

Summary

A Study of Existential Function of Personal and Simulated Nostalgia

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Previous studies manifested that nostalgia –a longing for past- (Hepper et. al., 2012) serves psychological functions such as positive mood, higher self-esteem, powerful social relationships and the perception of meaningful life that facilitates to cope with existential anxieties (e.g., Routledge et al., 2008, 2011). These nostalgia studies ignored the anxiety buffering role of a longing for “indirectly experienced” past which was described as historical or simulated nostalgia (Batcho, 1998; Holbrook, 1993; Stern, 1992). For closing this gap, this study aimed to observe the associations of simulated and personal nostalgia activation with death anxiety.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia studies can be collected under three titles: (1) nostalgia as an individual variable, (2) triggers of nostalgia, and (3) functions of nostalgia. First group of studies asserted that people can differ across their nostalgia proneness (Barrett et. al., 2010) and showed associations of nostalgia proneness with other individual variables such as gender and temperament and its stableness over time (e.g., Batcho, 1998; Holbrook, 1993). Second group of studies were about triggers of nostalgia and found that internal (negative feelings, social exclusion, loneliness, meaningless, existential terror, discontinuity between past and future and boredom) and external (song or music, lyrics, odors, objects and events from childhood, cold ambient air) factors can effect nostalgic feelings (see Sedikides et. al., 2015 for a review). Lastly, third group of studies were about functions of nostalgia and found that nostalgia has four psychological functions as higher self-esteem, positive affect, strong social relations and inducing meaning to one’s life (Routledge et. al., 2011; Sedikides et. al., 2004; Wildschut et. al., 2006). The focus of the current study was on its existential function.

Personal and Simulated Nostalgia

Davis (1979) stated that individuals are not able

to feel true nostalgic feelings about events or periods which they never experienced. However, other researchers focused on longing for past feelings about events that people didn’t experience directly and concluded that historical and simulative events and periods can also lead to nostalgic feelings. (Baker ve Kennedy, 1994; Batcho, 1998; Holbrook, 1993; Stern, 1992).

Simulated nostalgia term seems more accurate than historical nostalgia when we think about not directly experienced nostalgia, because historical periods in people’s minds are mostly constructed and the border between reality and fictional events are blurred. These events don’t need to have actually happened for triggering nostalgia. Thus, current study used personal-simulated nostalgia distinction. Personal nostalgia refers to bitter-sweet longing for directly experienced past, while simulated nostalgia refers to indirectly experienced past (Baker ve Kennedy, 1994).

Existential Function of Nostalgia

Thinking about an uncertain and uncontrollable universe in which death is inevitable and time of date is uncertain may lead people to feel meaningless (Becker, 1973; Solomon et. al., 1991, 2004). Beyond its threat against meaning of life, however, there is also a positive side of “mental time traveling”: It can also induce meaning to life by evoking nostalgic feelings (Sedikides et. al., 2015).

In sum, previous studies showed that nostalgia increases social connectedness (Wildschut et. al., 2006) and meaning of life (Routledge et. al., 2011) and it is also associated with death anxiety (Juhl et. al., 2010). However, these studies didn’t make a distinction between directly experienced nostalgia and indirectly experienced nostalgia. For closing this gap, the current study aimed to investigate the associations of personal nostalgia and simulated nostalgia with reduced death anxiety.

Method

Participants

136 (93 females, 43 males) undergraduate students ranging from 18 to 33 years of age ($M = 21.48$, $SD = 2.08$) from a university which is located in the west side of Turkey were participated in the study.

Measurements and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to three groups (simulated nostalgia, personal nostalgia and control group, $n = 45$ in each condition). They were instructed to read the cards asking them to think about "a historical period which they didn't experience by themselves and about which they can say "those days were better" (*Please think about a historical period or an event which you didn't experienced by yourself and about which you can say that "those days were better"*) in the simulated nostalgia condition, a nostalgic event from their life (*Please think about a nostalgic event from your life. Please try to think about an event which makes you feel more nostalgic*) in the personal nostalgia condition or an ordinary event from their life (*Please think about an ordinary event from your life*) in the control condition.

Participants of all conditions were asked to report their nostalgic feelings (1: *I don't have nostalgic feelings* to 6: *I have nostalgic feelings*) just after the nostalgia manipulations. Then, participants filled out the Turkish version (Akça & Köse, 2008) of Death Anxiety Scale (Templer, 1970).

Results

Two separate univariate analysis were conducted in order to see whether reported nostalgia feelings and death anxiety scores differentiated across three conditions (personal nostalgia group, simulated nostalgia group and control group).

The results of first univariate analysis of variance showed that the differences between the reports for nostalgic feelings for three groups were statistically significant, $F(2, 133) = 5.72$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .079$. LSD test showed that personal nostalgia group ($M = 4.08$, $SE = .24$) had reported higher nostalgic feelings than the control group ($M = 2.91$, $SE = .25$, $p = .001$). However, no significant differences were found between reported nostalgic feelings of simulated nostalgia group ($M = 3.58$, $SE = .26$) and the other two groups, $p = .06$.

Secondly, an analysis of covariance was conducted in order to see whether participants' death anxiety scores differentiated across different nostalgia groups. For the analysis of the differences by death anxiety, gender was controlled for, $F(1, 132) = 23.24$, $p < .001$, partial η^2

$= .150$. Women ($M = 3.77$, $SE = .08$) had higher death anxiety scores than men ($M = 3.11$, $SE = .12$), $t(134) = 4.54$, $p < .001$. ANCOVA showed that the differences between the scores of death anxiety for three nostalgia groups were statistically significant, $F(2, 132) = 6.26$, $p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .087$. LSD test showed that personal nostalgia group ($M = 3.44$; $SE = .11$) had lower death anxiety scores than the control group ($M = 3.87$; $SE = .11$), $p = .002$. Similarly, simulated nostalgia group ($M = 3.37$, $SE = .12$) had lower death anxiety scores than the control group, $p = .003$.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to observe the associations of simulated and personal nostalgia activation with death anxiety. The results demonstrated that participants in personal nostalgia group have lower death anxiety scores than those in control group. This finding was in accordance with previous studies which found that more nostalgic thoughts and higher nostalgia proneness are related with lower existential anxiety (Juhl et al., 2010; Routledge et al., 2008, 2011; Wildschut et al., 2006). According to those researchers, nostalgia evokes feelings of being a part of a community by satisfying the need to belong, and by making life meaningful. Besides, nostalgia is a socially and personally advantageous terror management strategy compared to other terror management strategies which include derogating out-groups or taking unnecessary health risks (e.g., sun-tanning) in the service of self-esteem maintenance (Routledge et al., 2008). However, there are some contradictory findings about its negative implications (Iyer & Jetten, 2011; Smeekes et al., 2015). Future studies should be conducted to reveal its *side effects*.

Relative to participants in the control condition, those in the simulated nostalgia condition reported less death anxiety. No previous work, to our knowledge, addressed existential function of simulated nostalgia. This finding indicates that like personal nostalgia, historical nostalgia could decrease death anxiety, too. However, participants were free to choose the event or period that makes them feel nostalgic. Future studies may also address the specific feature of the event or period and its associations with individual variables.

The results showed that participants in personal nostalgia group reported higher nostalgic feelings than those in control group. However, there was no significant difference between simulated nostalgia and control condition for reported nostalgic feelings. This is an important limitation of this study. However, it might mean that while both types of nostalgia decrease death anxiety, people didn't perceive or name them in the same way.

People mostly think about personally meaningful and happy moments from their childhood or moments with their relatives, when they were asked to think about a nostalgic event (Hepper et. al., 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that only personal nostalgia group thought themselves as feeling nostalgia.

These results might present an explanation for the success of organizations which use nostalgia effectively. For instance, people may be more likely to vote for a political party which establishes a bond with the history of the country or a company can make better sales when it reproduces an old product. Although many politicians use old figures, past events and periods for propaganda, it is surprising that few studies were conducted about the use of nostalgia in predicting political behaviors. Future studies should close this gap.

In conclusion, the results showed that both personal and simulated nostalgia serve to provide a defense against the existential threat of death anxiety.