain or self-esteem preceding social-connectedness. Relatedly, PA did not mediate the effect of nostalgia on optimism, and nostalgia increased optimism via social-connectedness and self-esteem above and beyond PA (Studies 1–4). Nevertheless, the extended mediational sequence model has been reported only once and is in need for replication. This is one objective of the current article. Its main objective, though, is to test whether this mediational chain is moderated by trait nostalgia.

2. Trait nostalgia as a moderator

Nostalgia proneness entails mental travel back in time. Individuals prone to nostalgia (i.e., high on trait nostalgia) are “frequent travelers,” and thus more proficient at reaping the psychological benefits (e.g., social-connectedness, self-esteem, optimism) of induced nostalgia.

This proposition is consistent with the view that individuals who possess a trait are sensitive to situational cues that encourage expression of trait-relevant behaviors. For example, extraverts exhibit more extraverted behaviors at certain time of the day and when the number of surrounding others increases (Fleeson, 2001). Further, conscientious individuals are more likely to display conscientious behaviors (e.g., being organized, hardworking, and responsible) when a deadline is approaching, the relevant situation is structured, and the task is uninteresting or entails obligation fulfillment (Fleeson, 2007). Stated otherwise, traits do not necessarily predict well a particular behavior, as individuals in possession of a trait can behave in a way that is consistent with both high and low levels of that trait. Instead, the predictability of a trait increases in reference to aggregation of multiple occasions (Fleeson, 2004), especially ones preceded by cues likely to activate it. Accordingly, high trait nostalgia will influence occasions or outcomes (e.g., social-connectedness, self-esteem, optimism and, more important, the mediational sequence) in the presence of a situational cue or trigger that precedes those outcomes; this trigger is induced nostalgia.

We hypothesized that trait nostalgia would magnify the effect of induced nostalgia, such that this effect upon social-connectedness, self-esteem, and optimism would be more pronounced among individuals high (than low) on trait nostalgia. Similarly, we hypothesized that the effect of induced nostalgia on optimism via the sequential path from social-connectedness to self-esteem would be more pronounced among individuals high (than low) on trait nostalgia.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and design

We tested 448 participants (247 women, 198 men). Sixty of them were University of X undergraduates, who completed the study in the laboratory. The rest (388) were US residents recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and Crowdfunder. MTurk workers had a job acceptance rate record of 95% or above, and Crowdfunder workers had the highest quality rating. In total, 652 workers responded to the study's advertisement, but we included in the analysis only those who completed the survey in full (184 MTurk workers, 204 Crowdfunder workers). We specified the settings in our recruitment procedures such that each worker could only complete the survey once. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 75 years ($M = 19.37$, $SD = 1.47$). Three participants omitted gender and age information. We randomly assigned participants to the nostalgia ($N = 232$) and control ($N = 216$) conditions.

3.2. Procedure

We induced nostalgia with the Event Reflection Task (Sedikides et al., 2015). In the nostalgia condition, participants read that nostalgia is defined as: “sentimental longing for one's past or as feeling sentimental

for a fond and valued memory from one's personal past (e.g., childhood, close relationships, momentous events).” Next, they were instructed to “...think of a nostalgic event in your life. Specifically, try to think of a past event that makes you feel most nostalgic. Bring this nostalgic experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the nostalgic experience for a couple of minutes and think about how it makes you feel.” Participants in the control (i.e., ordinary autobiographical) condition were instructed to “...think of an ordinary event in your life. Specifically, try to think of a past event that is ordinary, normal, and everyday. Bring this ordinary experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the ordinary experience for a couple of minutes and think about how it makes you feel.”

Next, all participants listed four keywords summarizing the pertinent event, and spent a few minutes describing the event. Finally, they responded to a 3-item manipulation check (Wildschut et al., 2006; e.g., “Right now, I am feeling quite nostalgic”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .98$, $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.55$).

3.2.1. Dependent measures

Participants completed measures of PA (Stephan, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012), NA (Stephan et al., 2012), social-connectedness (Hepper et al., 2012), self-esteem (Hepper et al., 2012), and optimism (Cheung et al., 2013), all preceded by the stem “Now that I have this event in mind, I feel...” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). The PA measure comprised five items: happy, excited, enthusiastic, calm, relaxed ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.11$). The NA measure also comprised five items: sad, anxious, fearful, bored, tired ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.02$). The social-connectedness measure comprised four items: connected to loved ones, protected, loved, I can trust others ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.40$). The self-esteem measure consisted of four items: good about myself, I like myself better, I value myself more, I have many positive qualities ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.22$). Finally, the optimism measure also featured four items: optimistic about my future, like the sky is the limit, hopeful about my future, and ready to take on new challenges ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.28$).

Lastly, participants completed a trait nostalgia inventory, the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Barrett et al., 2010; Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008). They responded to seven items reflecting nostalgia proneness (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; e.g., “How often do you experience nostalgia”). We aggregated responses to form a trait nostalgia index ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.13$).

4. Results

The results were unqualified by age or gender, and we excluded these variables from subsequent analyses.

4.1. Trait nostalgia

We ascertained that the nostalgia manipulation did not influence trait nostalgia.

Participants in the nostalgia ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.14$) and control ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.12$) conditions reported equivalent levels of trait nostalgia, $F(1, 446) = 0.73$, $p = .39$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$.

4.2. Manipulation check

To examine whether induced nostalgia elicited more state nostalgia, and whether this effect was contingent on trait nostalgia, we carried out a moderation analysis using Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013; model 1). As intended, induced nostalgia elevated state nostalgia, $\beta = 1.641$, $SE = .114$, $t(444) = 14.404$, $p < .001$. Also, trait nostalgia was positively associated with state nostalgia, $\beta = 0.435$, $SE = .050$, $t(444) = 8.663$, $p < .001$. The Induced Nostalgia \times Trait Nostalgia interaction was not significant, $\beta = -0.132$, $SE = .101$, $t(444) = -1.313$, $p = .190$. Induced nostalgia elevated nostalgia among participants high and low on trait nostalgia to an equivalent degree. The manipulation was effective.

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