

**Nostalgia as Enabler of Self-Continuity**

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### **Nostalgia as Enabler of Self-Continuity**

In 1969, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young released their self-titled album containing the classic song, *Suite: Judy Blue Eyes*. A particularly striking lyric from this song recommended: “Don’t let the past remind us of what we are not now.” This evocative line suggests a question with far-reaching social psychological implications. How does a person’s sense of the past contribute to (or detract from) the perceived continuity of their identity? This chapter entertains that question. We are concerned with the continuity within or between two fundamental sources of identity: the individual and collective selves. In particular, we focus on the temporal continuity between individual selves, between individual and collective selves, and between collective selves. We begin by defining the two types of self, specifying their possible relations, and asking how the seeming continuity within or between them is maintained. We proceed to argue that nostalgia is an important mechanism that enables this continuity, and we support our argument with a review of the empirical literature.

#### *Individual and Collective Selves*

The individual self is defined in terms of qualities that distinguish the person from other members of the ingroup. These qualities render the person unique and set her or him apart from other ingroup members. The collective self is defined in terms of qualities that characterize the person as a group member. These qualities are shared among members of the ingroup and differentiate them from members of outgroups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Individual selves vary in terms of how concordant or discrepant they are across time (Higgins, 1987; Sheldon, 2004). For example, a person may have succeeded in achieving important objectives set at an earlier age—a potential mark of high concordance between past and present individual selves or a match between actual and ideal self. A person may have failed in these goal pursuits—a potential mark of low self-concordance or high self-discrepancy.

Finally, a person may have abandoned earlier-set goals and moved on to new ones. Of course, the same analysis applies to the concordance or discrepancy between collective selves (cf. Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). For example, one's favorite sports team may win the championship as it did the previous year, may finish last, or may settle for a mid-table finish in hopes of greener pastures in the next season. Given the connections between sports outcomes and collective identity for sports fans (Cialdini et al., 1976), each of these scenarios may have implications for the degree of congruency of that collective identity.

The relation between individual and collective selves can be equally intricate. One can build from Festinger's (1957) analysis of the interplay between cognitions to construe individual and collective selves as antagonistic, parallel, or synergistic. They are antagonistic when the best interest of the person (e.g., saving money) conflicts with the best interest of the group (e.g., collecting money for an organizational donation). They are parallel (or peacefully co-existing) when the individual engages in an activity that neither benefits nor harms the group (e.g., traveling, gardening). Finally, the two selves are synergistic when the interests of the person overlap with those of the group (e.g., work productivity). The exact nature of the relation between the selves depends on such factors as social context, characteristics of the person or the group, motives and goals, emotional states, and relative accessibility of the selves (Hogg, 2000; Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Spears, 2001; Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005)

#### *Continuity Within and Between Individual and Collective Selves*

As our opening reference to the lyric from *Suite: Judy Blue Eyes* implies, the introduction of a time perspective raises the pivotal issue of identity continuity. Is there continuity or change between past and present individual selves, between past and present collective selves, and

between individual and collective selves across time? Is identity continuity the norm or the exception?

Based on logic, it is not clear how this question should be answered (Frederick, 2003). A long philosophical tradition denies identity continuity. This tradition rejects the definition of identity as a single entity that persists over time. Instead, the argument is that identity over time is a function of continuity of memories, interests, or other variable characteristics (e.g., habits, relationships, occupations, residences). Plato was the first to articulate this view in his *Symposium* (207D-208B; Borowski, 1976):

A man is said to be the same person from childhood until he is advanced in years: yet though he is called the same he does not at any time possess the same properties; he is continually becoming a new person ... not only in his body but in his soul besides we find none of his manners or habits, his opinions, desires, pleasures, pains or fears, ever abiding the same in his particular self; some things grow in him, while others perish.

This view was endorsed by David Hume, who wondered: “What ... gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possesst of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives?”. Several modern philosophers also endorse the view that the person across time is an infinity of persons (Lewis, 1976; Parfit, 1984; Strawson, 1999; Zemach, 1987).

The alternative philosophical view posits that continuity is a presupposition of identity (Wiggins, 2001). Although individuals undergo psychological and physical changes, they are the same person over time. Past experience is unified by an irreducible entity, the “I” (James, 1890). For example, when a drastic life event takes place (e.g., car accident accompanied by paralysis), the one who feels this change is the “I” or the same person (Madell, 1981; Williams, 1970). To

illustrate with a thought experiment, when one is offered the assurance of perpetual continuity through cloning (with the clone being a robotic and exact replica of her or his personality), one is bound not to find this offer particularly attractive as compared to ordinary survival: The cloned replica will not be the “I” (Korsgaard, 1989; Robinson, 1988). In fact, what contributes to identity continuity is agency: it is through a succession of personal choices that different experiences are linked together (Elster, 1986).

Turning to psychological research, there appears to be some support for the notion that identity continuity has been unduly emphasized. For example, participants report both personality continuity (Robins & DelVecchio, 2000) and personality change (Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989), and this self-reported change coincides considerably with actual change (Robins, Nofhle, Trzesniewski, & Roberts, 2005). Also, there is a remarkable individual difference in that regard, as some participants report diachronic disunity: They recount discontinuity between different phases of their lives, and they feel disconnected from the type of person they used to be (Lampinen, Odegard, & Leding, 2004).

Still, however, the bulk of empirical evidence is in favor of identity continuity (Ross & Wilson, 2003; Welzer & Markowitsch, 2005). A great deal of research finds continuity between individual selves (Breakwell, 1986; McAdams, 2001; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003), between collective selves (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Monden, & de Lima, 2002), and between individual and collective selves (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Chen et al., 2004; Milligan, 2003; van Knippenberg et al., 2002). Even Lampinen et al.’s (2004) data suggest that “the majority of people, the majority of time, report experiencing the self diachronically” (p. 246). Moreover, lack of continuity is a source of psychological maladjustment. Lampinen et al. (2004), stated that “approximately 15% of the participants who described themselves as diachronically disunified

had at least a 70% chance of falling into the pathologically dissociative taxon. None of the participants who described themselves as being diachronically unified had that high of a probability” (p. 248). Other perils of discontinuity include negative affect, anxiety, alienation, a weakening of group identification, and the emergence of group schisms, and even suicide (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Chandler et al., 2003; Milligan, 2003; Sani, 2005).

Given that identity continuity is pervasive and important, it is worth asking how it is achieved and maintained. We focus on one specific mechanism: nostalgia. Although nostalgia can at times raise the specter of a contrast between past and present, we argue that nostalgic reverie is a crucial vehicle for maintaining and fostering self-continuity over time and in the face of change. Nostalgia greases the communicative pathways within and between selves.

### *Nostalgia*

Before examining nostalgia as an enabler of continuity, in this section, we set the stage for such an analysis by briefly discussing some of our research findings on nostalgia, and, in particular, its status as a self-relevant and positive emotion, its triggers and objects, and its psychological functions.

#### *Nostalgia as a Self-Relevant and Positive Emotion*

*The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) defines nostalgia as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past.” In agreement, we (Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004) conceptualized nostalgia as an emotion, and a self-relevant emotion at such. We regarded the self as the central character of the nostalgic episode, while endorsing the view that the self operates in social context (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, in press). Empirical findings were consistent with this proposal: In the majority of nostalgic accounts, the self figured in a prominent role alongside close others (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006).

We also proposed that nostalgia is principally a positive emotion, with bittersweet elements (Sedikides et al., 2004, in press). This view was empirically supported (Wildschut et al., 2006). Nostalgic accounts reflected more positive than negative affect, and nostalgia was deemed to have more desirable than undesirable features. In addition, nostalgic accounts more often followed a redemption sequence (in which the protagonist progresses from a disadvantaged to a victorious position, resulting in positive feelings) than a contamination sequence (in which the protagonist progresses from a position of strength to one of weakness, resulting in negative feelings).

In addition, we wondered what the triggers and objects of the nostalgic experience are (Wildschut et al., 2006). Negative mood states, including loneliness, emerged as the most common nostalgia trigger. Other common triggers included sensory inputs (e.g., smells, music, tastes) and social interactions with close others (i.e., family members, friends, partners). Indeed, close others emerged as the most common nostalgia object. Other common objects included momentous events (e.g., anniversaries, holiday gatherings), places, and settings.

### *Functions of Nostalgia*

We proposed that nostalgia serves four key psychological functions (Sedikides et al., in press). First, nostalgia serves as a repository of positive affect. Our empirical findings have been consistent with this notion. Participants who brought to mind or wrote about a nostalgic experience reported more positive affect than those who brought to mind or wrote about an ordinary experience (Wildschut et al., 2006). Similarly, perceptions of the past as positive were associated with increased nostalgia proneness (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2006a). Second, nostalgia maintains and increases self-positivity. Indeed, participants who brought to mind or wrote about a nostalgic experience reported higher self-esteem than those in the control condition (Wildschut et al., 2006). Third, nostalgia fosters affiliation or stronger

social bonds. In support of this notion, participants who brought to mind and wrote about a nostalgic experience subsequently evidenced a more secure adult attachment style than those in the control condition (Wildschut et al., 2006). Finally, nostalgia carries existential meaning, serving as a reservoir of memories and experiences that is helpful for coping with existential threat. We tested this idea by focusing on how nostalgia moderates the effects of mortality salience in a terror management paradigm. After having being reminded of their mortality (relative to an aversive control topic), the more participants perceived the past as positive, the more they perceived life as meaningful (Routledge et al., 2006). Life meaningfulness was assessed with the No Meaning Scale (Kunzendorf & Maguire, 1995; for validation, see Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1998). This scale contains items such as “Life has no meaning or purpose,” “All strivings in life are futile and absurd,” and “Life is a cruel joke.” Also, participants who were more prone to nostalgia (Study 2) or who were asked to wax nostalgic (Study 3) actually manifested less activation of death-related cognition after their death was made salient via a mortality salience induction (Routledge et al., 2006a). These studies established that nostalgia is a vital resource for buffering existential threat.

Taken together, these studies suggest that nostalgia may play an important role in efforts to maintain psychological equanimity and protect the integrity of the self. Nostalgia is primarily a positive emotional experience in which the self plays a central role. It is often triggered by aversive states (e.g. negative mood). It serves to increase positive affect, self-positivity and social connectedness, and it helps maintain the psychological fortitude needed to manage existential threat. Therefore, nostalgia is an important and multi-faceted weapon in the arsenal of self-defenses; however, does it also serve as an enabler of self-continuity?

#### *Nostalgia as a Link between Past and Present*



Does nostalgia involve assimilation between the past and the present? Davis (1979) addressed this question with the discontinuity hypothesis. He theorized that nostalgia is an emotional reaction designed to repair discontinuity in a person's life (i.e., self-discontinuity). In particular, nostalgia is instigated when a contrast is perceived between past and present selves, be it individual or collective. Instigators of discontinuity include occupational crises (e.g., lay-offs), health deterioration, relationship break-up, and death of a loved one (Batcho, 1995; Best & Nelson, 1985). Discontinuity has emotional consequences, such as "fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties" (Davis, 1979, p. 34). In Davis's own words, "it is these emotions and cognitive states that pose the threat of identity discontinuity ... that nostalgia seeks, by marshalling our psychological resources for continuity, to abort or, at the very least, deflect." (pp. 34-35). Nostalgia, then, is a response to these ill psychological effects. It links the person with the past and, in the process, assuages the negative emotions experienced. As Davis, again, put it, "Nostalgia helps the individual construct continuity of identity by: encouraging an appreciative stance toward former selves; excluding unpleasant memories; reinterpreting 'marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves' in a positive light; and establishing benchmarks in one's biography" (pp. 35-46).

This view is congruent with our empirical findings on nostalgia—findings that are relevant to the individual/collective selves framework. As we stated previously, nostalgia is a deeply social emotion (Wildschut et al., 2006). Although the person (i.e., individual self) is typically the protagonist of the nostalgic account, an important group (i.e., collective self such as family, friends, co-workers) is almost always present. Through nostalgic reverie, the person goes back and forth between individual and collective selves, in an effort to explore and understand meaningfully not only her or his own relevance to other people's lives, but also the place of others in her or his life. Indeed, our research (Wildschut et al., 2006) shows that a pivotal

endpoint of the nostalgic experience is redemption (e.g., a prior bad deed being corrected by a later good deed directed to the group), thus achieving reconciliation and harmony between the individual and collective selves. Of course, the same analysis applies to present collective and past collective selves, as when a manager, academic, or solicitor is reunited with their former colleagues at a different company, university, or law firm. Finally, the same analysis is applicable to individual selves, as when a person compares current with past achievements.

#### *Indirect Tests of the Discontinuity Hypothesis*

Is there empirical support for the discontinuity hypothesis? A few indirect tests of the hypothesis are available and will be reviewed next. In particular, a derivation from the discontinuity hypothesis is that individuals who experience discontinuity will rate the past as more favorable (i.e., will report higher levels of nostalgia) compared to people who experience continuity. Best and Nelson (1985) put this derivation to test. They analyzed data from four surveys of U.S. national samples carried out in 1968, 1974, 1976, and 1980. The survey included both items implying high nostalgia (e.g., “People had it better in the old days,” “In spite of what some people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse, not better”) and items indicating low nostalgia (“I am as happy as when I was younger,” “These are the best years of my life”). Responses were combined to form a nostalgia score. One index of discontinuity (i.e., deteriorating life circumstances such as divorce and health problems) was related with increased nostalgia. However, other indices of discontinuity (i.e., occupational mobility, geographic mobility, work interruption) were not associated with nostalgia. Thus, support for the discontinuity hypothesis was equivocal. Nevertheless, the mixed support for the hypothesis may be due to conceptual and data-analytic issues with Best and Nelson’s research. For example, the survey items were rather poor indicators of nostalgia, and the data were underanalyzed.

Batcho (1995) provided another indirect test of the above-mentioned derivation of the discontinuity hypothesis. Older and younger adults completed the Nostalgia Inventory, indicating the extent to which they missed each of 20 objects from their youth. Examples of these objects include family, house, friends, the way society was, not knowing sad or evil things, and not having to worry. It seems reasonable to assume that older adults would have experienced higher degrees of discontinuity than younger adults, given that the former must have more (and more varied) life experiences than the latter. (This assumption, though, may be questionable, given Bluck & Alea's [this volume] findings that, compared to younger adults, older adults have higher self-concept clarity and engage more often in remembrance of the past for self-continuity purposes.) Age main effects were significant for 14 of the 20 items of the Nostalgia Inventory: family, friends, house, school, feelings, music, having someone to depend on, heroes/heroines, holidays, toys, pets, the way people were, not having to worry, and not knowing sad or evil things. However, on all but two (family, music) of these items, older adults were less nostalgic than younger ones. These results do not seem to follow from the discontinuity hypothesis.

Along with the aforementioned quantitative research, two qualitative studies are relevant to the discontinuity hypothesis. These studies capitalized on suggestions that nostalgia is prevalent in organizations (Gabriel, 1993). Brown and Humphreys (2002) interviewed faculty members of a Turkish training institution for women, established in 1934. The authors argued that collective nostalgia informed present understanding of the institution and contributed to collective self-esteem and readiness to cope with threat. Milligan (2003) used the techniques of participant observation and interviews to investigate how employees coped with the disruption of organizational relocation. She found that employees often resorted to nostalgic engagement as a way of re-adjusting to their new environment. In all, research involving indirect tests has rendered mixed support to the discontinuity hypothesis.

*Direct Tests of the Discontinuity Hypothesis*

In lieu of these suggestive findings, we conducted three studies aimed to provide a direct test of the discontinuity hypothesis (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis in a sample of 61 adult participants (mean age = 49 years). Discontinuity was measured using a revised version of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). This version of the scale asks participants to indicate for each of 12 disrupting life events (e.g., death of a close family member, change in living conditions, change in financial situation, divorce) whether they had experienced it over the past two years. Nostalgia was measured using the Batcho Nostalgia Inventory and with a 5-item nostalgia proneness measure (Routledge et al., 2006). Consistent with the discontinuity hypothesis, results revealed a significant positive correlation between the number of disrupting life events experienced and each nostalgia measure.

In Study 2, we induced nostalgia and measured perceived continuity between past-individual self and present-individual self. Participants in the experimental condition thought about a nostalgic event, whereas those in the control condition thought about an ordinary event. Subsequently, participants completed a scale we developed to assess directly perceptions of continuity between the past individual and present individual self (e.g., “The past and present flow seamlessly together”). Importantly, in the beginning of the study, we assessed happiness, using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This assessment was included because we expected that nostalgia would increase continuity to a greater extent when happiness is high than when it is low. This is because, when happiness is low, engaging in nostalgic reverie about the past may make the present seem particularly bleak by comparison. When happiness is high, on the other hand, the contrast between past and present should not nearly be as stark. Consistent with this line of reasoning, we found that perceived

continuity between past- and present-individual self was greater in the nostalgia than in the control condition, but only when happiness was high (1 SD above the mean). When happiness was low (-1 SD), the nostalgia and control conditions did not differ significantly.

In Study 3, we replicated Study 2 and, in addition to measuring perceived continuity between past-individual self and present-individual self, also assessed continuity between past collective self and present individual self (4 items; e.g., “A big part of who I am now is related to how I developed in the groups I belonged to in the past,” “The way I was in the groups I belonged to in the past played no part in shaping who I am today” [reversed]) and between past individual self and present collective self (4 items; e.g., “When I remember what I was like in the past, I understand why I am part of the groups I belong to now,” “I don’t understand how the person I was in the past ended up being part of the groups I belong to now” [reversed]). Consistent with the findings of Study 2, results revealed that participants in the nostalgia (compared to control) condition perceived greater continuity in all three areas examined, but only when happiness was high.

Direct tests of the discontinuity hypothesis provide compelling evidence for the capacity of nostalgia to increase self-continuity. At the same time, our findings indicate that individual differences in happiness play a pivotal moderating role: nostalgia is an enabler of self-continuity for happy but not unhappy persons.

#### *Further Explorations of Nostalgia as a Continuity Enabler*

When considering nostalgia as a facilitator of self-continuity, we also wanted to explore the potential for nostalgia-driven continuity at a broader level of self-related cognition. The studies just discussed indicate that nostalgia can facilitate continuity between past and present selves (both individual and collective). Can nostalgia also facilitate continuity between other past and present self-relevant attitudes? In two studies, we examined this possibility by testing the

potential for nostalgia to strengthen the association between positive and nostalgic feelings about the past and perceptions of meaning in the present (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2006b). We reasoned that, if nostalgia serves as a reservoir of positive cognitions that foster self-continuity, then accessing these cognitions would imbue one's life with higher levels of meaning.

In Study 1, we measured to what extent people perceive the past as positive using items from the Time Perspective Inventory (TPI; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Example items include: "Familiar childhood sights, sounds, smells often bring back a flood of wonderful memories," "It gives me pleasure to think about my past," "On balance, there is much more good to recall than bad in my past," and "I get nostalgic about my childhood." We then manipulated nostalgia. In the experimental conditions, we asked participants to: "Bring to mind a nostalgic event in your life. Try to think of a past event that makes you feel most nostalgic. Bring this experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the nostalgic experience. Write about it." In the control condition, we asked participants to: "Bring to mind an ordinary event in your daily life—an event that took place in the last week. Think it through as though you were an observer of the event rather than directly involved. Imagine the event as though you were an historian recording factual details. Write about it." Subsequently, we measured perceptions of meaning in life (Kunzendorf & Maguire, 1995). In Study 2, we followed a similar procedure but replaced the TPI with the Nostalgia Proneness Scale, developed at Southampton. Example items include: "How often do you experience nostalgia?" and "How important is it for you to bring to mind nostalgic experiences?"

The findings of Study 1 were revealing. When nostalgia was not induced, there was no relationship between positive perceptions of the past and present feelings regarding the meaningfulness of life. However, when nostalgia was induced, positive past perceptions

significantly predicted feelings of meaning such that the more individuals perceived the past as positive the more they perceived life in the present as meaningful. In Study 2, we found a similar relation between nostalgia proneness and meaning. When nostalgia was induced, the more prone to nostalgia participants indicated being, the more they perceived life to be meaningful.

Combined, these two studies further suggest that nostalgia can serve as a vehicle for self-relevant attitudinal continuity. This specific type of continuity maintenance may be particularly advantageous for psychological health and well-being as one contributing factor to depression is the inability to sustain a meaningful view of the world (Beck, 1967; Simon et al., 1998). Thus, the current evidence that nostalgia facilitates the use of positive perceptions about the past to bolster a continuous sense of positive meaning in the present further substantiates the previous claims that self-continuity is important to psychological adjustment and well-being.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Our statement of the hypothesis and discussion of empirical findings may seem to imply that nostalgia is simply a byproduct of perceived discontinuity in one's life. An alternative way to conceptualize these issues, however, would be to construe perceived discontinuity as a form of psychological threat. This notion is backed by a considerable amount of research, showing that individuals value stability and coherence in their lives (Swann et al., 2003). This threat to the self should, in turn, induce more nostalgia as individuals marshal positive coping resources. That is, nostalgia will be deployed in the service of increased self-continuity.

This line of reasoning suggests a number of avenues for future research. For example, does threat in the form of destabilizing negative feedback (Sedikides & Green, 2000) or the awareness of inevitable mortality (mortality salience; e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997), evoke corresponding changes in the level of nostalgia? Is nostalgia associated with positive affect, higher self-regard, and stronger affiliative tendencies

(Wildschut et al., 2006)? These are some useful research directions that we are pursuing in order to understand better how nostalgia cements self-continuity. To return to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, we need not let the past remind us of what we are not now, but can allow the past to remind us of what we are and the continuity behind these perceptions.



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