

A blast from the past: The terror management function of nostalgia

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Abstract

According to terror management theory, people turn to meaning-providing structures to cope with the knowledge of inevitable mortality. Recent theory and research suggest that nostalgia is a meaning-providing resource and thus may serve such an existential function. The current research tests and supports this idea. In Experiments 1 and 2, nostalgia proneness was measured and mortality salience manipulated. In Experiment 1, when mortality was salient, the more prone to nostalgia participants were, the more they perceived life to be meaningful. In Experiment 2, when mortality was salient, the more prone to nostalgia participants were, the less death thoughts were accessible. In Experiment 3, nostalgia and mortality salience were manipulated. It was found that nostalgia buffered the effects of mortality salience on death-thought accessibility.

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The ability to think in terms of time, combined with other cognitive capacities, renders humans cognizant of the inescapable reality of their mortality (Becker, 1971; Routledge & Arndt, 2005). Interestingly, the same capacities that reveal people's transience may also facilitate their transcendence. Though temporal consciousness may be complicit in creating an awareness of death, this ability may also be deployed to protect oneself from the potential consequences of death-related cognition. Research derived from terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) has focused on a wide range of behaviors that reflect efforts to reinforce a sense of meaning in the face of the awareness of mortality (e.g., defense of cultural worldviews, self-esteem strivings, efforts to deny similarities to other animals, efforts to perceive the world as coherent and just; Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, *in press*), but has yet to explore the potential for people to reflect on past life experiences to affirm a sense of meaning in the present.

Recent theory and research examining the psychological landscape of nostalgia suggests that this experience might be an especially potent means of terror management. Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden (2004) proposed that nostalgic reverie provides a reservoir of meaningful life experiences to draw upon when facing existential threat. Accordingly, research indicates nostalgic reverie often revolves around momentous life events (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). However, while there are some suggestive findings, no research has yet examined the potential for nostalgia to provide a defense against an existential threat. The current investigation explores the extent to which nostalgia provides protection from threatening cognitions about death.

Nostalgia as terror management

TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986) focuses on how humans cope with the awareness of mortality and suggests that people buffer the potential for death-related anxiety by advocating cultural worldviews that imbue their life with meaning, by striving to attain and maintain feelings

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of self-worth, and by investing in personal relationships. Experiments have supported these theoretical postulates by demonstrating that (a) the activation of death thoughts (mortality salience; MS) increases defense of one's worldview, strivings to maintain self-esteem, as well as investment in close relationships, and (b) bolstering each of these structures either before or after MS attenuates further the need to deploy psychological defenses (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Despite the wide scope of the TMT literature, research has yet to consider whether the ability to reflect emotionally on the past facilitates efforts to defend against threats to the self, and in particular, the threat of death-awareness. This is a critical gap not just with regard to terror management, but in the social psychological literature more broadly (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006), given the pervasiveness of nostalgia (i.e., 80% of survey respondents report feeling nostalgic at least once a week; Wildschut et al., 2006).

The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) defines "nostalgia" as "a sentimental longing for the past." Drawing from this definition, a revitalization of interest in the construct has focused on its positive and self-relevant implications (Sedikides et al., 2004, 2006). From this perspective, nostalgia is a self-relevant emotional reflection on the past that serves four specific psychological functions. First, it serves as a repository of positive feelings. Wildschut et al. (2006) found that nostalgic accounts, reflected more positive than negative emotions, contained more desirable than undesirable features, and led to more positive than negative mood. Thus, although nostalgia can at times be bittersweet, it is principally a positive emotional experience. Second, nostalgia contributes to self-positivity. Wildschut et al. found that participants who brought to mind and wrote about a nostalgic experience reported higher self-esteem than control group participants. Third, nostalgia strengthens social connectedness. In Wildschut et al., participants who wrote about a nostalgic experience subsequently demonstrated a more secure adult attachment style than control group participants, as well as greater confidence with initiating interpersonal relationships.

Though these first three hypothesized functions have recently been empirically explored, a fourth function has also been proposed, but has not received direct empirical attention. Specifically, it has been asserted that nostalgia may provide perceptions of meaning in life that facilitate coping with existential concerns (Routledge & Arndt, 2005; Sedikides et al., 2004). Broadly consistent with this position, Wildschut et al. (2006) found the subject of nostalgia was often momentous and thus highly meaningful life events. However, while there are some suggestive findings, no research has directly examined the potential for nostalgia to serve an existential function. The present research explores this potential.

Experiment 1

We initially examined the possibility that nostalgia serves an existential function by testing whether nostalgic tendencies are related to perceptions of meaning in response to reminders of death. According to TMT, people seek meaning in life, in part, to manage insecurities related to mortality awareness. Indeed, as mentioned previously, MS increases investment in meaning-providing structures. Such reactions include not only the aforementioned investments in cultural beliefs and values, but also a preference for basic structure and meaningful representations (e.g., structured vs. abstract art; Landau et al., 2004). Presumably, then, reminders of mortality would undermine perceptions of meaning, thus motivating efforts to derive or restore meaning. If nostalgia serves a meaning-providing function, in the context of terror-management processes wherein meaning-relevant defenses are needed following reminders of mortality, higher levels of nostalgia should be associated with greater perceptions of meaning. To test this proposition, we measured the propensity to think positively about the past—as a proxy for nostalgia proneness—then induced MS, and assessed perceptions of meaning in life.

Method¹

Seventy-six individuals (54 female, 22 male) completed a packet of materials beginning with filler personality measures to bolster the cover story, and followed by 8 items from the Time Perspective Inventory (TPI; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). The complete TPI consists of 56 items measuring attitudes toward the past, present, and future. Here we were only interested in attitudes towards the past that would reflect nostalgia proneness, and thus a priori selected and administered a subset of 8 items ($\alpha = .71$) that had good face validity in terms of capturing the sentiment of nostalgia proneness (Appendix A). Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic of me*, 5 = *very characteristic of me*). Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) and Bryant, Smart, and King (2005) found that positive perceptions of the past predicted self-reported indices of psychological adjustment, such as increased well-being and decreased anxiety or depression.

Participants were then randomly assigned to the MS or dental pain manipulation (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). They responded to two open-ended questions: "Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you die and once you are physically dead." The control condition consisted of parallel

¹ Note that, in all experiments, participants (a) were Introductory Psychology students at a large Midwestern university, (b) completed all materials in groups of 1–4 as part of a purported study on the interrelations among personality characteristics, (c) were given identical instructions across conditions, and (d) were thoroughly debriefed. No gender effects were found in any experiment.

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