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Individual differences in nostalgia proneness: The integrating role of the need to belong

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ABSTRACT

Who is the nostalgia-prone person? The 'sociality view' sees an individual who frequently recalls meaningful memories rich in social content. The 'maladaptation view' sees an emotionally unstable, neurotic individual. In four studies, we integrated these contrasting views. We hypothesized that the link between neuroticism and nostalgia proneness arises because (a) neuroticism is associated with the need to belong and (b) the need to belong triggers nostalgia, with its abundant social content. Consistent with this hypothesis, Studies 1–2 found that the correlation between neuroticism and nostalgia proneness was eliminated when controlling for the need to belong. The need to belong predicted increased nostalgia proneness, above and beyond neuroticism. Specifically, Study 2 revealed that a deficit-reduction (rather than growth) belongingness orientation predicted increased nostalgia proneness. When the role of this deficit-reduction belongingness orientation was controlled, the positive correlation between neuroticism and nostalgia disappeared. Studies 3–4 showed that experimental inductions of a belongingness deficit augmented nostalgia, providing support for its compensatory role.

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1. Introduction

The capacity for mental time travel enables individuals to reflect on meaningful past experiences. The recollection of such distinctive, personal memories often elicits nostalgia. Adopting a prototype approach, according to which people's understanding of nostalgia is shaped by repeated experience and becomes cognitively organized around a prototype (Rosch, 1978), Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2012) reported that laypersons conceptualize nostalgia as a predominantly positive, social, and past-oriented emotion. In nostalgic reverie, one remembers an event from one's past—typically a fond, meaningful memory (e.g., childhood, close relationship). One often reflects on the memory through rose-tinted glasses, misses that time or person, and may even long to return to the past. Consequently, one feels sentimental, most often happy but with a tinge of longing. These lay concep-

tions of nostalgia dovetail with formal definitions; *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) defines nostalgia as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (p. 1266). Experimentally-induced nostalgia increases positive affect, elevates self-regard, fosters social connectedness, and instils a sense of meaning in life (Routledge et al., 2011; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Whereas this evidence pertains to the psychological functions of momentary nostalgia (state nostalgia), the causes and consequences of individual differences in nostalgia proneness (trait nostalgia) are underexplored.

We distinguish between two contrasting views on nostalgia proneness. The 'sociality view' emphasizes the rich social repertoire of nostalgic memories. Content analyses revealed that nostalgic recollections typically involve meaningful interactions with close others, such as family members, partners, and friends (Wildschut et al., 2006). Also, linguistic analyses showed that nostalgic narratives (compared to ordinary autobiographical narratives) contain more first-person plural pronouns (e.g., “we”, “ours”) and social words (e.g., “mother”, “friend”) (Robertson, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Vingerhoets, in preparation). Furthermore, persons who are high (vs. low) in nostalgia proneness manifest a stronger preference for activities (Batcho, 1998) and song lyrics

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(Batcho, DaRin, Nave, & Yaworsky, 2008) in which social relationships are central.

In contrast, the ‘maladaptation view’ entails that nostalgia proneness is a form of emotional instability or depression (for reviews, see: Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). Scholars adopting this view advocate that nostalgia is a retreat into the past stemming from an inability to deal with the demands of adulthood. For example, Castelnovo-Tedesco (1980) described the nostalgia-prone person as enamoured with the past, unhappy with the present, and afraid of the future. Consistent with this view, research showed that neuroticism is positively linked with nostalgia proneness (Barrett et al., 2010). Definitions of neuroticism vary somewhat, but it is commonly understood to involve negative emotionality/affect and emotional instability (Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992; Widiger, 2009).

The primary objective of this article was to integrate the ‘sociality’ and ‘maladaptation’ views. This integration rests on two propositions. First, neuroticism is related to the need to belong (NTB). Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined NTB as a “need for frequent, nonaversive interactions within ongoing relational bonds” (p. 497). Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, and Schreindorfer (2006) subsequently developed the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS), which operationalized NTB as the strength of individuals’ concern with being accepted, and not being rejected, by others. A strong NTB, to the extent that it renders one susceptible to others’ approval or disapproval, should be related positively to neuroticism. This is because neuroticism, in its original meaning of emotional instability (Hofstee et al., 1992; Widiger, 2009), refers to whether one’s emotions depend strongly on external and therefore varying circumstances. Indeed, Leary et al. reported a positive correlation between neuroticism and the NTBS.

Our second proposition is that NTB triggers nostalgia. Deficiencies in social connectedness elicit a range of compensatory mechanisms. Gardner, Pickett, and Knowles (2005) made a distinction between direct and indirect compensatory strategies. Direct strategies are engaged when suitable interaction partners are available, and are geared toward forming or repairing relationships with these individuals. Indirect strategies are engaged when suitable interaction partners are not readily available, and rely on mental representations of social bonds as a source of social connectedness. We propose that nostalgia can serve as an indirect strategy for coping with belongingness deficits. Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, and Gao (2008) illustrated this restorative function of nostalgia. They found, first, that loneliness was associated with, and caused, decreased perceived social support. Second, loneliness was associated with, and caused, increased nostalgia. Third, nostalgia was associated with, and caused, increased perceived social support. Thus, whereas loneliness directly decreased perceived social support, it indirectly increased perceived social support via nostalgia. Nostalgia, with its fertile social content, thwarted the detrimental influence of belongingness deficits.

We attempted to integrate the ‘sociality’ and ‘maladaptation’ views of nostalgia proneness in four studies. Study 1 examined whether the correlation between neuroticism and nostalgia can be explained by their shared association with NTB. Study 2 differentiated between two facets of NTB: growth and deficit-reduction belongingness orientations (Lavigne, Vallerand, & Crevier-Braud, 2011). Specifically, this study tested the hypothesis that the deficit-reduction (but not growth) orientation accounts for the relation between neuroticism and nostalgia. Studies 3 and 4 evaluated the causal hypothesis that belongingness deficits trigger nostalgia.

2. Study 1

We administered validated measures of neuroticism, nostalgia proneness, and NTB. We expected that the positive correlation

between neuroticism and nostalgia would be reduced when controlling for NTB. We further expected that NTB would be positively correlated with nostalgia when controlling for neuroticism.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Five hundred thirty-three members of the Dutch public (272 females) volunteered for an online survey ($M_{AGE} = 40.11$, $SD_{AGE} = 12.62$, range = 13–64). Materials were presented on a website hosted by Tilburg University. The sample was heterogeneous with respect to age, relationship status, and educational background. To adhere to strict space limitations on the survey, we used brief assessments. We obtained complete responses from 527 participants.

2.1.2. Procedure

We assessed nostalgia proneness with the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (SNS; Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008). This scale consists of a definition of the word nostalgia (‘a sentimental longing for the past’) followed by five items that assess nostalgic tendencies (e.g., “How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?”; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We averaged the items to create a nostalgia index ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.47$). Routledge et al. (2008) provided evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the SNS.

We assessed neuroticism with a single item from the revised Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI-r; Denissen, Geenen, Selfhout, & van Aken, 2008). Participants rated themselves (1 = *extremely like the left adjective pair*, 7 = *extremely like the right adjective pair*) along a bipolar dimension ranging from *anxious, easily upset* to *calm, emotionally stable* ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.54$). Six participants did not complete this item. Denissen et al. provided evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the TIPI-r.

We assessed NTB using the NTBS (Leary et al., 2006). This scale comprises 10 items (e.g., “I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). We averaged the items to form a NTB index ($\alpha = .79$; $M = 3.12$, $SD = .67$). Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, and Cummins (2008) provided evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the NTBS.

For practical reasons, the measures were presented in a single order (NTBS, SNS, neuroticism). Space limitations do not permit us to list additional measures included in the survey, but readers can obtain this information upon request.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Zero-order correlations

Replicating previous findings (Barrett et al., 2010), neuroticism was positively correlated with nostalgia proneness ($r[527] = .14$, $p = .002$). Neuroticism was also positively associated with NTB ($r[527] = .40$, $p < .001$). Finally, as hypothesized, NTB was positively related to nostalgia proneness ($r[527] = .18$, $p < .001$). All correlations remained significant when we controlled for (partialled out) participant age and gender.

2.2.2. First-order partial correlations

Next, we tested the first-order partial correlations among neuroticism, nostalgia, and NTB. As anticipated, when controlling for NTB, the correlation between neuroticism and nostalgia was reduced and no longer significant ($pr[527] = .07$, $p = .102$). In contrast, the correlation between NTB and nostalgia remained significant when controlling for neuroticism ($pr[527] = .14$, $p = .002$), and the correlation between neuroticism and NTB

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