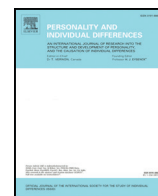




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The influence of personality and coping style on the affective outcomes of nostalgia: Is nostalgia a healthy coping mechanism or rumination?

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ABSTRACT

Nostalgia is often described as a 'bittersweet' emotional experience. Scholars have argued persuasively as to its function as a means of coping with loneliness, meaninglessness and a negative mood, and its relationship with adaptive strategies for coping with adverse events or affective states. However, depression is strongly associated with rumination and a negative attentional bias. Previous research has not investigated the possibility that people with impaired capacities to effectively regulate moods, such as people with strong tendencies to rumination, may not obtain the same benefits from nostalgic remembering as more healthy people. This paper reports the results of two studies: a preliminary survey involving 213 participants and a second study in which 664 participants self-selected a piece of music that made them feel nostalgic. Results suggest that for people with tendencies to depression or maladaptive coping styles, nostalgic remembering may result in negative affective outcomes. It is argued that nostalgia can represent part of both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, depending on the personality and coping style of the individual.

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1. Introduction

Nostalgia is a frequent experience in all cultures in young and old (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). It is typically a bitter-sweet experience (Barrett et al., 2010), involving both a sense of loss and longing for the past, as well as happiness in recalling positive memories (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012). Nostalgia can be triggered by feelings of loneliness and negative mood (Wildschut et al., 2006), a sense of meaninglessness (Routledge et al., 2011) and existential threat (Juhl, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010), suggesting that it is a resource that is accessed as a psychological buffer in times of distress. In fact, nostalgia has been shown to be positively correlated with adaptive coping strategies such as seeking emotional support and turning to religion (Batcho, 2013). Experimental studies have also demonstrated that engaging in nostalgic remembering increases positive affect and positive self-regard, heightens interpersonal connectivity (Wildschut et al., 2006) and results in a higher sense of personal meaning (Routledge et al., 2011).

However, a distinction must be made between the use of nostalgia as a healthy coping mechanism and its effects in people with impaired capacities to regulate affect. Nostalgia-proneness has been found to be correlated with Neuroticism from the Big Five Personality Index (Barrett et al., 2010), a trait generally associated with a range of mental health disorders (Omel et al., 2013). In complicated grief, obsession

with loss of the idealized past worsens depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994). An over-obsession with the past may also result in negative outcomes for migrants, leading to a failure to adjust to new surroundings, increased feelings of isolation, and other threats to psychological well-being (Lijtmaer, 2001; Zinchenko, 2011).

Other studies similarly report differing outcomes of nostalgia. Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, and Arndt (2010), for example, found that nostalgia enabled a sense of self-continuity for happy but not unhappy persons. They thus argue that "when happiness is low, engaging in nostalgic reverie about the past may make the present seem particularly bleak by comparison" (p. 234). Verplanken (2012) observed that even though nostalgia initially resulted in an increase in positive affect, it ultimately increased anxiety and depression in habitual worriers. Other individual differences in the outcomes of nostalgic remembering have also been reported (Hart et al., 2011; Iyer & Jetten, 2011).

These studies suggest that despite the potential psychological functions nostalgia can fill, it does not have a wholesale positive effect. Barrett et al. (2010) therefore proposed two distinctive nostalgia-prone personality profiles: the brooding, neurotic ruminator, and the individual whose thoughts about the past are more motivated by curiosity and wonder. These archetypes closely correspond to the two types of private self-attention described by Trapnell and Campbell (1999): rumination and reflectiveness, a distinction proposed as a solution to the 'self-absorption paradox': the fact that self-reflection can be both a healthy, adaptive behavior, and can be associated with neuroticism, depression and poor self-esteem. This seems to be a similar paradox to that found in the literature relating to nostalgia.

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Rumination is an involuntary focus on negative and pessimistic thoughts (Joorman, 2005). It is strongly predictive of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) and involves an attentional bias towards negative stimuli (Gotlib, Krasnoperova, Neubauer Yue, & Joormann, 2004), and a diminished motivation to do things that would reduce dysphoria and improve mood (Forbes & Dahl, 2005). Reflection, on the other hand, is a form of self-analysis that is highly adaptive and psychologically healthy. If nostalgia can be both adaptive and maladaptive depending on the individual's personality, thinking patterns and perspective, the distinction between rumination and reflection may be an effective way of further unraveling the 'bittersweet' effect of nostalgia. The aim of the studies reported herein is to contribute to an understanding of the psychological benefits (or otherwise) of nostalgia, by testing the relationship between nostalgia and coping styles such as rumination and reflection.

2. Study 1

This study was designed to firstly confirm whether a relationship exists between nostalgia and rumination since previous studies have not investigated this, and to further explore whether the relationship between nostalgia and depression could be mediated by rumination.

2.1. Hypotheses

H1. Rumination would be correlated with measures of Nostalgia Proneness

H2. The relationship between Depression and Nostalgia Proneness would be mediated by Rumination.

2.2. Methods

2.2.1. Participants

Two-hundred-and-thirteen undergraduate students from a university in Australia were given course credits for participation. Mean age of participants was 21.5 years, including 85 males and 128 females.

2.2.2. Procedures

Participants completed an online survey consisting of three demographic questions and four question blocks with items grouped according to the scales described below.

2.2.3. Measures

Nostalgia was measured using the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (SNS, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008) and Batcho's Nostalgia Inventory BNI (1995). The SNS asks participants to answer five questions relating to the frequency with which they experience nostalgia. Routledge et al. (2008) reported a reliability co-efficient of 0.92. In the current study a reliability coefficient of 0.74 was obtained (Cronbach's α). The BNI, on the other hand, measures the extent to which people miss things from when they were younger, rating 20 items on a 9-point scale (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). The scale is reported to have a split-half reliability of 0.78 and test-retest reliability over a 1-week interval of 0.84 (Batcho, 1995), and in the current study obtained a reliability co-efficient of 0.89 (Cronbach's α).

The Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999), a 24-item questionnaire with reported internal consistency confirmed in the current study of 0.91 (Cronbach's α), was also used. Questions were answered using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI, Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961), a widely used scale to assess depression in both clinical and normative populations, was also included. A meta-analysis of reported internal consistency of the scale in

studies over a 25 year period revealed a mean coefficient alpha of 0.81 for non-clinical populations (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). In the current study a reliability coefficient of 0.86 was returned (Cronbach's α).

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Correlation analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test for correlations between nostalgia, depression, rumination and reflection (Table 1). Rumination was correlated with both measures of nostalgia and with depression (BDI). While the BNI was strongly correlated with BDI, the SNS was not, suggesting that missing the past is more closely related to depression than is the frequency of nostalgic experiences. The SNS was correlated with reflectiveness, but the effect size was small.

2.3.2. Mediation model

To test whether the relationship between nostalgia and rumination was mediated by rumination, bootstrapping methods outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2004), were used to test the model proposed in Fig. 1. Results based on 5000 bootstrapped samples confirmed the role of rumination in the relationship between nostalgia and depression, with an unstandardized indirect effect of $B = 0.68$ CI 0.33 to 1.21 ($p < 0.05$). The direct effect of nostalgia on depression, while still significant ($B = 1.26$, $t(179) = 2.5$, $p = 0.01$), dropped when controlling for rumination, indicating partial mediation.

2.4. Discussion

These results demonstrate that the relationship between nostalgia-proneness and depression is partially mediated by rumination. While the analyses performed do not confirm a causal relationship, it illuminates the possibility that people with ruminative tendencies may tend to focus more on negative memories from the past, view the past in a more negative light, or compare the past more unfavorably with the present, thinking patterns that could conceivably exacerbate a depressed mood. This is in harmony with studies demonstrating that rumination is associated with negatively biased memory recall (Lyubomirsky, Caldwell, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998), and a general tendency to interpret other stimuli as negative (Raes, Hermans, & Williams, 2006).

3. Study 2

The results of the previous study suggested that rumination is involved in the relationship between nostalgia and depression. However, whether or not nostalgia functions so as to improve mood or to worsen it in the case of ruminators remains unclear. While previous studies have found that nostalgic remembering generally has positive affective results, it is possible that the bias towards negative thoughts inherent in rumination may lead to negative affective outcomes. Thus the second study aimed to investigate whether the affective outcome of nostalgia differed depending on rumination scores.

Given the evident relationship between rumination and nostalgia, it was also thought likely that other coping styles may be involved in how

Table 1
Pearson correlations between predictor variables in Study 1.

	Depression (BDI)	BNI	SNS
Rumination	0.402**	0.266**	0.283**
Reflectiveness	0.079	−0.043	0.169*
Depression (BDI)		0.317**	0.157*
BNI			0.341**
SNS			

Note:

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

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