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Does Nostalgia Depend on the Valence of the Past? an Empirical Analysis of the Discontinuity Hypothesis

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DOES NOSTALGIA DEPEND ON VALENCE OF PAST EXPERIENCE?:AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DISCONTINUITY HYPOTHESIS Mousumi Bose Godbole, Louisiana State University Omar Shehryar, Montana State University David M. Hunt, University of Wyoming The discontinuity hypothesis suggests that when faced with a disruption in daily life people seek comfort in nostalgic feelings. Contemporary research on nostalgia has found mixed support for the discontinuity hypothesis. It is suggested in the present research that the valence of the reservoir of past experiences that are invoked in nostalgic thoughts moderates the degree to which nostalgia is used to cushion individuals from discontinuities in their current lives. Results from an experiment provide support for the moderating effect of nature of past experience on the relationship between discontinuity and nostalgia.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Nostalgia, related to the judgment of the past relative to the future, helps individuals construct a sense of identity and social connectedness by facilitating continuity across time, especially in the face of existential disruptions. Davis (1979) captures this phenomenon in his "discontinuity hypothesis" to envisage that people who experience disruption in their lives tend to cling to the past more than those who experience continuity. Contemporary research on nostalgia has found weak support for this hypothesis (Best and Nelson 1985; Batcho 1995).

One of the issues not deliberated in earlier studies is the valence of the reservoir of past experiences invoked in nostalgic thoughts. In their evaluation of whether people connect to the past for shelter in the face of a potentially dreadful future, past studies have treated the reservoir of memories and recollections as unipolar. But not everyone has an identical experience of the past or has similar perceptions and interpretations of those experiences. That is, individuals have available both positive and negative experiences when they look to their past. According to Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), the recalled past may be positive or it may be aversive and negative. Consequently, past tests of the discontinuity hypothesis may be compromised by the assumption of homogeneity of thoughts, experiences and perceptions.

It is suggested in the present research that the valence of the accessible past experiences that are invoked in nostalgic thoughts moderates the degree to which nostalgia is used to cushion individuals from discontinuities in their lives introduced by threats of a strained future. When confronted with discontinuity, people with a predominantly positive past will tend to be nostalgic. On the other hand, people who have experienced a predominantly negative past will tend to avoid the past because a depressing past does not offer mental sustenance and is best discarded. As a result, such people would not be nostalgic.

Two aspects of the discontinuity hypothesis were tested in an experiment. First, a scenario portraying the dread of the future was compared with a situation depicting a bright future. The main stimulus consisted of a one page fictitious news editorial which was designed to provide either good or bad news about the economic outlook for college seniors seeking employment upon graduation. Thus, as the first independent variable, the nature of the future outlook pertaining to the participants was manipulated. Next, the hypothesis was extended by incorporating the individual differences in the valence of past experiences using Zimbardo and Boyd's (1999) time-perspective inventory as an individual-differences metric to measure the nature of participants' alignment to the past. Participants responded to items from the time-perspective inventory and were asked to describe how characteristic they thought each statement was in describing how they felt about their past. To introduce a second independent variable, two groups were created based on whether participants had predominantly positive or negative thoughts of the past. Holbrook's (1993) nostalgia proneness scale was used as a control variable to ensure that any differences in nostalgia could be confidently attributed to the variables of interest, namely future outlook and past experiences. Following the stimulus participants responded to an inventory of adjectives (borrowed from the Positive and Negative Affect Scales, Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) measuring their affective state in re-

sponse to the manipulation. This served as the manipulation check to ensure that the "future outlook" manipulation successfully introduced "discontinuity" among participants in the condition with the negative outlook. Finally, participants responded to a twenty item nostalgia inventory designed and tested by Batcho (1995, 1998), which comprised the dependent variable.

Compared to the response of the participants assigned to the positive future outlook condition, the participants assigned to the negative future outlook condition scored higher on the set of negative adjectives. Further, participants assigned to the positive future condition scored higher than participants in the negative future outlook condition on the set of positive adjectives, showing successful manipulation check. A standardized overall score for positive and negative past experiences served as the second independent variable.

Analysis using Batcho's Nostalgia Index as the dependent variable showed significant results. A two-way interaction between future outlook and valence of past experience was significant. The main effect of future outlook was not statistically significant, thus rejecting the original form of the discontinuity hypothesis. The main effect of valence of past experience was statistically significant but it was interpreted in light of the significant two-way interaction.

Planned contrasts showed that participants with a predominantly positive past expressed more nostalgia when they faced a bleak outlook for the future than when they encountered a positive outlook for the future. This finding provides partial support for the discontinuity hypothesis which suggests that nostalgia is triggered by dread of a negative future. When faced with a negative outlook for the future those with a predominantly positive past were more nostalgic than those with a predominantly negative past. Taken together, it is suggested that a bright outlook for the future did not trigger nostalgia whereas a bleak outlook for the future triggered nostalgia. Moreover, when faced with a bleak outlook for the future, those with a predominantly positive past expressed more nostalgia than those with a predominantly negative past. Based on these findings we conclude that there is support for our proposed extension of the discontinuity hypothesis which considers valence of past experience as a moderator of the degree to which one seeks solace in nostalgia when confronted with a threatening future.

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