



Dropping the weight stigma: Nostalgia improves attitudes toward persons who are overweight

Rhiannon N. Turner ^{a,*}, Tim Wildschut ^b, Constantine Sedikides ^b

^a University of Leeds, UK

^b University of Southampton, UK

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ABSTRACT

Weight stigma, a negative attitude toward persons who are overweight, can lead to emotional detriment (increased vulnerability to depression and anxiety, decreased self-esteem) and discriminatory practices (denial of employment, lower wages, refusal of job promotion or college admission, healthcare deprivation), which have increased dramatically in the United States over the past decade. We report two experiments that implicate nostalgia as a resource or strategy for weight stigma reduction. We hypothesized and found that nostalgia about an encounter with a person who is overweight improves attitudes toward the group “overweight.” Undergraduates who recalled a nostalgic (vs. ordinary) interaction with an overweight person subsequently showed more positive outgroup attitudes. The effect of nostalgia on outgroup attitudes was mediated by greater inclusion of the outgroup in the self and increased outgroup trust (Experiments 1 and 2), as well as reduced intergroup anxiety and greater perceptions of a common ingroup identity (Experiment 2). The findings have interventional potential.

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Introduction

“... nostalgic memories ... lead to a vivid sense of commonality [which] accelerates the process of acquaintance in a community where formerly only barriers may have existed.”

—Allport, 1954 (p. 454)

Persons who are overweight are perceived as lazy, socially inept, unhappy, ugly, and stupid (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Latner, 2007). This negative attitude, or *weight stigma*, has harmful repercussions for them including increased vulnerability to depression and anxiety, and decreased self-esteem (Puhl & Latner, 2007). Moreover, weight stigma leads to discrimination. Children who are overweight are victimized, verbally abused, and bullied or aggressed against, whereas overweight adults are denied employment, given lower wages, refused job promotion or college admission, and deprived of healthcare (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008; Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Latner, 2007). Weight discrimination has increased by 66% in the past decade in the United States, and is now at least as prevalent as racial discrimination and, in some cases, more prevalent than gender or age discrimination (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell,

2008; Puhl et al., 2008). The root of discriminatory practices, weight stigma, needs to be tackled. We propose and test the idea that nostalgia reduces weight stigma.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia, “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998, p. 1266), was historically regarded a brain malfunction, psychiatric disorder, or variant of depression (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). Recent research, however, has rehabilitated nostalgia. This research indicates that nostalgia is a predominantly positive emotion that serves vital psychological functions (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2011; Juhl, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010; Routledge et al., 2011; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008; Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010; Wildschut, Sedikides, & Cordero, 2011). One such function is social connectedness.

The content of nostalgic narratives is substantially more positive than negative, as naturalistic and laboratory studies demonstrate (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Furthermore, nostalgic narratives are social: during nostalgic reverie, figures from the past become part of one’s present (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, Arndt, & Zhou, 2009). Also, nostalgia, when experimentally induced, engenders perceptions of social support, increases estimates of the number of friends one has, nurtures feelings of being protected and loved, lowers attachment anxiety and

* Corresponding author at: Institute of Psychological Sciences, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK. Fax: +44 113 3435749.

E-mail address: r.n.turner@leeds.ac.uk (R.N. Turner).

attachment avoidance, elevates perceptions of social competence, and fosters a communal or prosocial orientation (Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, & Cordaro, 2010; Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008; Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Shi, & Feng, in press).

In all, nostalgia, through its positivity and capacity to bolster social connectedness, gives rise to “an expansive state of mind” (Kaplan, 1987, p. 465) or an approach orientation (Stephan et al., 2011), whereby one opens up to the possibility of new relationships or others in general. Research on intergroup contact has documented that social interactions between members of different groups must be positive in order to improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). We capitalized on this finding to formulate our hypotheses regarding the role of nostalgia in reducing the weight stigma or improving attitudes toward persons who are overweight.

Consequences of nostalgia for outgroup attitudes

Inclusion of others in the self is a marker of interpersonal closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). When individuals become nostalgic about a known outgroup member, an increased sense of social connectedness will result in greater inclusion of that outgroup member in the self. Provided the group membership of that person is salient (Brown & Hewstone, 2005), inclusion of an outgroup member in the self will result in the inclusion of the entire outgroup in the self. A potential benefit of this is a more positive outgroup evaluation (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Thus, nostalgia about an overweight person will lead to inclusion in the self of the group “overweight,” which in turn will result in improved attitudes toward persons who are overweight.

Nostalgia about an outgroup member may also generate outgroup trust. Trust is a positive expectation about another’s intentions and behavior (Turner et al., 2010). If perceivers experience an increased sense of social connectedness to an outgroup member as a result of nostalgia, they will feel more trusting towards that person. Provided group membership of that person remains salient (Brown & Hewstone, 2005), perceivers will generalize trust from the person to the entire outgroup. Benefits of trust include greater positivity toward the outgroup, and enhanced communication and cooperation (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). Thus, nostalgia about an overweight person will lead to increased trust of the group “overweight,” which in turn will result in improved attitudes toward person who are overweight.

Experiment 1

We tested whether nostalgia counters the weight stigma. In particular, we hypothesized that nostalgia would improve attitudes toward persons who are overweight, and that this effect would be mediated by greater inclusion of the outgroup “overweight” in the self and by higher trust of the outgroup “overweight.”

Method

Participants, design, and procedure

We tested 60 University of Leeds undergraduates (37 females, 23 males; $M_{age} = 20.9$, $Range_{age} = 19–22$, $SD_{age} = .71$; none visibly overweight) in separate cubicles. We randomly assigned these participants to the nostalgia or control condition. We used a modified version of the nostalgia manipulation introduced by Wildschut et al. (2006) and rigorously validated by Hepper et al. (2011). We tailored the current version to the target group “overweight.”

In the *nostalgia condition*, participants were instructed as follows: “According to the Oxford Dictionary, ‘nostalgia’ is defined as a ‘sentimental longing for the past.’ Please bring to mind a nostalgic event in your life that involved interacting with an overweight person. Specifically, try to think of a past event involving an overweight person that makes you feel most nostalgic. Now we would like you to spend five

minutes imagining that you are back at this nostalgic event. Try and immerse yourself into this nostalgic event, remembering what it was like and how you felt at the time you interacted with the overweight person.”

In the *control condition*, participants were instructed as follows: “This is a study on autobiographical memory—that is, on your memory about your past. Please bring to mind an ordinary event in your life that involved interacting with an overweight person. Specifically, try to think of a past event involving an overweight person that is ordinary. Bring to mind an objective record of this event and think it through as though you were a scientist or historian recording factual details. Now we would like you to spend five minutes imagining that you are back at this event. Try and immerse yourself into this autobiographical event, trying to remember exactly what happened at the time you interacted with the overweight person.” In both conditions, participants wrote down a description of the event and then proceeded to complete a manipulation check and the measures (i.e., mediators, dependent variables) in the listed order.

Manipulation check

Participants responded to three items (Wildschut et al., 2006): “Right now, I am feeling quite nostalgic,” “Right now, I am having nostalgic feelings,” and “I feel nostalgic at the moment” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .97$). A higher score reflected greater nostalgia.

Mediators

Inclusion of the outgroup in the self (IOGS). Participants indicated the nature of their relationship with the outgroup by selecting one from seven pairs of overlapping circles (Aron et al., 1992). The greater the overlap between the circles, the greater the IOGS.

Outgroup trust. Participants responded to five items assessing outgroup trust (adapted from Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009): “Right now, I am able to trust an overweight person as much as any other person” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), “Right now, I am able to trust an overweight person with personal information about myself” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), “Do you think most overweight people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?” (1 = *take advantage*, 7 = *be fair*), “Would you say that most of the time overweight people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?” (1 = *out for themselves*, 7 = *helpful*), and “Generally speaking, would you say that overweight people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful?” (1 = *can’t be too careful*, 7 = *can be trusted*). A higher score reflected greater outgroup trust ($\alpha = .83$).

Dependent variables: Outgroup attitudes

According to the tripartite model, attitudes have affective, cognitive, and behavioral components (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). We assessed all three components.

Affective component. Participants indicated their feelings toward overweight persons by rating five 7-point semantic differential items: cold–warm, negative–positive, hostile–friendly, contempt–respect, and disgust–admiration (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). A higher score reflected a more positive outgroup attitude ($\alpha = .91$).

Cognitive component. Participants rated (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*) five statements assessing their beliefs regarding the amount of personal control a person has over their weight (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Miller, Goldstein, & Leeper, 2004): “People have control over their weight,” “If a person is overweight, it is his or her fault,” “People are overweight because they eat too much,” “People are overweight because they don’t exercise,” and “Overweight people can become thin if they really try.”

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