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Review

Collective nostalgia as a balm for the distressed social identity

Michael J. A. Wohl¹, Anna Stefaniak² and Anouk Smeekes³**Abstract**

Group history provides the experiential building blocks that shape social identity. When contemporary events are perceived as having created (or creating) a discontinuity with that history, collective nostalgia is likely to be elicited. Importantly, collective nostalgia is functional—it consolidates social identity, motivating group members to support a return to the group's "true" state of existence. However, no group is a monolith. Factions within a group may have differing opinions on what aspects of the past best represent core features of the ingroup. Variations in the content of the collective nostalgia can cleavage members' responses. Herein, we review research demonstrating the powerful role collective nostalgia and its contents play in intra- and intergroup relations, especially in the socio-political domain.

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"Je me souviens [I remember]"

The motto affixed to the license plate on cars in the Canadian Province of Quebec announces, "I remember". What is its meaning and psychological significance? Although an official interpretation has never been provided by the Quebec government, there is relative

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consensus that the motto is a directive to French Canadians/Quebecois to remember they were conquered by the English [1]. In this way, the "I" in "I remember" is subversive. It is a collective call to action. Specifically, with three (French) words, the emotive use of Quebec's history makes Quebecois' social identity salient and distressed about what has been lost to the English. Prominently, the words are tinted with longing for when Quebecois had the power of self-determination (i.e., control over the land they settled). As the years of social movements aimed at achieving Quebec sovereignty from Canada suggest, the collective nostalgizing (i.e., sentimental longing or wistful reflection) captured by the motto is functional—it increases group members' desire to return to being 'la belle province' [the beautiful province] and propels them toward collective action.

In line with the Quebec experience, in the current article we review the small but growing body of empirical literature on collective nostalgia and its socio-political implications. We show this group-based emotion motivates group members to support (and engage in) collective action framed as helping to bring their group's past into the present. In this way, collective nostalgia is a balm for the distressed social identity in that it provides a route (and root) to protect the future. We also underscore the need to consider what group members are reminiscing about (i.e., collective nostalgia content). Although there is predictive utility in knowing whether group members are experiencing collective nostalgia, our (data-based) opinion is that such generalized nostalgia is but a blunt object for understanding attempts to (re)claim a perceived (or real) cherished past. When the specific content of the collective nostalgizing is understood, variance in group members' socio-political attitudes and behaviors can be better explicated.

Collective nostalgia: using the past to control the future

Group history is cornerstone of social identity—the part of the self that is derived from membership in a social group [2]. This is because it is the primary source for allegories that inform members about the nature of their group (i.e., core group values, beliefs, and norms) and its composition (i.e., who group members are, who belongs and who does not) [3–5]. These representations of the group are weaved together and then positioned as evidence for the group's enduring temporal collective

continuity [6,7]. Even though change is inevitable, the prospect of change and disconnection (or *collective discontinuity*) [8] with aspects of the group's past is often perceived to be a threat to the group's *raison d'être* [reason for being] [9]. The emotional outcome is collective nostalgia for a bygone time when the threat was not present and collective continuity was secure [10–14].

The experience of collective nostalgia should not be mistaken for benign daydreaming about the group's past. Support for ingroup advancing political action or policies typically hums against the backdrop of a yearning to uphold or return to the group's core values or foundational membership (often these are one and the same). This group-based emotion focuses group member's attention on the perceived cause of the collective discontinuity, which can have ramifications for intra- and intergroup relations. For instance, Smeekes and Verkuyten [15] showed that Dutch participants who were manipulated to feel collective discontinuity expressed greater willingness to restrict religious expression rights of Muslims. Put differently, when collective continuity is perceived to be under threat, the desire to thicken the border between what constitutes "us" and what constitutes "them" strengthens [16,17].

Indeed, discontinuity-induced collective nostalgia has been shown to be a primary emotional source of negative attitudes towards national minorities and collective action intentions against immigration in the Netherlands [17–19], negative views of newcomers in organizational [20] and urban transition [21], and greater support for in-group benefitting collective action [18,19,22]. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that political leaders often use collective nostalgia to galvanize the electorate to support a particular political party and/or politician [23]. Collective nostalgia is the corrective used to assuage the distress that group members are experiencing due to an array of often complex socio-political realities. Specifically, framing a particular aspect of the ingroup's past as cherished and core to its identity, then suggesting that the ingroup is losing touch with that past, and espousing that specific action can bring about a better future by returning to the past, can gin up collective action. Arguably, a real-world example of this process was on display during the January 6th 2021 insurrection at the American Capitol building. Specifically, a line can be drawn from the insurrection to Donald Trump's populist and nostalgia-based "Make America Great Again" rhetoric—rhetoric that insinuated America was under existential threat, and that protecting the future necessarily entailed reclaiming (a populist right-wing vision of) the past.

Providing empirical evidence for the link between collective nostalgia and support for populist right-wing politics, Smeekes et al. [24] collected data from a

representative sample of over 1000 native Dutch citizens and asked them to report, among other things, the extent to which they felt national nostalgia (i.e., longing for the Netherlands of the past) and support for populist radical right parties (PRRP) in their country. As hypothesized, higher national nostalgia was associated with stronger support for PRRP, and this was in part due to national nostalgia's association with endorsement of PRRP's nativist ideology (i.e., ethnic nationhood and anti-Muslim attitudes). These results, as well as the results of other research [25], provide the impression that collective nostalgia is inherently tied to conservatism. In the following section, we propose that collective nostalgia should not be understood as intrinsically conservative/right-wing, but rather as a longing for the collective past that can be experienced by individuals across the political spectrum.

What are they yearning for?

Memories are subjective [26]. Consequently, representations of group history are biased accounts of the past [27] and are often distorted to maintain a positive view of the group [28]. Importantly, despite a tendency to appraise one's ingroup as a coherent entity [29,30], members are not monolithic in terms of the elements of a group's past that they cherish (i.e., perceive to be positive). Representations of ingroup history and their associated memories are constructed to be consistent with the member's schema of the group, and there is within-group variance in the schema group members possess [31]. Thus, simply asking group members whether they feel collective nostalgia without specifying the exact elements of the past that elicit these feelings, may result in spurious findings about ingroup sentiment and erroneous conclusions about the very nature of collective nostalgia.

For instance, research and theory that has examined collective nostalgia broadly (i.e., without focusing on particular elements of the past) has positioned this group-based emotion to be conservative in nature [25,32,33]. Providing support for this supposition, Smeekes and colleagues [10,18,19] observed a positive association between reported collective nostalgia and a conservative political orientation as well as support for policies and collective forms of action that are traditionally espoused by individuals on the conservative end of the political spectrum (e.g., negative perceptions about immigrants and racial minorities) (see also [10,16]). However, recent theorising by Wohl et al. [13,34] and emerging research [14,35–37] has illustrated that not all nostalgizing leans politically conservative. Socio-political realities and education [13,35], and even a group member's personality [37], may result in nostalgizing about elements of group history that are decidedly more liberal.

Wohl *et al.* [14], for example, showed variance in the content of the collective nostalgia group members report. Specifically, although some Americans reported longing for a more homogeneous society (traditionally a conservative sentiment), other Americans reported longing for a more open and tolerant society (traditionally a more liberal sentiment) [see 38]. Interestingly, when both liberal and conservative types of collective nostalgia are investigated, conservatives and liberals report similar levels of this group-based emotion (i.e., they simply differ in nostalgic content) [36].

Variance in the content of the collective nostalgia reported had implication for intergroup attitudes. Participants who expressed longing for a more open society reported less anti-immigration sentiments and less blatant prejudice against Muslims compared to those who expressed longing for a more homogeneous society. Wohl *et al.* [14] also found that more liberal-oriented collective nostalgia content (i.e., openness-focused) can be experimentally upregulated, which resulted in more support for liberal attitudes and policies. Stefaniak *et al.* [35] also demonstrated this effect in a real world setting via a large-scale intervention with Polish youth. Over the course of a four-session workshop, participants were taught about historical co-existence between Christians and Jews in Poland. A workshop evaluation study revealed that the intervention increased nostalgia for a more open Polish society, whereas nostalgia for a more homogenous society decreased. A downstream consequence was more tolerant intergroup attitudes. To the point, collective nostalgia content matters.

Looking forward to future collective nostalgia research

The reviewed literature suggests that collective nostalgia may be critical for understanding an array of socio-political phenomena. For instance, knowing that group members experience longing for greater ethnic homogeneity, explains that they might not place priority on achieving harmonious intergroup relations in the present. Populist leaders are remarkably adept at manipulating representations of the past to elicit positive perceptions of the ingroup and antagonistic attitudes toward others (e.g., immigrants) [39]. As Blight [40] observed, “deflections and evasions, careful remembering and necessary forgetting, and embittered and irreconcilable versions of experience are all the stuff of historical memory” (p. 5). Collective nostalgia—or more precisely, the specific history that group members value and yearn to return to—places a dreamy, wistful aura on the past that may be removed from historical fact. Put simply, a representation of group history (e.g., America as a traditionally White nation) need not be tethered to reality [3–5,41] and can be easily

manipulated [36,42]. Consequently, collective nostalgia content can be leveraged to justify and promote collective action—on the left and right side of the political spectrum—in the name of promoting ingroup vitality and survival [13,34].

Indeed, collective nostalgia is a powerful tool that should not be underestimated, in both the political arena and research endeavours. For instance, collective nostalgia (particularly homogeneity-focused nostalgizing) may help explicate support for strong non-democratic leaders—leaders who position themselves as being uniquely capable of bringing back the group’s past glory should they only have unconstrained authority. Additionally, within-group variance in collective nostalgia may be central to ingroup schisms. When factions within a group long to bring back different (and potentially contradictory) aspects of the ingroup’s past, polarization and splintering may result. We call on researchers to take the content of group member’s nostalgic reflections into consideration when testing the antecedents and consequences of this group-based emotion. Doing so will yield greater predictive utility than a general, non-specific measure (e.g., “I am nostalgic for my group’s past”).

Conclusion

Akin to personal nostalgia, members of social groups can experience sentimental longing for the past. However, the memories recalled reflect how the group used to be as opposed to one’s personal past. Nonetheless, the goal is constant—restoration of the past in the present. For this reason, collective nostalgia has been equated with a desire to maintain the status quo and has thus been aligned with a conservative ideology. However, emerging theory and research has demonstrated within-group variance in collective nostalgia and thus what aspects of the group’s past require restoration. We contend that accounting for the content of collective nostalgia is necessary to truly appreciate this group-based emotion and to improve our understanding of when and why it is a powerful driver of both socially and politically constructive (e.g., positive intergroup attitudes) and destructive (e.g., an antagonistic posture toward outgroups) outcomes. Doing so will increase predictive utility as well as the emotion’s practical functionality.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence (bias) their work.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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