

Theoretical Interpretation of the Concept of Nostalgia- from Psychopathological disorder to Psychological Well Being

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘Nostalgia’ initially referred to “extreme homesickness” experienced by Swiss mercenaries. With the passage of time nostalgia was equated with emotions such as love, jealousy and fear rather than with conditions like melancholia and obsessive compulsion. Mills and Coleman defined nostalgia as bittersweet recall of past events. From philosophical point of view nostalgia enable to discover one’s sense of “Good” and “Right,”. Nostalgia as Leisure means during hectic times, the exercise of nostalgia acts as means of escape. Nostalgia facilitates continuity of Identity through cultivating appreciative stances toward former self. Nostalgia improves psychological well-being and memory functions.

Keywords: *Nostalgia, Melancholy, Reminiscence, Recollection*

The conceptual framework of “Nostalgia” has moved from pathology (a medical condition) to emotion. It was coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer who referred it to the extreme “Home sickness” experienced by Swiss mercenaries. Persistent thoughts of home, insomnia, anorexia, anxiety, melancholy are the symptoms of nostalgia according to Hofer. This word has been derived from Greek word “nostos” meaning “return home” and “algia” means pain. So, it literally means “Home sickness”. As Hofer claimed that nerve fibres of brain are in constant motion because these nerve fiber store impression of one’s native home, so brain is seat of this disease.

Nostalgia as psychopathological condition

Although Hofer coined this term but it had existence prior to that. At least six soldiers were discharged from the Spanish Army of Flanders with *el mal de corazon*. This disease was associated with soldiers specially Swiss soldiers who were susceptible to nostalgia when they heard a particular Swiss milking songs. So nostalgia is disorder of imagination. In fact, he considered it as disease in which patient fantasized about home and escape from present world. Professor Wildschut Sedikides and their colleagues suggested that during 17th and 18th century doctors reconsidered nostalgia only affected the Swiss because they observed it in the Swiss mercenary soldiers. In his article - by the beginning of the 20th century nostalgia was regarded as a psychiatric disorder which included such as anxiety, sadness and insomnia. By the mid-20th century psychodynamic approaches considered nostalgia as a

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Theoretical Interpretation of the Concept of Nostalgia- from Psychopathological disorder to Psychological Well Being

subconscious desire to return to an earlier life stage. Then it was labelled as **Repressive compulsive disorder**. Soon thereafter nostalgia was downgraded to a variant of depression, marked by loss and grief though still equated with home sickness. Some psychologists considered it as an **immigrants psychosis**. This condition was demedicalized (became normal) in late 19th century when doctors attributed it to technological advancement such as progress in communication networks and transportation. Today this is considered as emotion not disease.

Nostalgia as emotion

Fred Davi's writes " that it is much more likely to be classed with such familiar emotions as love ,jealousy and fear than with such conditions as melancholia, obsessive compulsion or claustrophobia" . A person's memories may be pleasant or bad in the past. It is related with place and time but there is no way of going back or the place he or she longs for does not remain same as the nostalgic recollection. So different scholars differ on this matter for example- Jan Morris(2002) says that we cannot return to the past what we can go home(place) again. On the other hand Boym(2001) states " a first glance, nostalgia is longing for place but actually it is a yearning for a different time - the time of childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams". In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to re- visit time like space referring to surrender to the Irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. But just considering it related to past that does not exist no more, makes this concept unweildy which makes it difficult to grasp the meaning of this term. Nostalgia acts to realign cognition and emotion to produce security and comfort. Also emotions of love and nostalgia are interconnected as Harper states "that love and nostalgia cannot be separated..... in both love and nostalgia, a wave of presence swirls around with a wave of loss".

Stuart Tannock (1995) gives nostalgic "structure of feeling "considering nostalgia as periodizing emotion: he States three ideas i.e. a prelapsarian world (such as the "golden age"), a lapse (separation or fall) and a postlapsarian world (this is the present and it is felt like lacking, deficient).

According to Davis - nostalgia is different from words such as history, remembrance, recollection, reminiscence, revivification and recall which denote the mental state of sentiment being looking back in time. Nostalgia connotes emotion, thought in broader sense - a behaviour. It is beyond sentimentality. Reminiscence (remembering the past) is more general phenomenon than nostalgia. It requires active reconstruction of the past for experiencing nostalgia and this activity occurs not consciously but sub- consciously. According to Steve Chilton (2002) "nostalgia goes well beyond recollection and reminiscence. We can make difference between nostalgia and recollection as the latter are "less actively creative ". Another difference is that reminiscence and recollection do not involve desire to return to past, while nostalgia involves both these characteristics- comparison to present and desire to return to past ".

According to G.H Mead "past is never left as the past, indeed past is as uncertain as future". It is more a longing for recapturing a spirit of previous time or rediscovering a former self (hence nostalgia is considered a phenomenological experience). From philosophical point of view nostalgia enable to discover one's sense of "Good " and "Right".

Theoretical Interpretation of the Concept of Nostalgia- from Psychopathological disorder to Psychological Well Being

According to Chilton (1997) “nostalgia could be very valuable in helping us figure out what people want - their positive goals apart from the conflicts and hostility”. So nostalgic feeling gives higher meaning to our existence.

Nostalgia as Leisure

Pickering (1997) writes “my meditations on nostalgia suggest that it is a leisure activity .It seems to have something in common with Wordsworth’s idea of poetry as “recollection on tranquility” needing both distraction from immediate concerns and deliberate recollection for its manifestation”. During hectic times, the exercise of nostalgia acts as means of escape.

While reviewing social - psychological explanation Cameron and Gatewood (1994) considered nostalgia as “a psychological adaptation to circumstances of rapid culture change during which individuals fear became obsolete “. They consider nostalgia as psychological luxury of the rich class.

Nostalgia as Continuity of Identity

Nostalgia shapes our identities. It shapes our deepest sense of who we are as individuals and members of groups. Although nostalgia is a private affair but it can be shared with others, for example showing, sharing photographs, artifacts, participation in group rituals, telling stories etc. According to Davis (1979) “that such narratives are “one of the means “we employ in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining and reconstructing our identities. Brown & Humphreys examined the role of nostalgia in organizations. According to them “nostalgia is key to the understanding of the dynamics of individual and organizational identity construction (Brown & Humphreys ,2002,).

As Aden (1995) states “nostalgia indicates individual’s desire to regain some control over their lives in an uncertain time “. According to Davis “nosto experimentally induced nostalgia increases perceived capacity to support (Wildschut et al.2010). Nostalgia strengthens subjective vitality - one’s conscious experience of possessing energy and aliveness (Ryan & Frederick ,1997). Experiments showed that nostalgia increases vitality (Routledge.et.al.2011) and strengthened vitality (Sedikides et.al.2016). Nostalgia also increases competence - a sense of mastery in one’s activity(Ryan & Desi 2017). Nostalgizing increases perception of social competence (Abeyta et.al.,2015, studies 6-7). Weinstein et.al. (2022) addressed the assoalgia facilitates continuity of identity through cultivating appreciative stances toward former selves, screening from memory the unpleasant and shameful “. To restore identity, a person engaged in selective memory which reconstructs former selves.

Nostalgia as Psychological Well-being (PWB)

Nostalgia is also associated with increased psychological well-being (PWB) (Hepper et al.,2021; Routledge et al.,2013). PWB is multidimensional construct, encompasses various interrelated domains according to Su et al. (2014). These domains are as following. - a). Nostalgia and flourishing social relationships - According to MacIver and Page “society is web of relations”. These relationships are integral part of nostalgic recollection also nostalgia facilitates the development and maintenance of relationships (Abeyta et al.2015). There are various studies which shows that nostalgia is associated with social support seeking (Batcho, 2013). Also experimentally induced nostalgia increases perceived capacity to support (Wildschut et al.2010). Nostalgia strengthens subjective vitality - one’s conscious experience of possessing energy and aliveness (Ryan & Frederick ,1997). Experiments

Theoretical Interpretation of the Concept of Nostalgia- from Psychopathological disorder to Psychological Well Being

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Types of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is not only private phenomenon (personally subjective experience) but also has become public experience. As Davis differentiated between private and collective nostalgia. Private nostalgia refers to "Those symbolic images and allusions from the past which by virtue of their resource in a particular person's biography tend to be more idiosyncratic, individuated, and particularistic in their reference, e.g., the memory of a parent's smile". Collective nostalgia refers to "that condition in which the symbolic objects are of a highly public, widely shared and familiar character i.e., those symbolic resources from the past which can under proper conditions trigger off wave upon wave of nostalgic feeling in millions of persons at the same time". Boym differentiates between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia emphasizes on the lost home and the desire to patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia focusses not on recovery of what is perceived to be on absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time.

Empirical Evidences

Best and Nelson (1985) analysed data from four national sample surveys. In these surveys one or two items were used to measure nostalgic feelings. In National Senior Citizens Survey conducted in 1968 (Best and Nelson 1985, p. 232) respondents responded to following statements 'you are as happy now as you were when you were younger 'and' "people had it better in the old days 'in "yes " or "No" reply .

In National Council on Aging's 1974 study -two statements - "I am just as happy as when I was younger "and "These are best years of my life". In Survey "American View their Mental Health "in 1976 asked "what do you think of the happiest time in your life ". In 1980 "General Social Survey "In spite of what some people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse, not better". The analysis by Best and Nelson gave consistent results on the principal variables across the six items. Krystine conducted survey on 648 respondents of undergraduates of college (268 males and 380 females) ranging in age from 4 years old to 80 years old. This Survey was designed to assess nostalgia for 20 aspects of experience. They were asked to give responses to questions. The result of this study showed - factor analysis on this sample showed that nostalgia may vary across different spheres or levels of experience. Gender difference was not significant ,but significant differences across age groups were obtained for most times. Also intensity of nostalgic sentiment varied across situations, people objects and aspects of society .Nostalgia includes number of factors reflecting different levels of experience and different spheres.

Theoretical Interpretation of the Concept of Nostalgia- from Psychopathological disorder to Psychological Well Being

CONCLUSION

Nostalgia is multi- dimensional construct includes different aspects of spheres of experience of life. The ideas about the concept of nostalgia are dynamic. The way in which nostalgia has been conceptualized shows that it is not simply a” living the past”, but it is an active involvement or engagement with the past. Nostalgia enables us to note changes in our “self” over time. We might feel a sense of loss or growth associated with nostalgia. So, these feelings are important to understand “self” which enable us to maintain coherent identity.

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Theoretical Interpretation of the Concept of Nostalgia- from Psychopathological disorder to Psychological Well Being

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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