

## A FUTURE-ORIENTED THEORY OF NOSTALGIA

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Nostalgia, or homesickness, was responsible for the incapacitation of large numbers of recruits in the armed forces during World War II and has been similarly cited as having been a cause of considerable loss of manpower in many other wars. Nostalgia also accounts for scores of college freshman dropouts each year.

It is rather curious that a phenomenon as pressing, as ubiquitous, and as little understood as nostalgia has received only passing attention from psychologists; in the last quarter century no more than six empirical studies have appeared on the subject. This paucity of research is probably due to the inadequacy of the theoretical models or frames of reference within which the phenomenon is investigated. The purpose of this article is to sketch briefly the major theoretical orientations, to review the empirical findings which have accrued thus far, and to present a testable hypothesis as an alternative to the prevailing theories.

### CURRENT THEORIES

Over the years, scores of theories of nostalgia have been proposed. These may be classified into past-oriented and present-oriented theories.

*The past-oriented approach.* This approach is most clearly represented in the writings of orthodox psychoanalysts, and, with minor variations, centers around the concept of the "homing instinct." Fodor's formulations represent the orthodox view rather succinctly. He interprets nostalgia as an expression of a wish to return to the womb, a state which leads to "the attainment of happiness in the only perfect form we have known it" (10, p. 219; 11).

Rumke (27) identifies two types of nostalgia, the healthy, biologically founded or "true nostalgia," and the pathologic or "pseudo-nostalgia." According to Rumke, true nostalgia, which expresses itself in a normal "yearning for the surroundings in which one was bred," is a manifestation of the homing instinct. Pseudo-nostalgia is pathological in etiology and common in various types of neurotic and psychotic disturbances. Like Rumke, Martin distinguishes between

healthy and pathological nostalgia, noting that true nostalgia, "in a literal and figurative sense, involves a healthy surrender to the rhythmic biological inclination to return to the past, to our beginnings, to childhood, to sleep and to the unconscious" (21, p. 102). There is little agreement among psychoanalysts as to the etiology of pseudo- or pathologic nostalgia. Linder (17) is of the opinion that it stems from a disturbed Oedipal situation, while Sterba (30) relates it to the oral stage of development and one's craving for the mother's breast.

*The present-oriented approach.* This approach considers nostalgia to be primarily a reaction by the individual to his unsuccessful adaptation to his present surroundings. Rose (26) emphasizes feelings of insecurity in triggering nostalgia. Levy (16) attributes nostalgia, in many cases, to a guilt feeling about the enjoyment of new surroundings which has led one to forget his home and loved ones which the home symbolizes. Lippert notes that nostalgia "results from a discrepancy between the actual and imagined surroundings, the latter being determined not by perceptions but by conceptions" (18, p. 83).

Howland (13), an existentialist, considers nostalgia to be a manifestation of loss of being or loss of something central to one's life. Paraphrasing Heidegger, Howland sees nostalgia as a "return to something that has both intimacy and mystery, something we have fleetingly glimpsed in a few magic moments in our life—a closeness to the truth of being . . . a recognition of 'having been.'" Polatin and Philtine (24) view nostalgia as being due to immaturity and overdependence upon one's parents. Menninger (22) and Saul (28) consider nostalgia a reaction of the typically overdependent individual to external stress.

More detailed reviews of the theories of nostalgia, accentuating different orientations, have been competently prepared by Jaspers (14), McCann (19), Martin (21), and most recently and comprehensively by Zwingmann (31).

#### EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The present-oriented view underlies the bulk of the empirical studies in both psychology and psychosomatics. An early study by Frost (12) of the nature and frequency of psychoses in recent immigrants to England seemed to suggest that a common factor, recent absence from their homeland, was a precipitating factor in their illnesses. Unfortunately, the study suffers from lack of controls.

McCann (20) matched 100; nostalgic and 100 non-nostalgic students for age, sex, college aptitude scores, years in college and membership in a social fraternity. He gave each subject the Bernreuter Personality Inventory, Conklin's Introversion-Extroversion Questionnaire, and a paper-and-pencil instrument of 186 items designed to shed light on the etiology, symptomatology and prevention of nostalgia. McCann found distinct differences between the two groups, the homesick students being significantly less emotionally stable, less self-sufficient and significantly more introverted, more prone to substitute daydreaming for action, and more self-conscious than the non-homesick students. The investigator attempted to identify predisposing and precipitating factors in nostalgia, but his findings were so unspecific that he was led to conclude that the "causes of homesickness appear to be unlimited in their number and relative in their effect."

Rose (25) observed a group of 66 college freshman women for homesickness during the first five weeks at school. In addition she gave them the Bell Adjustment Inventory and the MMPI. Girls who had not experienced homesickness attained higher adjustment scores and found it easier to relate to the other sex than the average girl. They also had not been especially close to their families. Girls who had experienced homesickness only once were as well adjusted as the average undergraduate woman student but showed a minor deviation towards psychasthenia on the MMPI. Girls who experienced homesickness repeatedly were the least adjusted of the three groups and showed a consistent deviation in the direction of psychasthenia.

Christenson (5) found that among 547 male and female college freshmen 5.5% of the males and 18.1% of the females had experienced homesickness. It occurred more often among students of rural background than among their urban counterparts. Dexter (8) found "only children" to be more susceptible to nostalgia than others.

McCann (19) noted that at one time or another, almost every symptom, both physical and emotional, had been attributed to nostalgia. Undoubtedly Bachet (4) is right in asserting that many of these symptoms reported as having been due to nostalgia have really been due to other unrecognized circumstances or maladies.

By definition, nostalgia implies a separation or distance from an object to which one is attached. This hints at a possible affinity—generic, etiological or otherwise—between nostalgia on the one hand

and separation anxiety and the physical symptoms associated with it on the other hand. Students of psychosomatic medicine have in recent years directed some attention toward the elucidation of such connections. Schmale (29) provides an extensive bibliography of studies in this area. The decision regarding the existence or lack of any relationships between nostalgia and physical symptoms will have to wait until many more focused and better designed studies have been conducted.

#### A FUTURE-ORIENTED VIEW

The apparent failure of the available theories to generate empirical studies and their inability to account for the occurrence of both normal and pathological nostalgia within a single theory, suggest the need for a new perspective.

Zwingmann (31), in the most complete and thorough review of nostalgia to appear yet, redefines nostalgia as the "individual's response to change and/or an abstraction thereof (anticipated change) by a symbolic return to, or reinstatement of, those features of his past . . . which are perceived as having (had) the greatest gratification value." This definition by its inclusion of "anticipated change" adds the future time dimension to the phenomenon, which dimension is the main objective of the present paper.

The future has been emphasized by a number of self theorists and many existentialists with regard to personality theory in general. Erik Erikson characterizes the individual's sense of identity as a sense of flowing continuity of one's past, present and future (9). Similar views are expressed in the works of Jung, as well as of G. W. Allport, Maslow, Rogers, and others. These theorists see an increased ordering of the personality over time, with the future playing a large role in the process of goal orientation (2, pp. 85, 569). Jung and Pauli observed that the present and the future are as vital as is the past, and that the psychologist cannot seek any science of man unless he attends to man's goals and intentions and his perception of the future (15).

Perhaps more than any other psychologist did Adler stress the future. He saw the "whither" as a more important question of mental life than the "whence" (1, p. 91), with every psychological process aiming at future events (1, p. 217), and the whole mental life, through its goal directedness, receiving "an impetus in a forward direction" (1, p. 94). A most succinct statement of such a future-oriented thesis is provided by Adler through a quotation from the philosophical

writer Rudolf Hildebrand (1824-1894) which runs as follows: "Throughout the great *being* which surrounds and deeply penetrates us, there extends a great *becoming* which strives towards the perfect *being*" (3, p. 12).

Among the existentialists, Pervin, Boss, Tillich, de Beauvoir and others also subscribe to this point of view. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "Man . . . aspires to open up a future different from the past in which his roots are sunk" (7). Pervin (23) cites Medard Boss as calling man's capacity to transcend the immediate situation the "basic and unique characteristic of human experience."

The concern of older people with the "good old days" is proverbial. Realizing that the future is coming to a close, the individual is prone to look back for ego comforts. Consistent with this are the incidental findings by Cleveland and Johnson (6) on young cardiac patients hospitalized for myocardial infarction. These subjects, whose future is so uncertain, gave more nostalgic themes on the TAT than a matched group of patients hospitalized for skin disorders.

These observations lead one to believe that nostalgia can best be understood if seen as an expression of concern over, or dread of, the future, and that it is a lack of "being-in-becoming" rather than a "homing instinct" or a reaction to unsuccessful adaptation to one's present surroundings.

#### RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The future-oriented view of nostalgia allows a number of derivations which can be cast in testable forms. For example, individuals who emphasize futurity in their time perspectives, or others who are characterized as optimistic, goal-oriented and playful are not likely to fall victims to nostalgia. An individual who sees his future as potentially promising or gratifying is not likely to become nostalgic either. Middle-class individuals (whose training emphasizes futurity) are less likely to be nostalgia victims than either lower-class individuals (whose training and life circumstances focus on the present) or the tradition-bound (and essentially past-oriented) upper-class individuals.

A practical implication of the foregoing hypotheses is of particular relevance to psychotherapy. Rather than delve into the individual's past to determine the "causes" which presumably led to nostalgia, it would perhaps be more fruitful to help him structure for himself some goals, and realistic plans for their attainment.

## SUMMARY

The current theories of nostalgia are reviewed briefly within the framework of past- and present-oriented approaches, the former being represented primarily by the psychoanalytic viewpoint and the latter primarily by environmental theories. Empirical findings on the phenomenon are also reviewed. A future-oriented approach is supported here as an alternative to the prevailing theories. It casts nostalgia within the future-time perspective employed by a number of self theorists and existentialists. When nostalgia is understood as concern over the future, one can formulate testable hypotheses which relate nostalgia to uncertainty of goals and to pessimism regarding future prospects.

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