



Fighting the future with the past: Nostalgia buffers existential threat

Jacob Juhl^{a,*}, Clay Routledge^a, Jamie Arndt^b, Constantine Sedikides^c, Tim Wildschut^c

^aNorth Dakota State University, Department of Psychology, 115 Minard Hall, Fargo, ND 58108, USA

^bUniversity of Missouri–Columbia, Department of Psychology, 112 McAlester Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA

^cUniversity of Southampton, School of Psychology, Shackleton Building, SO17 1BJ, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 1 March 2010

Keywords:

Nostalgia
 Terror management theory
 Death anxiety
 Mortality salience

ABSTRACT

Three studies tested and supported the proposition that nostalgia buffers existential threat. All studies measured nostalgia proneness and manipulated death awareness (mortality salience; MS). In Study 1, at low, but not high, levels of nostalgia proneness, participants in the MS condition responded less positively to an identity threat than participants in the control condition. In Study 2, at low, but not high, levels of nostalgia proneness, participants in the MS condition evidenced greater levels of death anxiety than participants in the control condition. In Study 3, at high, but not low, levels of nostalgia proneness, participants in the MS condition indicated greater feelings of state nostalgia than participants in the control condition.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

“Everybody needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door. Saul Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970, p. 190)”.

Humans' highly evolved cognitive capacities for temporal thought are not only important for self-regulation, but for their survival. The capacity to think about the self in time allows people to reflect on past events, learn from them, and plan for the future (Becker, 1971; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). However, these same mental abilities facilitate an awareness of inescapable mortality and thus create the potential for debilitating anxiety about death (Becker, 1973; Kierkegaard, 1849/1989). Building on this premise, terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008) asserts that people are able to live with relative psychological equanimity in the face of this awareness through investing and maintaining faith in psychological structures (e.g., self-esteem, relationships, cultural worldviews) that buffer death anxiety by imbuing life with meaning, order, significance, and self-transcendence.

Considerable research supports these basic assertions of TMT. Much of this work proceeds from the *mortality salience hypothesis*. This hypothesis states that, if psychological structures buffer the consequences of mortality awareness, then experimentally heightening the awareness of death (mortality salience; MS) will result in elevated levels of investment in or defense of these buffering

structures. In support of this hypothesis, participants receiving MS inductions (e.g., writing about their own mortality, being primed with death-related imagery or words, standing in front of a funeral home, engaging in death-priming cancer screenings) relative to participants receiving other, non-death related, aversive control inductions (e.g., writing about a painful medical procedure, experiencing personal failure or uncertainty or social exclusion) show greater commitment to romantic relationships (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002), feelings of ingroup entitativity (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002), belief that one's collective self (e.g., group) will continue to exist long into the future (Sani, Herrera, & Bowe, 2009), and belief in God and divine intervention (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006).

Because people need to maintain faith in the beliefs and identifications that provide protection from deeply rooted concerns about mortality, the theory predicts that, when reminded of death, people will be more positive to that which supports their beliefs and identifications, and will be less positive or more negative toward that which threatens them. These effects, often referred to as *worldview defenses* in the terror management literature, have been found with respect to a variety of domains. For example, participants reminded of mortality (relative to a control topic) respond less favorably to essays criticizing their nationalistic and university identifications, both in their evaluations of the authors as well as in their willingness to engage in greater physical aggression towards them (McGregor et al., 1998; for a review see Greenberg et al., 2008). Further research has shown that these responses to MS serve to prevent death awareness from turning into death anxiety. Specifically, participants who received a placebo purported to avert the experience of future anxiety did not show the effects of MS described above (Greenberg et al., 2003). In sum,

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 701 231 8426.

E-mail address: jacob.juhl@ndsu.edu (J. Juhl).

when individuals are reminded that they are mortal and thus transient entities, they cling to the relationships, groups, and beliefs that imbue their lives with purpose, stability and permanence; and these responses prevent death cognition from turning into death anxiety.

Recently, it was postulated that nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, serves such an existential function (Routledge & Arndt, 2005; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). Although nostalgia was once regarded as a medical disease and a psychiatric disorder (Sedikides et al., 2004), this recent perspective indicates that nostalgia is a psychological strength, not a liability or pathology (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). From this perspective, nostalgia is a self-relevant, but highly social, and generally positive emotional reflection on the past that fulfils a number of psychological functions.

First, nostalgia is a source of positive affect. By analyzing the content of nostalgia narratives, Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, and Routledge (2006) found that nostalgic reverie was more positive than negative, and, when a nostalgic narrative contained negative elements, the narrative was typically redemptive (i.e., “a narrative pattern that progresses from a negative to a positive or triumphant life scene.”; pp. 978–979). Also, participants who wrote about a nostalgic event (compared to an ordinary event) manifested greater levels of positive affect, but no change in negative affect. Second, nostalgia bolsters the self-concept. Nostalgic narratives are not only self-relevant, but thinking about a nostalgic event (compared to an ordinary event) results in higher levels of state self-esteem and implicit self-positive associations, as well as lower levels of self-serving attributions after receiving negative performance feedback (Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010; Wildschut et al., 2006). Third, nostalgia strengthens social connectedness. In nostalgic narratives, the self is often surrounded by close others (Wildschut et al., 2006). Further, thinking about a nostalgic event (compared to an ordinary event) resulted in greater feelings of being “loved” and “protected,” lower feelings of attachment anxiety and avoidance, and greater feelings of interpersonal competence and support (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008).

Finally, and most relevant to the current studies, nostalgia may also serve an existential function. This idea was postulated by Sedikides et al. (2004); see also Routledge and Arndt (2005) in their original theoretical account of the functional nature of nostalgia and was first tested by Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2008). Specifically, these researchers measured trait nostalgia (frequency and importance of nostalgia), induced existential threat via MS, and then assessed the extent to which participants had a sense of meaning in life. Whereas thinking about death resulted in a lower sense of meaning, this effect was not found among participants who were highly nostalgic. Two additional studies assessed the extent to which inducing nostalgia resulted in lower levels of death-thought accessibility after MS. Consistent with research showing that engagement of terror management structures reduces heightened accessibility of death-related thought following death reminders (Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004), Routledge et al. (2008) showed that the effect of MS on elevated death-thought accessibility was lower among nostalgia-prone participants (Study 2) and among participants subjected to an experimental induction of nostalgia (Study 3). In sum, after MS, nostalgia kept levels of death-thought accessibility low and perceptions of meaning high.

Although Routledge et al. (2008) provided initial evidence that nostalgia offers some protection from the consequences of death awareness, important questions regarding nostalgia’s capacity to counter the existential reverberation of mortality awareness remain. Routledge et al. (2008) did not consider the extent to which high nostalgia proneness reduces the need to turn to other terror management structures when death is salient. Yet if nostalgia buf-

fers existential threat, individuals who regularly wax nostalgic should not need to engage in other psychological responses that are typically observed following death reminders. In other words, is nostalgia a sufficient existential resource when people are faced with concerns about mortality or, alternatively, are additional psychological defenses needed? We begin to test this idea in Study 1.

In addition, although Routledge et al. (2008) showed that being highly nostalgia-prone reduced the effects of MS on elevated levels of death-thought accessibility, the capacity of nostalgia to reduce levels of death anxiety provoked by reminders of mortality has yet to be determined. Previous research indirectly suggests that nostalgia possesses this capacity. Routledge and Juhl (in press) found that higher perceptions of existential meaning prevented MS from leading to higher levels of death anxiety. That is, MS resulted in elevated levels of anxiety about death, but only for those who lacked a clear sense of meaning in life. Thus, if nostalgia similarly serves an existential function, it should moderate the effects of MS on death anxiety, such that those who are habitually nostalgic should not show heightened death anxiety when mortality is salient. We test this hypothesis in Study 2.

Finally, research has yet to examine whether nostalgic individuals are actually more nostalgic in response to mortality concerns. When exploring the existential function of nostalgia, research has thus far treated nostalgia as a predictor or independent variable, not as a dependent variable. If nostalgia provides protection from mortality concerns for nostalgia prone individuals, then MS (relative to a control condition) may result in greater feelings of nostalgia for individuals high in nostalgia proneness, but not for individuals low in nostalgia proneness. We test this hypothesis in Study 3.

2. Study 1

Previous research indicates that, if a psychological structure provides protection from mortality concerns, then those who have this structure firmly established do not display elevated levels of investment in other structures to buffer themselves from heightened death awareness (Greenberg et al., 2008). In the present study, we apply this reasoning to the influence of nostalgia. Specifically, we measured nostalgia proneness, induced MS, and then assessed reactions to criticism of one’s university. Following previous research showing that MS leads students to respond less favorably to an essay that disparages their university identity (as a way of affirming faith in their worldview and identifications (Dechesne, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000), we hypothesized that participants in an MS condition (compared to a control condition) will exhibit lower positive evaluations of a critical essay concerning one’s university. Importantly, however, this effect should only occur among individuals who are low, rather than high, on nostalgia proneness. Such evidence would expand upon the research by Routledge et al. (2008) to offer convergent support for the notion that nostalgia does indeed serve as a resource capable of mitigating the psychological repercussions of mortality reminders.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Eighty-one (43 female) undergraduate psychology students from North Dakota State University (NDSU) participated in exchange for course credit. In this and the subsequent studies, participants were told that the research was concerned with the relationship between personality and attitudes. Participants completed all materials (in the following order) on computers in partitioned workspaces, and in groups ranging in size from 1 to 6.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/951809>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/951809>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)