


Days of Future Past: Concerns for the Group's Future Prompt Longing for Its Past (and Ways to Reclaim It)

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Michael J. A. Wohl¹ , Anna Stefaniak¹, and Anouk Smeekes²

¹Department of Psychology, Carleton University, and ²Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University

Abstract

In this article, we summarize recent research on collective angst (i.e., concern for one's group's future vitality) and collective nostalgia (i.e., sentimental longing for the in-group's past) and emphasize their interconnections and predictive utility. We also put forth the supposition that the source of the collective angst that group members are feeling can influence the content of collective nostalgia (i.e., what group members are longing for), which has consequences for the attitudes and actions that group members will support to protect the group's vitality. Political rhetoric tends to capitalize on the relation between these emotions by making specific existential threats salient to elicit specific associated collective nostalgizing, followed by promises to “bring back the good old days”—days when the source of the threat was (ostensibly) absent. In sum, the content of collective nostalgia matters for understanding what action tendencies group members will support to assuage the specific (perceived) threats to their group.

Keywords

group-based emotions, collective nostalgia, collective angst, populism, memory, political psychology

In many contemporary social groups (e.g., national, religious, cultural), there is a growing belief that unwanted change is afoot (Bonnett, 2016; Duyvendak, 2011). Such an appraisal often elicits collective angst—a group-based emotion that reflects concern about the in-group's future (see Wohl, Squires, & Caouette, 2012, for a review). Because collective angst is aversive, group members are motivated to find ways to assuage their concerns. One way to respond to such feelings of anxiety about the in-group's future is to cling to the cherished collective past. Such *collective nostalgia* (i.e., sentimental longing for the in-group's past; see Smeekes et al., 2018) may be a functional coping mechanism in times of change and uncertainty about the group's future. This is because the past provides a road map for how to protect the in-group's future. Put differently, the stories group members tell about their group's past inform members who they are, where they came from, and where they are going (Liu & Hilton, 2005), and in so doing, they illustrate what needs to be protected to ensure the in-group's future vitality.

However, the stories that group members tell of their group and nostalgize about are not necessarily uniform or coherent (see Liu & Hilton, 2005). Moreover, they are highly susceptible to alteration and manipulation—a fact that group leaders often use in the name of achieving their goals for the in-group and galvanizing group members to support actions that will help achieve those goals. Populist leaders, for example, often use slogans (e.g., Donald Trump's “Make America Great Again”) as a shorthand that simultaneously depicts the in-group as being under threat and calls for the group to return to its roots (as defined by the populist leader) to secure its future. In this article, we put forth the supposition that collective angst and collective nostalgia are two distinct but interrelated group-based emotions. In so doing, we extend current thinking by underscoring the

Corresponding Author:

Michael J. A. Wohl, Carleton University, Department of Psychology, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1S 5B6
E-mail: michael.wohl@carleton.ca

utility in accounting for the interplay between group-based emotions in both theory and research that seek to understand intra- and intergroup attitudes and behaviors. We also direct needed attention to the signal provided by the content of the group-based emotions being experienced—a signal that can illuminate when group members endorse constructive versus destructive actions to safeguard the in-group.

We Were. We Are. Will We Be? The Antecedents and Consequences of Collective Angst

As was the case for our ancestors, belonging to a social group provides both psychological and physical benefits (Caporael, 1997). Among other things, group membership can bolster a sense of self-worth through the reflected appraisal of valued groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986); validate our belief systems (Hogg & Abrams, 1993); fulfill members' basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, and relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kachanoff, Wohl, Koestner, & Taylor, 2020); and provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollodge, & Scabini, 2006). In sum, social groups can afford members a sense of psychological equanimity. Thus, people can be extremely affected when a cherished social group is perceived to be under existential threat, even when the personal self is not implicated (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Lewin, 1948; Wohl et al., 2012).

In fact, decades of empirical work stemming from intergroup-emotions theory (Smith, 1999) have provided clear evidence that people can and do feel emotions that stem from appraisals of group-relevant (as opposed to personally relevant) events. Although emotional states are typically seen as arising from personal experiences and concerns, emotions can also be felt because of one's group membership. One such group-based emotion—collective angst—is experienced when the future vitality of the cherished in-group is perceived to be under existential threat (see Wohl et al., 2012, and Dupuis, Porat, & Wohl, 2015, for reviews). As shown by Tabri, Wohl, and Caouette (2018), collective angst is particularly likely to arise in the presence of three specific appraisals: (a) high harm probability (i.e., perceiving a possible future harm to the group as probable), (b) high harm severity (i.e., perceiving a future possible harm to the in-group as severe), and (c) low collective efficacy (i.e., perceiving the in-group as not capable of taking action to protect against a future possible harm). However, these appraisals of threats to the group's future may be removed from the group members' current lived experience. French Canadians, for example, have been shown to report collective angst

about their culture and language, even though both are currently thriving (Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010).

Importantly, collective angst is functional in that it motivates group members to reduce or eliminate threats to the group's vitality, with the ultimate goal of ensuring a secure future. This can be accomplished in socially constructive ways or socially destructive ways. For example, Wohl, Giguère, Branscombe, and McVicar (2011) showed that both Jews and French Canadians who experience collective angst are more apt to constructively fortify their group through donating money to in-group organizations. Moreover, Halperin, Porat, and Wohl (2013) showed that collective angst can lead group members (Jewish Israelis) to take a conciliatory position with an adversary group (Palestinians) when that conciliatory position is perceived to help the in-group's future vitality (a lasting peace). However, collective angst may also lead group members to lash out at groups seen as undermining the in-group's future vitality. People who feel collective angst express more anti-immigration sentiments (Jetten & Wohl, 2012), express support for extreme militant behavior against an adversary group (Wohl, King, & Taylor, 2014), and are more forgiving of the in-group for harmful actions taken against an adversary group (Wohl & Branscombe, 2009). In fact, group members have been shown to use collective angst as a tool (i.e., they seek information that elicits collective angst) to justify harmful action against an adversary group (Porat, Tamir, Wohl, Gur, & Halperin, 2019). What has yet to receive attention are the factors that direct group members to engage in one type of in-group protective behavior versus another when feeling collective angst.

Emotion Interplay: Collective Nostalgia as a Manifestation of Collective Angst

From the days of Socrates to the present, theorists (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Kreibig & Gross, 2017; Scherer, 1984) have argued that emotions can influence each other. Not only can people experience more than one emotion at a time (e.g., happiness and sadness; Stanley & Meyer, 2009), but emotions can also regulate each another (i.e., positive emotions can help people modulate and recover from negative emotional states; see Izard, 2009). Likewise, at the intergroup level, group members may experience a sequencing of emotions that produce unique behavioral effects (Smith & Mackie, 2006). Unfortunately, researchers who study group-based emotions have, by and large, neglected this fact. Here, we contend that the influence of one emotion on another may help explain why the behavioral tendencies associated with an emotion (e.g., collective angst) may vary (donating to an in-group organization

vs. supporting policies that restrict out-groups) while the goal of a given emotion remains constant (protecting the in-group's future).

In times of unwanted social change, group members often feel there is a growing disconnection or collective discontinuity with the past (Sani, 2008; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015; Vignoles et al., 2006). This sense of disconnection can yield existential concern (i.e., collective angst) about what will become of the group if the unwanted social change goes unchecked (Jetten & Wohl, 2012). We contend that such concern not only focuses group members' attention on what unfavorable outcomes the future may hold but also results in a sentimental longing for the in-group's past (i.e., collective nostalgia)—a collective past that no longer exists (or has never existed) that is viewed through rose-colored glasses as “the good old days,” when times were more safe and secure.

Sociological, anthropological, and historical perspectives on collective nostalgia (e.g., Boym, 2001; Davis, 1979; Hewison, 1987; Milligan, 2003) suggest that it is a resource for people who perceive that their group's identity continuity is under threat. The reason is that, on the basis of awareness of a shared past, collective nostalgia helps clarify for members which aspects of their group they value and need to protect to ensure the group's future. Put differently, collective nostalgia offers a window to the core features that define the in-group—the set of ideas, feelings, and beliefs about the in-group's authentic attributes (Duyvendak, 2011; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015; Wildschut, Bruder, Robertson, van Tilburg, & Sedikides, 2014). Thus, collective nostalgia is an important outcome of collective angst because it shapes what aspects of the group's identity members will fight to protect (and what actions group members may take to protect the in-group's future).

Providing empirical support for this supposition, Smeekes and colleagues (2018) assessed whether collective angst triggered collective nostalgia in approximately 6,000 participants across 27 countries. Among other things, participants were asked the extent to which they (a) were concerned about the future of their country (e.g., “I am worried about the future vitality of [country]”), (b) longed for their country's past (e.g., “I often think back about the good old days”), (c) had a sense of belonging to the country (e.g., “Although at times I may not agree with the government, my commitment to [country] always remains strong.”), and (d) opposed immigration (e.g., “Immigrants are a threat to the [country's] identity”). Results revealed that collective angst was related to collective nostalgia, which subsequently translated into higher feelings of in-group belonging but also increased opposition to immigration. Thus, similar to collective angst, collective nostalgia can

lead to both constructive and destructive attitudes and behavioral tendencies (see also Smeekes, 2015, 2019).

Indeed, nostalgizing about the in-group's past increases exclusionist understandings of in-group identity and negative attitudes toward out-groups (i.e., groups that one does not belong to; Smeekes, Verkuyten, & Martinovic, 2015; Wildschut et al., 2014). For example, reactionary anti-immigrant movements that stem from existential concerns about the group's future are partially explained by collective nostalgia for a return to the “purer” society of the past (Mols & Jetten, 2014). However, collective nostalgia can also serve to increase people's positive regard and tangible support for their group (Wildschut et al., 2014). Interestingly, the literature has yet to illuminate when and why collective nostalgia leads group members to pursue reconnection to the in-group's past by constructive or destructive means.

The Content of the Emotional Experience Matters

As demonstrated in Smeekes et al. (2018), collective nostalgia that has been induced by collective angst can have more than one outcome. To better gauge what attitudes and action tendencies will be elicited when collective nostalgia is experienced, we contend that attention should be focused on the signal that is provided by the content of collective nostalgia. That is, it is important to know what group members are nostalgizing about. Understanding collective memory (i.e., representations of group members' shared past; Liu & Hilton, 2005) is paramount to this endeavor because it serves as a repository of potential nostalgic content. However, this repository is not etched in stone. Depending on group members' current needs and goals, different aspects of the past may be selectively brought to light or forgotten (e.g., Sahdra & Ross, 2007). In a process called *reconsolidation*, nuances about past events can be lost and misinformation added (Shaw, 2016), and thus group members (and leaders in particular) may (consciously or not) distort their memories to achieve group-based goals.

The reconsolidation process is, in part, dependent on the (perceived) source of threat experienced, which can be easily manipulated by political leaders. Wohl, Stefaniak, and Smeekes (2020), for example, predicted and found that when people feel (or are manipulated to feel) existential threat stemming from unwanted social and cultural change, they long for a past in which their society was more culturally and religiously homogeneous (and experience *homogeneity-focused nostalgia*). Conversely, a belief that the future of the group is threatened by hostility toward out-groups, which deviates from the group's moral core, elicited nostalgia for

a time in which the society was more open to cultural and religious diversity (i.e., *openness-focused nostalgia*). Additionally, Stefaniak and Wohl (2019) found that homogeneity-focused nostalgia was linked with more negative attitudes toward ethnic and social out-groups (Jews, Muslims, refugees, and gays) and was more prevalent among Republican Party voters, whereas openness-focused nostalgia was associated with less social distance toward out-groups and was more prevalent among Democratic Party voters. This more nuanced conceptualization broadens the traditional understanding of collective nostalgia as the domain of conservatives (Lammers & Baldwin, 2018) and as an emotion that leads to solely negative intergroup outcomes.

A conceptualization of group-based emotions that takes into consideration the content of the emotional experience also has important implications for understanding the influence of political rhetoric on the attitudes and behaviors of a given constituency. Populist politicians, for example, frequently use nostalgic rhetoric to appeal to people who feel that they are losing out and to instill such feelings in others (Gaston & Hilhorst, 2018). They do so by focusing constituents on a particular threat (e.g., immigrants, the lack of affordable health care) and by manipulating collective memory by portraying the group's past as being devoid of that threat (e.g., a homogenous past, a past when group members could access affordable health care). Moreover, the past is positioned as having been unequivocally positive. The populist leader then promises to bring back past greatness by eliminating the source of the threat (e.g., closed borders, regulating the insurance industry).

Summary and Future Directions

Focusing on the interplay between collective angst and collective nostalgia allows for a better understanding of how people attempt to maintain or rebuild a coherent sense of social identity in the face of social change. Moreover, a signal is provided by the contents of these group-based emotions—a signal that the resulting attitudes and behavioral intentions will be either constructive (e.g., supporting the in-group) or destructive (e.g., prejudice against out-groups) in the name of protecting the group's future.

In light of the electoral success of populist politicians who upregulate (or instill) a sense of existential threat in their electorates and then promise to bring back “the good old days” when these threats did not exist, investigations of collective angst and collective nostalgia (and their interplay) are particularly pertinent. We call on researchers to extend the work detailed here by exploring the relations between different sources of

existential threat to the in-group and the types of nostalgic content that group members turn to (e.g., nostalgia for a more stable economy in countries undergoing an economic crisis), as well as their attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Research that employs a longitudinal design should provide strong evidence for the exact nature of their temporal dynamics.

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ORCID iD

Michael J. A. Wohl  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6945-5562>

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