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NOSTALGIA AND POPULISM

An Empirical Psychological Perspective

For centuries, nostalgia denoted homesickness, but current dictionary definitions indicate that these two concepts have parted ways and acquired discrete meanings. However, it is one thing to demonstrate that contemporary definitions of nostalgia and homesickness are distinct; it is another to show that the way people think about nostalgia and its characteristics corresponds to this lexicographic knowledge. In 2012, Erica G. Hepper and colleagues therefore asked laypeople to identify which features they considered most characteristic of the construct ›nostalgia‹ and found that respondents conceptualised nostalgia as a predominantly positive, social, and past-oriented emotion. In nostalgic reverie, one brings to mind a fond and personally meaningful event, often involving one's childhood. The person tends to see the event through rose-coloured glasses and may even long to return to the past. As a result, he or she feels sentimental, typically happy but with a hint of sadness.¹

Psychological research on nostalgia has expanded rapidly over the past 15 years, and the seemingly straightforward question ›what is the relation between nostalgia and populism?‹ requires a nuanced answer. To begin to address it, we need to develop a taxonomy for organising pertinent research. The first dimension in this taxonomy is the distinction between personal and collective nostalgia. Personal nostalgia refers to a longing and affection for a personally experienced past. It is not contingent on thinking of oneself in terms of a particular social identity or group membership (e.g., one's nation). When individuals become part of a group, however, that group, its members,

1 Erica G. Hepper/Timothy D. Ritchie/Constantine Sedikides/Tim Wildschut, *Odyssey's end: Lay conceptions of nostalgia reflect its original Homeric meaning*, in: *Emotion* 12 (2012), pp. 102-119.



and events or objects related to it acquire emotional significance.² Collective nostalgia, then, is contingent on thinking of oneself in terms of a particular group membership, and pertains to the people, experiences, and objects associated with this in-group. The second dimension is the distinction between momentary, short-lived, transient episodes of nostalgia (i.e., state-level nostalgia) and relatively stable, enduring, dispositional tendencies to regularly experience, and ascribe importance to, nostalgia (i.e., trait-level nostalgia). In everyday parlance, someone who is high in trait-level nostalgia may be said to have a ›nostalgic personality‹. We review illustrative research in each of the four cells of the resultant 2 (personal vs collective) × 2 (state vs trait) taxonomy. Along the way, we describe the diverse ways in which populism – a broad construct – has been operationalised in psychological research. One defining aspect of populism that has attracted empirical attention is out-group derogation and prejudice, often manifested as opposition to immigration and immigrant rights. Another key feature of populism that has been studied is in-group bias, manifested as glorification of the qualities, achievements, and products of the in-group – typically one’s nation.

1. State-Level Personal Nostalgia

When individuals nostalgise about a personal experience they shared with an out-group member, they feel more confident about forming relationships with other members of said out-group. This connection between state-level personal nostalgia and positive out-group attitudes has been demonstrated with regard to four stigmatised groups: overweight individuals,³ individuals suffering from mental illness,⁴ older adults,⁵ and immigrants.⁶ Given its focus on immigration, work regarding the latter group is most relevant to our present discussion of populism.

Migration is a global phenomenon, but immigrants continue to be greeted with suspicion and seen as less than fully human by locals.⁷ Gravani and colleagues asked whether personal nostalgia could reduce anti-immigrant sentiment.⁸ They conducted

2 Diane M. Mackie/Thierry Devos/Eliot R. Smith, Intergroup emotions: Explaining offensive action tendencies in an intergroup context, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000), pp. 602-616.

3 Rhiannon N. Turner/Tim Wildschut/Constantine Sedikides, Dropping the weight stigma: Nostalgia improves attitudes toward persons who are overweight, in: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48 (2012), pp. 130-137.

4 Rhiannon N. Turner/Tim Wildschut/Constantine Sedikides/Mirona Gheorghiu, Combating the mental health stigma with nostalgia, in: *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43 (2013), pp. 413-422.

5 Rhiannon N. Turner/Tim Wildschut/Constantine Sedikides, Fighting ageism through nostalgia, in: *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (2018), pp. 196-208.

6 Maria Gravani/Anastasia Soureti/Sofia Stathi, Using nostalgia to reduce prejudice toward immigrants, in: *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (2018), pp. 0168-0174.

7 Samuel Pehrson/Vivian L. Vignoles/Rupert Brown, National identification and anti-immigrant prejudice: Individual and contextual effects of national definitions, in: *Social Psychology Quarterly* 72 (2009), pp. 24-38.

8 Gravani/Soureti/Stathi, Using nostalgia to reduce prejudice (fn 6).

their experiment in Greece, a country that has experienced increased immigration from Africa and the Middle East in recent years and has seen a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment.⁹ Their study involved an interesting twist: 99 Greek participants were first instructed to bring to mind a Greek person they knew well and who had emigrated from Greece to another country. That is, participants brought to mind a familiar in-group member who, by emigrating from Greece, had become an immigrant. Participants randomly assigned to the nostalgia condition were instructed to recall and write about a nostalgic experience they had shared with this émigré. Participants assigned to the control condition were instructed to bring to mind an ordinary experience they had shared with the émigré and to write an objective account of that event. The researchers then assessed participants' attitudes toward immigrants in general using semantic differentials (e.g., ›friendly – hostile‹). Reflecting on a nostalgic (compared to an ordinary) experience shared with a compatriot who had become an immigrant reduced generalised anti-immigrant sentiment.

2. Trait-Level Personal Nostalgia

Dispositional, or trait-level, personal nostalgia has implications for prejudice reduction as well. This was demonstrated by Wing-Yee Cheung and colleagues in four studies focusing on White Americans' attitudes toward African Americans.¹⁰ In their first study (involving 183 online participants), the researchers assessed trait-level personal nostalgia with five statements that described behaviours related to characteristic features of nostalgia (e.g., ›I bring to mind rose-tinted memories‹).¹¹ Participants rated how frequently they engaged in each behaviour and how important they regarded this behaviour. The responses were averaged to form an index of trait nostalgia. Next, participants completed a 9-item subscale of the Motivation to Control Prejudiced Reactions scale, assessing concern about acting prejudicially in the eyes of others and oneself (e.g., ›I get angry with myself when I have a thought or feeling that might be considered prejudiced‹).¹² Participants higher on trait nostalgia were more concerned about acting prejudicially. In Study 2 (involving 289 online participants) and Study 3 (involving 192 online participants), the researchers assessed trait nostalgia with the 7-item Southampton Nostalgia Scale (e.g., ›How often do you experience nostalgia?‹). Three items measure the extent to which participants find nostalgia valuable, important,

9 Lia Figgou/Antonis Sapountzis/Nikos Bozatzis/Antonis Gardikiotis/Pavlos Pantazis, Constructing the stereotype of immigrants' criminality: Accounts of fear and risk in talk about immigration to Greece, in: *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 21 (2011), pp. 164-177.

10 Wing-Yee Cheung/Constantine Sedikides/Tim Wildschut, Nostalgia proneness and reduced prejudice, in: *Personality and Individual Differences* 109 (2017), pp. 89-97.

11 Hepper/Ritchie/Sedikides/Wildschut, *Odyssey's end* (fn 1).

12 Bridget C. Dunton/Russell H. Fazio, An individual difference measure of motivation to control prejudiced reactions, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 (1997), pp. 316-326.

or significant (e.g., ›How valuable is nostalgia for you?‹). Another four items measure proneness to nostalgia (e.g., ›How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?‹) or frequency of nostalgic engagement (e.g., ›Generally speaking, how often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences?‹).¹³ They then measured concern about acting prejudicially with the same scale as in Study 1. Finally, they assessed prejudice against African Americans with the 20-item Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale.¹⁴ The highly correlated subtle prejudice component (e.g., ›African Americans living here teach their children values and skills different from those required to be successful in America‹) and blatant prejudice component (e.g., ›African Americans come from less able races and this explains why they are not as well off as most American people‹) were averaged to create an overall prejudice index. Trait nostalgia predicted greater concern about acting prejudicially, which in turn predicted reduced prejudice. The fourth study (involving 664 online participants) replicated these findings.

3. State-Level Collective Nostalgia

In contrast to personal nostalgia, collective nostalgia arises when a particular social identity or group membership is salient, and pertains to the people, experiences, and objects associated with this social entity. For example, students may experience collective nostalgia when they reflect on meaningful experiences shared with other students, such as field trips or graduation.¹⁵ The prominent social component of nostalgia has led scholars to speculate that the emotion can solidify shared social identity, as exemplified by the ›Red Nostalgia‹ (i.e., nostalgia for the communist past) in Eastern Europe.¹⁶ Indeed, there is compelling empirical evidence that state-level collective nostalgia pertaining to one's university, work organisation, or nation strengthens ties to, and confers benefits on, these in-groups.¹⁷ In the context of our focus on populism, research demonstrating the effect of collective nostalgia on ethnocentric consumer preferences is particularly informative.¹⁸

13 Constantine Sedikides/Tim Wildschut/Clay Routledge/Jamie Arndt/Erica G. Hepper/Xinyue Zhou, To nostalgize: Mixing memory with affect and desire, in: *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 51 (2015), pp. 189-273.

14 Thomas F. Pettigrew/Ree W. Meertens, Subtle and blatant prejudice in Western Europe, in: *European Journal of Social Psychology* 25 (1995), pp. 57-75.

15 Tim Wildschut/Martin Bruder/Sara Robertson/Wijnand A.P. van Tilburg/Constantine Sedikides, Collective nostalgia: A group-level emotion that confers unique benefits on the group, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107 (2014), pp. 844-863.

16 Martin Blum, Remaking the East German past: *Ostalgie*, identity, and material culture, in: *Journal of Popular Culture* 34 (2000) issue 3, pp. 229-253.

17 Constantine Sedikides/Tim Wildschut, The sociality of personal and collective nostalgia, in: *European Review of Social Psychology* 30 (2019), pp. 123-173.

18 Marika Dimitriadou/Boris Maciejovsky/Tim Wildschut/Constantine Sedikides, Collective nostalgia and domestic country bias, in: *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 25 (2019), pp. 445-457.

In three experiments with Greek participants, Dimitriadou and colleagues demonstrated that state-level collective nostalgia strengthens consumer preferences for in-group (domestic) versus out-group (foreign) products, a form of consumer ethnocentrism.¹⁹ In the first experiment (involving 208 participants), the researchers induced collective nostalgia both idiographically (i.e., focusing on characteristics of the person and her or his autobiography) and nomothetically (i.e., focusing on characteristics shared by a generation, with the person being a member of this generation). The ideographic induction entailed participants recalling either a nostalgic event that they had experienced together with other Greeks or an ordinary event that they had experienced together with other Greeks. The nomothetic induction entailed participants reading either a nostalgic description of childhood experiences that were common for members of their generation (e.g., types of games children used to play) or a neutral text (i.e., a practical guide to photography). Next, all participants indicated whether they would prefer to listen to a Greek or a foreign song. Regardless of induction method, participants in the collective-nostalgia condition more frequently chose a domestic (compared to foreign) song than did those in the control condition. The second experiment (involving 121 participants) replicated this finding, using two product categories. Participants experiencing collective nostalgia were more likely than controls to prefer domestic (compared to foreign) songs and TV clips. The third experiment (involving 90 participants) identified collective self-esteem as the mechanism through which collective nostalgia increases consumer ethnocentrism. Collective self-esteem refers to one's evaluation of the significance and value of the social groups to which one belongs. It is positively associated with group-benefiting outcomes,²⁰ including the belief in the superiority of domestic over foreign products.²¹ The researchers induced collective nostalgia using the idiographic method, then administered the Collective Self-Esteem Scale,²² and, finally, assessed domestic (compared to foreign) song preferences. Participants in the collective-nostalgia condition (compared to controls) reported higher collective self-esteem, as well as increased preference for the domestic song. Importantly, higher collective self-esteem mediated (i.e., accounted for) the effect of collective nostalgia on this form of ethnocentrism. A more recent experiment among a representative sample of the Dutch population (involving 516 participants) corroborated the link between state-level collective (i.e., national) nostalgia and populism, specifically prejudice toward immigrants and Muslims.²³

19 Ibid.

20 Constantine Sedikides/Claire M. Hart/David de Cremer, The self in procedural fairness, in: *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2 (2008), pp. 2107-2124.

21 Garold Lantz/Sandra Loeb, An examination of the community identity and purchase preferences using the social identity approach, in: *NA – Advances in Consumer Research* 25 (1998), pp. 486-491.

22 Riia Luhtanen/Jennifer Crocker, A collective self-esteem scale: Self-evaluation of one's social identity, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18 (1992), pp. 302-318.

23 Anouk Smeekes, Longing for the good old days of our country: Understanding the triggers, functions and consequences of national nostalgia, in: Sahana Mukherjee/Phia S. Salter (eds), *History and Collective Memory from the Margins. A Global Perspective*, Hauppauge 2019, pp. 53-77.

4. Trait-Level Collective Nostalgia

This final cell in our taxonomy comprises the largest number of relevant studies. Space limitations do not permit an exhaustive review, but suffice it to say that the preponderance of evidence supports a positive association between trait-level collective nostalgia and various indices of populism. Research on the link between trait-level national nostalgia and opposition to immigration offers an illustration of this. Scholars have proposed that national nostalgia forms a key ideological component of populist radical right parties,²⁴ and that it is an integral piece of a new master-frame employed to increase the allure of these parties among their electorates.²⁵ Indeed, the rhetoric of national nostalgia deployed by leaders of populist radical right parties in various European countries emphasises a sharp discrepancy between the nation's ostensibly sunny past and gloomy present, and attributes this downturn to low-status out-groups (such as immigrants and refugees).²⁶ Studies by Smeekes and colleagues corroborate the notion that trait-level national nostalgia predicts anti-immigrant sentiment.²⁷ In their initial study (involving 112 Dutch undergraduates), these researchers first assessed trait-level national nostalgia (e.g., ›How often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences related to the way the Netherlands was in the past?‹), followed by autochthony beliefs (i.e., the idea that the first inhabitants of a territory deserve preferential treatment; ›The Netherlands belongs more to native Dutch than to immigrant minorities, because native Dutch were here first‹) and attitudes toward Muslim expressive rights (e.g., ›Muslims should be allowed to build mosques‹, ›... establish Islamic schools‹). Trait-level national nostalgia was positively associated with autochthony beliefs, which in turn predicted increased opposition to Muslim expressive rights. A larger follow-up study among a representative sample of the Dutch adult population (involving 933 participants) replicated these findings.

Nevertheless, the implications of trait-level collective nostalgia are not necessarily uniformly negative. A study among 87 Australian participants from former Yugoslavia demonstrated that collective nostalgia can reduce out-group derogation.²⁸ In the wake of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, many Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs settled in

24 Eefje Steenvoorden/Eelco Harteveld, The appeal of nostalgia: The influence of societal pessimism on support for populist radical right parties, in: *West European Politics* 41 (2018), pp. 28-52.

25 Frank Mols/Jolanda Jetten, No guts, no glory: How framing the collective past paves the way for anti-immigrant sentiments, in: *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 43 (2014), pp. 74-86.

26 Anouk Smeekes/Tim Wildschut/Constantine Sedikides, Longing for the ›good old days‹ of our country: National nostalgia as a new master-frame of populist radical right parties, in: *Journal of Theoretical Social Psychology* 5 (2021), pp. 90-102.

27 Anouk Smeekes/Maykel Verkuyten/Borja Martinovic, Longing for the country's good old days: National nostalgia, autochthony beliefs, and opposition to Muslim expressive rights, in: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 54 (2015), pp. 561-580.

28 Borja Martinovic/Jolanda Jetten/Anouk Smeekes/Maykel Verkuyten, Collective memory of a dissolved country: Collective nostalgia and guilt assignment as predictors of interethnic relations between diaspora groups from former Yugoslavia, in: *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5 (2017), pp. 588-607.

Australia. Could collective nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia predict positive contact among these former enemies? Participants first completed a measure of identification with the superordinate group, Yugoslavia (e.g., ›I identify strongly with the Yugoslavian people‹). Next, they completed a measure of trait-level collective nostalgia that referred to Yugoslavia (e.g., ›I get nostalgic when I think back of Yugoslavia in the past times‹). Finally, they reported on their contact with Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The question read: ›How often do you hang out with people from the following ethnic groups living in Australia? This can be at your work or study/school, as well as in your neighbourhood and in your free time.‹ Identification with Yugoslavia predicted more intense collective nostalgia for Yugoslavia, which in turn predicted more contact with members of the three ethnic groups from former Yugoslavia.

5. Discussion

We used a 2 (personal vs collective) \times 2 (state vs trait) taxonomy to categorise evidence pertaining to the link between nostalgia and populism. Transient, state-level personal nostalgia for experiences shared with an out-group member has the potential to improve attitudes toward the entire out-group. This beneficial effect of momentary personal nostalgia was demonstrated with regard to immigrants – an out-group frequently vilified by populists. Stable, trait-level personal nostalgia also has positive implications for intergroup relations. Higher levels of dispositional personal nostalgia are associated with reduced prejudice, and this relation is mediated (i.e., accounted for) by increased concern about acting prejudicially. Personal nostalgia is antithetical to populism.

Collective, and especially national, nostalgia can be conducive to ethnocentrism. Experimental evidence links state-level national nostalgia with increased preference for domestic (compared to foreign) consumer products. Higher levels of collective self-esteem mediate this effect of in-the-moment national nostalgia on consumer ethnocentrism. Correlational studies reveal that trait-level national nostalgia can be positively associated with out-group derogation, and in particular with opposition to immigration and immigrant rights that is rooted in autochthony beliefs. Yet collective nostalgia for a superordinate group can also unite former adversaries, as illustrated by Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats bonding over collective nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia. One way to counter the adverse implications of national nostalgia among ›populism-curious‹ persons may be to frame cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity as a time-honoured national tradition.²⁹ Political messages that convey liberal ideals with a past focus (vs future focus) weaken conservatives' opposition to liberal policies.

29 Michael J.A. Wohl/Anna Stefaniak/Anouk Smeekes, Longing is in the memory of the beholder: Collective nostalgia content determines the method members will support to make their group great again, in: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 91 (2020), 104044.

German political opinion about the Syrian migration crisis is a case in point. Politically conservative Germans were more receptive to Syrian immigration when it was presented as an old phenomenon that dates back to the earliest days of German history (past focus) than when it was described as a recent phenomenon that presents new opportunities to forge connections between Germans and Syrians (future focus).³⁰ Finally, conservatives are not the sole purveyors of collective nostalgia; liberals also long for aspects of their nation's past. But whereas conservatives hark back to a time when their nation was (ostensibly) more homogeneous, liberals fondly evoke a time when the nation was more open to different cultures and traditions.³¹ Going forward, then, achieving a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relationship between nostalgia and populism will be crucial for bridging political divides.

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30 Joris Lammers/Matt Baldwin, Past-focused temporal communication overcomes conservatives' resistance to liberal political ideas, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114 (2018), pp. 599-619.

31 Anna Stefaniak/Michael J.A. Wohl/Constantine Sedikides/Anouk Smeekes/Tim Wildschut, Different pasts for different political folk: Political orientation predicts collective nostalgia content, in: *Frontiers in Political Science*, 29 March 2021, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.633688>>.