

Nostalgia: The Puzzling Predicament of a Positive and Negative Emotion

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It was all coming back to me. I recalled my elbow pressed against the rounded edge of the grey rectangular table as I filled out my math packet made from recycled paper. My mind was deeply focused as I listened to the calming sound of an instrumental Beatles album that my fifth grade teacher always played while we were working on math. As I snapped out of this flashback I found my body filled with a contented warmth, but at the same time I felt my eyes glistening with tears.

I never came to the airport expecting to experience such intense feelings, but hearing the simple tune of Michelle playing as background music unlocked a memory that I had not accessed for many years. I became very aware of the four years that had passed since I graduated from elementary school. So much had changed, could I even consider myself the same person as that innocent child in my memory? I felt like a stranger to my past self. Experiences and bodily developments had guided me out of childhood and into adolescence, my blissful ignorance was fading away from me. I became aware of serious problems in the world around me. I realized for the first time that my parents had flaws, in fact nothing in the world was perfect. Furthermore, I understood that life did not have any inherent meaning, I knew that I had to create my own. These epiphanies deeply changed who I was and how I was going to carry out my life. The burden of the world was now on my back, I could not help but want to fix as many injustices as I could find. Still, I was happy that I held the detailed memories of a simple, blissful time in my life, but the knowledge that the progression of time would prevent me from ever experiencing such memories again depressed me. In this paper, I will argue that despite some negative aspects of nostalgia, it consists primarily of positive feelings in most individuals.

The History of Nostalgia

Ever since Hofer (1934) coined the term nostalgia in 1688, it has had a dynamic history. Centuries ago, the sentiment had a very different connotation than it does presently. Hofer considered nostalgia a disease in which a sufferer was entirely consumed with images from the past, so much so that one could not even function well enough to live (Hofer, 1934). Also, Griesinger (1867/1965) claimed that nostalgia was a kind of homesickness that should be treated when a person displays what he referred to as the usual signs of insanity (Griesinger, 1867/1965). Clearly, when nostalgia was first labeled, it was regarded as a purely negative condition.

The first change in how nostalgia was perceived occurred when Freud and psychoanalysis became popular. The psychosexual approach came into play as nostalgia was thought of as a longing desire to relive the time before the oedipus complex occurred. Additionally, Freudian theory was onto something more in line with modern views with the idea that nostalgia is a coping mechanism for mourning and a past forever lost (Kaplan, 1987). With psychoanalysis we see the emergence of nostalgia as a mixed phenomenon. While people experienced a negative longing for the past, it had the positive effect of helping people deal with depressive thoughts associated with the knowledge that we cannot re-experience the past.

The emergence of considering nostalgia a positive emotion came about with the humanists. The humanist approach moved away from feeling the need to treat nostalgia as a disease, choosing instead to look at it as a positive aspect of existence. Humanists took the opposite view of the early theorists, claiming that nostalgia's adaptive functions dealing with stress and change indicate that the emotion is an essential part of the human experience (Martin,

1954). In contrast to McCann's (1941) view that nostalgia should be avoided at all cost, humanists argued that we should strive to experience its benefits. We can see a link between this and the Freudian perspective because of their focus on helpful ways for us to think about and deal with the past.

Further departure from the earliest treatment of nostalgia occurred with cognitive theorists who believed that not only was nostalgia not a disease, but it could actually be used as a thinking strategy to improve our lives (Hertz, 1990). Hertz studied Holocaust survivors and discovered that survivors reminisce more frequently as they age, indicating that thinking about the past helps elderly people to cope with their experiences more effectively than avoiding nostalgia (Hertz, 1990).

This dramatic shift of looking at nostalgia as adaptive, represents how our labels of emotions can change over time based on the way that society views them. In Averill's interpretation of the social constructivist perspective, society creates expectations for the way in which we feel and exhibit emotions (Averill, 1985). For Averill, our positive views of nostalgia exist as a modern emotion that we created by labeling it. In the past, when nostalgia was thought of as a negative homesickness, people actually experienced something different simply because of expectations. The social constructivist perspective on emotion works as a fascinating way to explain nostalgia because it provides a clear reason for its apparent transformation as an emotion. The history of nostalgia allows us to see the many different ways in which the emotion has been and can be viewed, and even experienced.

Nostalgia as a Mixed Emotion

Our perceptions of nostalgia have changed greatly since its first iteration as an entirely adverse condition. Recent research on nostalgia indicates that people experience nostalgia in

mostly positive ways, although negative components still remain. A series of studies were conducted to find out what central characteristics the “lay person” associates with the word nostalgia (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012). First, they had participants write down all the features of nostalgia that they could come up with. 35 different characteristics were generated and the frequencies were listed. A second study using a different group of participants then rated these features on a scale of 1-8 in order to determine which were the most central (highest rated). The results determined that positive features such as fond memories, social relationships, and rose-tinted memories rated highest and were written down the most. Yet, negative thoughts including dwelling, missing, and wanting a return to the past did not rank much lower than the positive ones (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012). A clear definition of nostalgia that everyone can agree on has not yet been developed, so this approach of describing it as a list of words with varying significance is valuable in trying to describe its meaning. We can see from this study how intertwined the good and bad sides of nostalgia are for individuals. People seem to agree that nostalgia is not a black and white emotion such as happiness or sadness. In fact, happiness, sadness, and mixed feelings were all terms that participants in the study listed (Hepper et al, 2012). Evidently, a wide range of feelings make up nostalgia.

A study focusing on the effect of music on nostalgia shed even more light on the mixed nature of nostalgia (Barrett, Grimm, Robins, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Janata, 2010). Participants listened to 30 15 second excerpts of Billboard Top-100 songs and ranked how nostalgic they were from 1-5. Many factors were analyzed, such as the the subjects mood, proneness to nostalgia, and personality characteristics. A particularly interesting finding was that subjects in a negative mood experienced significantly more intense nostalgia. This finding demonstrates that

an important relationship exists between nostalgia and negative emotions (Barrett, Grimm, Robins, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Janata, 2010). Perhaps pre-existing negativity exacerbates the negative emotions found in nostalgia. Another possibility is that experiencing a more powerful form of nostalgia when sad could act as a coping mechanism if we view nostalgia as a positive emotion. Additionally, the study found that when subjects experienced nostalgia, happy emotions outranked negative emotions in a 4 to 1 ratio (Barrett et al, 2010). Just like in the study by Hepper et al, nostalgia consisted of mixed emotions with predominantly positive feelings.

Furthermore, nostalgia does not only exist as a positive emotion for individuals, but a study by Wildschut, Bruder, Robertson, van Tilburg, and Sedikides (2014) revealed that nostalgia can also be experienced as a group emotion. The study had a group of college students recall a nostalgic event from their past, and a control group that did not recall an event. The students then completed self reports about their levels of nostalgia, positive affect, in-group evaluation, and in-group oriented action tendencies. In the recall condition participants experienced the same level of positive affect as the control condition, but nostalgia levels, ratings of the in-group, and in-group oriented action tendencies all increased significantly. These findings indicate that we are more likely to approach and enjoy the company of those with whom we share some past experience. This greatly supports the notion that nostalgia is a positive and beneficial emotion because it strengthens our social bonds with others. From an existential perspective, it follows that we should intentionally put ourselves in meaningful situations with others so that we can form tighter bonds and develop our social networks. By focusing on nostalgia as a positive emotion, we can discover valuable insights about how to lead happier lives.

Functions of Nostalgia

Indeed advertising has capitalized off of the happiness that nostalgia evokes in us. Merchant, LaTour, Ford, and LaTour (2013) examined how personal nostalgia in advertising affects past imagery, physiological reactions, positive emotions, and negative emotions in its viewers. Intentionally nostalgic advertisements have a variety of effects on human emotion and even behavior. Much like my experience with a flashback to fifth grade brought on by music, advertisements snap viewers back to a previous time in their life, causing them to relive the past in the form of images. Participants reported that the advertisements brought on positive feelings like peacefulness, warmth, calmness, and pleasantness. Once again, the contradictory presence of positive and negative emotions was exhibited as participants also reported feeling “tensed”, “grieved”, “anxious”, and “guilty”. Additionally, this study was unique in that it also investigated the physical responses associated with nostalgia. Participants experienced goosebumps, sweating, and steady or slow breathing. Its hard to infer any adaptive function of nostalgia from these responses, but they show that nostalgia may be equivalent to more basic emotions such as happiness and sadness. Apparently, a very powerful and specific emotional response exists with the sentiment of nostalgia, so much so that people can feel goosebumps! The experimenters found that nostalgic advertisements increase viewers’ connection to the product, making them more likely to be loyal customers. The very knowledge that advertisers use nostalgia to make us feel better about their products indicates its function as a beneficial emotion to our psyche.

To further investigate nostalgia’s function in mental health, a study was conducted to understand how nostalgia helps us look inward and cope with the knowledge that one day we will die (Routledge, Juhl, Abeyta, & Roylance, 2014). After taking a test to assess nostalgia

proneness, participants were split into two groups; the first was asked about the emotions they expect to experience when they die and the second was asked about emotions involved in extreme pain. Lastly, they filled out a nationalistic self-sacrifice scale. It was found that participants low in nostalgia proneness reported a greater willingness to self-sacrifice for their nation than individuals high in nostalgia proneness when first asked to think about death. If they did not think about death first, there was no significant difference. This remarkable finding indicates that nostalgia allows us to attach more meaning to life. When we are nostalgic we appreciate our past, but we do not see the future as fruitless. This study reveals that as we appreciate the past, we appreciate life in general, causing us to have a greater desire to keep experiencing the wonder of living.

Bradbury (2012) further elaborated on the benefits of looking at the past to gain a new sense of hope for the future by investigating the qualities of nostalgia in postapartheid South Africa. South Africans have a unique sense of nostalgia, in which they do not want to relive the past, they want to reinvent it. They yearn for what could have and should have been, and they place the hope that their children will be able to create a future that mimics their re-imagined past. In this manner, nostalgia may help South Africans to cope with their history by reflecting on the past and imagining it in new ways. Interestingly, Bradbury applies the concept of homesickness, reminiscent of Hofer (1934) and Griesinger (1867/1965), to the South African's situation during apartheid. They felt that they had lost their true home, thus they longed to cure their homesickness by rediscovering what was lost. Bradbury explained that when speaking of experiences such as nostalgia we feel "moved." This word fits nostalgia perfectly because we displace ourselves from reality with a rose tinted version of our past. In hindsight, we see that the

past could have carried itself out in a much more positive way. Nostalgia allows us to recreate a more positive imagined world, a fantasy that gives us an ideal to work towards for the future.

Conclusion

I can imagine the future. I see myself as an old man with my wrinkled face rummaging through old edited college papers in a dusty basement cabinet. What will I think when I come across this one, discussing the very nature of nostalgia? The feelings of nostalgia in myself will surely be powerful, I may even break down and cry. But I will not cry out of sadness, for the reunion of my past and future selves is a beautiful thing. As my older mind reads my recollection of my fifth grade classroom, I will experience a cascade of emotions. In the end, all we are and all we will be is a collection of past memories. In this sense, the emotion of nostalgia is perhaps the quintessential human emotion because nostalgia is the emotion associated with the self-reflection that comes with recollection. It is that uniquely powerful sensation linked with a reflection on one's life. I feel blessed that as a human I get to look on the past in such a positive light. Nostalgic thoughts carry me through the best, most important moments of my memory. Nostalgia lets me know who I am.

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