



The mnemonic muse: Nostalgia fosters creativity through openness to experience [☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the effect of nostalgia on creativity.
- Four experiments show that nostalgia increased creativity.
- The effect of nostalgia emerged above and beyond general positive affect.
- The effect of nostalgia on creativity was mediated by openness to experience.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2014

Revised 29 January 2015

Available online 12 February 2015

Keywords:

Nostalgia

Creativity

Openness to experience

Memory

Emotion

ABSTRACT

We proposed and tested the hypothesis that nostalgia fosters creativity. In Experiments 1 and 2, we examined whether nostalgia increases creativity. Nostalgia, relative to control, sparked creative prose in a writing task. We proceeded to test the mediating role of openness to experience. As hypothesized, openness to experience emerged as a plausible mediator of nostalgia's positive influence on creativity in Experiment 3. Finally, in Experiment 4, nostalgia, mediated by openness, boosted creativity above and beyond positive affect. The findings showcase the relevance of nostalgic reverie for the present and future, and establish nostalgia as a force of creative endeavors.

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Nostalgia, 'a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past' (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998), has been linked to creativity. Nearly 3000 years ago, Homer famously crafted the epic poem about Odysseus, whose nostalgic yearning for homeland and family fueled his conquests over temptations and monstrosities (Homer, 1921). The Romantic Movement included nostalgic art (Austin, 2003), as expressed in fiction (e.g., Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Hudspith, 2004) and poetry (e.g., William Wordsworth; Goodman, 2008). Contemporary creative culture prominently features nostalgia. Examples are the 1978 film *Grease* (Flinn, 1992), the 1980s "retro" movement (Cook, 2009), the television series *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993), and *That 70s Show* (1998–2006; Marchegiani & Phau, 2013).

The cultural association of nostalgia with the aforementioned creative works may suggest that nostalgia is a conservative, traditionalist sentiment. After all, authors have argued that nostalgia takes people back to a glorified past (Flinn, 1992). Such an impression, however, would be

largely unwarranted. Rather, nostalgia impacts on the present and on the future (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Sedikides et al., 2015). For example, nostalgia triggers self-regulatory strivings to cope with discomfort (e.g., loneliness; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008), increases empathy (Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Shi, & Feng, 2012), breeds inspiration (Stephan et al., 2015), and raises optimism (Cheung et al., 2013). In all, nostalgia harnesses the past for engaging with the present and future. Consistent with this view, we hypothesize that nostalgia fosters creativity and influences creative expression. We begin by reviewing the literatures on creativity and nostalgia.

Creativity

In order to qualify as creative, ideas or behaviors need to be both original and useful (Feist, 1998). Thus, creativity involves a utilitarian contribution and not just an unorthodox one, and in that way can be distinguished from mere originality or divergent thinking. The quality and frequency of creativity are a function of both individual differences and situations (Feldhusen & Goh, 1995; Sternberg, 1999; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2014). Established assessments of creativity range from personality measurement (Gough, 1979) and self-report indices (Ivencin, 2007) to

[☆] We thank Kate Costello, Michelle L. Ingram, and Annemieke J. M. van den Tol for their assistance with data collection.

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evaluation of written prose (Proulx, 2012; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012; Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, Fryer, & Ryan, 2010) and analysis of drawn aliens' characteristics (Ward, 1994). On the societal level, creativity thrives within pluralistic cultural environments (Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008; Simonton, 1997) whose members are open to experience (Leung & Chiu, 2010).

Creativity enjoys a celebrated status within psychology. As stated by Simonton (2000), "Creativity is among the most important and pervasive of all human activities" (p. 151). The benefits of creativity have been documented in settings such as organizational innovation (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996), technological progression (Mokyr, 1990), and problem-solving (Friedman & Förster, 2005). Indeed, researchers (Sternberg, 1999; Sternberg & Lubart, 1995) have advocated the promotion of creativity at the individual and societal level. Taken together, creativity occupies a prominent place in psychology and is a catalyst of scientific, economic, and cultural advancement (Chikszentmihalyi, 1999). Creativity does not merely involve the future, it contributes to a *valuable* future.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia has a turbulent past. It was historically regarded a brain mal-function, psychiatric disorder, or variant of depression (for a review, see Sedikides et al. (2015)). Following due empirical scrutiny, the last decade has witnessed an overhaul in scholarly understanding of this emotion.

Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2012) adopted a prototype approach in their examination of lay conceptualizations of nostalgia. They found that the prototypical experience of nostalgia is bittersweet: it contains both pleasant and unpleasant features, albeit the former overshadow the latter (see also: Abeyta, Routledge, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2014)). Nostalgia entails fond evocation of momentous events in which the self and significant others occupy central roles—evocations that are often characterized by redemptive narratives where one conquers adversity (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Moreover, nostalgia is experienced across the lifespan (Hepper, Robertson, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Routledge, 2014) and can be prompted by a range of stimuli, including guided narratives (Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, & Cordaro, 2010; Wildschut et al., 2006), music or song lyrics (Cheung et al., 2013; Routledge et al., 2011), and scents (Reid, Green, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2014). In all, nostalgia is a common, self-relevant, predominantly positive, and social emotion that is experienced by people of all ages and cultures (Hepper et al., 2014).

Nostalgia exerts a profound influence on the present and the future. For example, chronically or in-the-moment lonely individuals evoke nostalgia to strengthen their social connectedness (a sense of belongingness or acceptance; Zhou et al., 2008). Also, nostalgia increases empathy towards needy strangers (Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Shi, & Feng, 2012). Moreover, nostalgic reverie makes life seem meaningful in the face of existential threat such as mortality salience (Juhl, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, Wildschut, 2010; Routledge et al., 2008) or boredom (Van Tilburg, Igou, & Sedikides, 2013), and it assuages physical coldness (Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Chen, & Vingerhoets, 2012). In addition to these self-regulatory benefits, nostalgia engenders an approach orientation (Stephan et al., 2014), inspiration (Stephan et al., 2015), and optimism (Cheung et al., 2013). But why would nostalgia foster creativity?

Nostalgia, creativity, and openness

Let us pose the question somewhat differently. If nostalgia fostered creativity, how would it do so? We postulate that nostalgia's impact on creativity is rooted in the openness to experience (henceforth: openness) that nostalgia promotes. According to McCrae (1987), openness entails a variety of features that revolve around "an interest in varied experience for its own sake" (p. 1259). Openness is a core aspect of personality (McCrae & Sutin, 2009), encompassing such characteristics as

reflectiveness and inventiveness (McCrae, 1987; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Yet, openness is susceptible to context-dependent influences (Bergeman et al., 1993). One such influence, we submit, is nostalgia. It is the impact of nostalgia on openness that fosters creative behavior.

The literature is consistent with the proposition that nostalgic evocation begets openness. Nostalgia increases inspiration (Stephan et al., 2015), which is characterized by openness (Hart, 1998) and correlates with openness (Thrash & Elliot, 2003; see also McCrae (1987); McCrae and Sutin (2009)). Also, nostalgia facilitates the transition of avoidance motivation to approach motivation. As an example, Stephan et al. (2014) reported that behavioral inhibition is associated with nostalgia, which in turn leads to activation of the behavioral approach system. This transition may indicate that nostalgia builds the self-regulatory resources to transit from a guarded or restrained orientation to an exploratory or adventurous one, thus reflecting openness to engage with novelty. Research on the influence of nostalgia on optimism is consistent with this reasoning. Cheung et al. (2013) showed that nostalgia promotes self-regulatory resources (i.e., social connectedness, self-esteem), which in turn facilitate an optimistic outlook. Approach orientation and optimism are both associated with adopting less conservative standards and favoring riskier options in evaluating thoughts and behaviors (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Friedman & Förster, 2000, 2002), which are proclivities associated with openness (Hinze, Doster, & Joe, 1997; Nicholson, Soane, Fenton-O'Creedy, & Willman, 2005; Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2004). Together, these findings provide a basis for the hypothesis that nostalgia augments openness.

Openness, in turn, has been extensively linked to creative endeavors. A meta-analysis by Feist (1998) established that openness predicts creativity in both scientific and artistic contexts, and yields one of the largest predictive effects relative to neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. Hirsh and Peterson (2008) found that openness predicts higher scores on a self-report measure of creative accomplishments in several domains (e.g., visual arts, scientific enquiry, music) above and beyond other big-five personality factors. Silvia, Nusbaum, Berg, Martin, and O'Conner (2009) obtained positive correlations between openness and measures of everyday life creativity, creative achievements, and the extent to which individuals considered creativity to be part of their self-concepts. Extending these findings to a behavioral level of analysis, Miller and Tal (2007) demonstrated that openness predicts creativity in writing and drawing. In all, openness is an established predictor of creativity.

We examined, in four experiments, the hypothesized positive influence of nostalgia on creativity, and the proposed mediating role of openness. We started (Experiments 1–2) by testing whether nostalgic evocation propels creative behavior in the form of prose. Next, we probed the underlying process by testing whether nostalgia augments openness and whether openness mediates nostalgia's impact on creativity (Experiment 3). We concluded by testing whether nostalgia, as mediated by openness, promotes creativity above and beyond an affectively positive experience (Experiment 4).

Experiments 1 and 2: nostalgia facilitates creative prose

We investigated the facilitative role of nostalgia on creativity in the context of written stories. Subsequent to a nostalgia manipulation, we asked participants to compose prose. In Experiment 1, participants wrote about a princess, a racecar, and a cat. In Experiment 2, participants finished a story that sets out with a mysterious noise on a cold winter evening. Given their design and procedural similarity, we combine reporting of the two experiments for parsimony.¹

¹ In the combined sample (Experiments 1–2), we obtained a main effect of gender on creativity, $F(1, 164) = 3.929, p = .049, \eta^2 = .02$. Women ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.33$) wrote more creative stories than men ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.44$). We obtained no other significant main or interaction effects involving gender on the nostalgia manipulation check (Experiments 1–4), positive affect (Experiment 4), openness (Experiments 3–4), and creativity (Experiments 1–4).

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