

Walking down Memory Lane: The Unfolding Experience of Nostalgia

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This study aims to investigate the unfolding experience of nostalgia as it occurs. With help from the museum *Den Gamle By* in Aarhus (*The Old Town*, Aarhus-Denmark) it became possible to follow, a group of tour-guests as they were exposed to nostalgic experiences during their tour the 1974-section of the museum. All participants had personal relations to the 1974-environments, which became significant for the unfolding experience of nostalgia. An observational field study was carried out with the purpose of capturing- and recording the unfolding experience of nostalgia on camera and dictaphone. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was conducted with two of the female participants in order to elaborate on their personal nostalgic experiences in *Den Gamle By*. The study confirmed that the immediate experience of nostalgia is primarily positive, evoking warm feelings of joy, comfort, and security. However, these experiences may be followed by less joyful memories of the past, which has firstly been covered in the rosy light pictures of nostalgia.

A well-known expression goes like “*things were much better in the good old days!*” but is such a statement necessarily true? The “*good old days*” are not limited to a specific timeline in the past, but rather it functions as a general term that defines a meaningful period of the past. In this respect it may seem paradoxical that specific aspects of the present will come to be romanticized in the future, where new generations most likely will refer to the past (now, the present) as *the good old days*. It suggests that individuals have the ability to idealize certain aspects of the past and cover it in rosy-like pictures of nostalgia. Thus, it becomes interesting to examine under which circumstances nostalgic experiences unfold, how nostalgic experiences develop through time, and how they affect the individual being exposed.

The present study will investigate the above-described aspects, by focusing on nostalgic experience and their content. The main focus will be to explore the unfolding process of nostalgia and to clarify its functions. In this respect, the article examines whether nostalgia can be considered a positive or negative experience, and how that affects its functions. However, before turning to the empirical aspects of the present study, it is relevant to elucidate how the concept of nostalgia has been defined, characterized, and changed through history.

HISTORICAL WALK THROUGH: THE CONCEPT OF NOSTALGIA

According to the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998), nostalgia can be defined as a sentimental longing for the past (p. 1266). The word *nostalgia* originates from Greek, *nostos*, meaning *returning home* and *algia*, meaning *longing* or *suffering* (Boym, 2001, p. xv; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006). The concept was firstly introduced in 1688 as a medical diagnose, given to soldiers suffering from severe cases of homesickness (Hofer,

1688/1934). However, nostalgia has an even longer history that can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greek genre of *Odyssey* and the stories of *Nostos* (homecoming). In Homer's poem, Odysseus is struggling 10 years to get home to the island Ithaca and to his beloved wife Penelope. On his journey, he spends seven years on an island with a sea-nymph called Calypso, who seduces him to stay with her (Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. 1921, Book V; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006). However, Odysseus decides to leave Calypso, and says:

"Full well I acknowledge Prudent Penelope cannot compare with your stature of beauty, for she is only a mortal, and you are immortal and ageless. Nevertheless, it is she whom I daily desire and pine for. Therefore I long for my home and to see the day of returning." (Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. 1921, Book V, pp. 78-79; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006, p. 3).

The above quote illustrates very well the notion of nostalgia, namely that nostalgia concerns a longing for the past, even though it is imperfect.

The concept of nostalgia has gone through great development throughout history, which influenced how nostalgia has been perceived and processed within science. As argued earlier, the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (1688/1934) introduced nostalgia as a medical disease, where symptoms included being constantly home-oriented, having crying spells, unstable heartbeat, sleeplessness etc. (Hofer, 1688/1934; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006). The assessment of nostalgia as being a neurological- or cerebral disease continued throughout the 17th and 18th century. However, in the 19th century, the notion of nostalgia shifted, so that the condition of nostalgia was linked to a special version of melancholia or depression. This view of nostalgia continued until the 20th century (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006). During the 20th century, a new approach of experimental psychology was applied to nostalgia, which eventually changed how the concept was perceived. By the second part of the 20th century, a more positive perspective to nostalgia arose, where the concept came to be perceived as a warm feeling that includes cheerful memories of the past (*ibid.*).

The short historical walkthrough above illustrates that the notion of nostalgia has gone through great development throughout history; from being perceived as a negative condition, nostalgia has changed to be perceived as a positive feeling. Of course, the different approaches to the notion of nostalgia affected how the concept has been perceived- and processed within science. In addition, it is relevant to note that the psychological approach to nostalgia is just a century old, which makes nostalgia a relatively new phenomenon within the field of psychology (Batcho, 2013). One can therefore assume that more psychological research within the area of nostalgia is required, as it is a relatively new field.

Unlike many previous assumptions about nostalgia, this study does not categorize nostalgia as being either a negative condition (which had been the prevailing view until the 20th century) or a positive feeling (which has been the main assumption from the mid-20th century until now). Instead, the current study aims at investigating the unfolding experience of nostalgia, its content, and its functions without having some of the above described assumptions. By taking such a neutral approach to the concept of nostalgia, it becomes possible to investigate whether nostalgia is characterized by e.g. positive or negative experiences, and how that influences the way people relate to certain aspects of their pasts. Put in another way, the cur-

rent study contributes with new information to the psychological field of nostalgia by exploring the unfolding process of nostalgia without having prior assumptions about its content. In this respect, the current study also aims to clarify the ambiguous definitions of nostalgia.

CURRENT PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES REGARDING NOSTALGIA

Before turning the findings of the current study, it is relevant to take a look at how other psychological studies have explored the phenomenon of nostalgia. In the following section, two different studies will be presented in order to illustrate how nostalgia has typically been investigated methodologically within the field of psychology.

Nostalgia as a terror management function

Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides and Wildshut (2006/2008) have investigated whether nostalgia has a terror management function that helps to achieve- and sustain meaning in life when fronting existential danger. The authors had a prior assumption about nostalgia being primarily a positive- and self-relevant emotion that improves self-esteem and supports social bonds. In relation to this, the authors wanted to use a proxy for nostalgia proneness in their study; namely by thinking positively about the past (ibid.).

In brief, the study comprised three experiments where participants were asked to filler personality measures in order to strengthen their cover stories of thinking positively about the past (the proxy for nostalgia proneness). Afterwards the participants completed eight items from the *Time Perspective Inventory*, which measures attitudes concerning the past, the present, and the future. Finally, the participants were randomly exposed to one of two conditions: either 1) activation of death-thoughts, or 2) dental pain manipulation. By structuring the above described method the authors found that in the state of activating death-thoughts, positive perceptions of the past increased opinions about life being meaningful. Similar results were not to be found in the case with dental pain manipulation. Based on these results the authors perceive nostalgia to be a terror management function that contributes with meaning in life when facing existential danger (ibid.).

The additional content of the above described study will not be discussed further, but please note that the experimenter had prior assumptions about how to perceive the concept of nostalgia. This has to do with that, the authors in the beginning of the paper postulated that nostalgia is primarily a positive emotional experience with several benefits. Such a prior assumption about nostalgia can be quite problematic, as the experimenters' perception of nostalgia does not necessarily reflect how the participants perceived the concept.

The second thing to be critical about is whether it is acceptable to use *positive thinking of the past* as a proxy for nostalgia proneness. The authors do not provide any evidence that would justify such a link between the two phenomena, and therefore it questions the validity of the study's results. Because it can be argued that, it is possible to think positively back at the past without it necessarily being nostalgic. Davis (1977) gives an example where he argues:

“to merely remember the places of one’s youth is not the same as to feel nostalgia for them. Neither for that matter, does active reminiscence - however happy, benign or tortured its content - necessarily capture the subjective state characteristic of nostalgic feeling.” (Davis, 1977, p. 418)

Davis' statement support the argument that there is not necessarily a direct link between nostalgia and *positive thinking of the past*, which makes it a pitfall to conclude a direct link between the two phenomena.

The above critique illustrates that more qualitative investigations are required in order to specify the characterization of nostalgia and how the concept can be perceived from a psychological point of view (which the current study aims to do).

Physical coldness activates nostalgia

Another study made by Zhou, Chen, Wildschut, Sedikides, and Vingerhoets (2012) investigated whether physical coldness activates nostalgia, in which people will feel more nostalgic on colder days compared to warmer days. The hypothesis of the study suggested that nostalgia contributes with actual physical feelings of warmth being activated when located in cold environments (ibid.).

The authors collected 19 students who participated in the experiment where they had to rate their levels of nostalgia on specific times during the day over a period of 30 days. The authors wanted to examine whether the participants reported higher levels of nostalgia when the temperature was dropping. In this respect, the authors collected local temperatures from weather stations and joined these information with the participants' assessments of nostalgia (ibid.).

The additional content of the study will not be processed further. However, it is relevant to notice that the experimenters did not provide any definition of nostalgia – not to the reader of their article or to the participants who participated in the study. This creates a source of error, as it is not possible to examine what the participants linked to the experience of nostalgia and how their perceptions of nostalgia differed from the researchers'. Furthermore, it is not possible to concretize whether the participants considered nostalgia to be a positive- and/or negative experience, and how that affected their physical feelings of warmth. Finally, there is also the question of temperature measurements: because the participants could have worn warm sweaters or found themselves within heated spaces, which would make the outside-whether-temperatures irrelevant.

The above critique also illustrates that more information about the content of nostalgia is required in order to specify its functions.

The two studies described above are typical examples of how nostalgia has been investigated within the field of psychology. These studies show that there are ambiguities as how to perceive the concept of nostalgia from a psychological point of view. This has to do with the fact that researchers usually have prior assumptions about how to perceive nostalgia, which they pass on to their participants. From this, it becomes clear that more information of how to perceive the concept of nostalgia from a psychological point of view is required. In order to elucidate this aspect it is essential to pay attention to the participants' own subjective experience of nostalgia, in order to understand the content of the phenomenon. This is exactly what the

current study is aiming at, by exploring the unfolding process of nostalgia, without interfering with the participants' personal perception of the concept.

NOSTALGIA: REMEMBERING THE PAST

No matter how to perceive the concept of nostalgia it cannot be excluded that nostalgia is linked to memories (or imaginations) of the past. But how does *nostalgia* more concretely distinguish itself from *remembering*? This aspect becomes important to clarify before starting to code- and analyze the current study's results.

Nostalgia and remembering

Throughout history there has been different ways of perceiving and exploring the notion of memory. Plato suggested that memory functions as a block of wax in which the individual can "write" down the perceptions or thoughts he wishes to save. That way memory is perceived as a storehouse in which sensory impressions are retained over time (Wagoner, 2011). This notion of memory is very widespread within the field of psychology, and it has broadly affected how to investigate memory empirically. However, not all scientists agree with this approach to memory. For example, Frederic Bartlett (1995/1932) saw *remembering* as an active process in which the mind incorporates perceptions, imaginations and thinking to recall the past (Wagoner, 2011). These different approaches to the notion of memory illustrate the complexity of the concept and also affects how to perceive the relation between *remembering* and *nostalgia*. Please note that memory studies is a vast body of work in which there is not enough space to address in this piece of nostalgia. However, the memory-aspect becomes important to include in order to distinguish the two constructs of *remembering* and *nostalgia*, which are both related to memory.

Scientists have found that nostalgia comprises a complex mix of emotions that refer to memories of prior experiences and relationships (Ye, Ngan & Hui, 2013). As presented earlier, Davis (1977) argues that the complexity-aspect of nostalgia has to do with the fact that;

"to merely remember the places of one's youth is not the same as to feel nostalgia for them. Neither for that matter, does active reminiscence - however happy, benign or tortured its content - necessarily capture the subjective state characteristic of nostalgic feeling". (Davis, 1977, p. 418; Wildshut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006, p. 41).

These assumptions reveal that the link between *nostalgia* and *remembering* are to be found in the emotional responses, though emotional remembering does not necessarily guarantee nostalgic experiences (cf. Davis, 1977). In this respect, it becomes relevant to notice that much scientific work has already confirmed that emotional stimuli do in fact increase recall in comparison to neutral stimuli. This tendency is named the *enhancement effect* and it causes the *trade-off effect*, which means that emotional arousing stimuli eliminate attention directed towards non-arousing stimuli. As such, non-arousing stimuli are usually not remembered well because the emotional-stimuli take most of the attention (Kensinger, Piquet, Krendl, and Corkin, 2005). If it can be accepted that nostalgia is characterized by emotional remembering, then it can also be argued that nostalgia functions as an enhancement effect where nostalgic memories will become clearer in mind because of its emotional content. Though it is im-

portant to notice that the emotional content of nostalgia might not be in the original stimuli but added later. By taken the above-described argument it can also be proposed that nostalgia is always linked to *emotional remembering* but that *emotional remembering* does not necessarily include nostalgia. This has to do with, that nostalgia comprises a complex mix of emotions that is not necessarily activated through *emotional remembering*.

The above arguments suggest that when investigating nostalgia it becomes central to pay attention to emotional content within memories. Thou it is important to recognize that emotional remembering does not necessarily guarantee nostalgic experiences to arrive. This information becomes relevant when analyzing and coding the current study's result.

Methodological Considerations

How is it possible to get access to the immediate and unfolding experiences of nostalgia, and how can such a process be analyzed empirically? Valsiner (2007) argues that: "*The human immediate living experience is primarily microgenetic, occurring as the person faces, the ever-new next time moment in the infinite sequence of irreversible time*" (p. 301). Valsiner (2000) also argues that microgenetic method comprises: "*any empirical strategy that triggers, records, and analyses the immediate process of emergence of new phenomena*" (p. 78).

The above described notion of microgenesis opens up for many different ways of applying the method empirically, and it contributes with new techniques of exploring psychological phenomena as they unfold. In the present study, the microgenetic method will be used to: 1) investigate the processes by which objects/environments trigger nostalgic experiences, and 2) to analyze the unfolding process of those experiences in time. This will shed new light upon the concept of nostalgia, as previous studies have not investigated the qualitative experiences of nostalgia as it unfolds in the present moment. In other words, this study digs into the subjective experiences of nostalgia in order to find new information that will affect how to perceive the phenomenon from a psychological point of view. In this respect, the current study confronts the ambiguous definitions of nostalgia in order to contribute with a clarification of the concept.

CURRENT STUDY

Current literature within the field of nostalgia has provided evidence that nostalgia has indeed positive effects, such as higher feelings of relatedness, creates a sense of meaning in life, and contributes with actual physical feelings of warmth (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides & Wildshut, 2006/2008; Routledge, Wildshut, Sedikides, Juhl & Arndt, 2012; Zhou, Chen, Sedikides & Vingerhoets, 2012). However, many of those studies have investigated the concept by having participants sit in experimental rooms thinking about or writing down their nostalgic experiences towards a certain stimuli, and then report how those experiences made them feel (e.g. Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006; Zhou, Wildshut, Sedikides, Shi, & Feng, 2012). Taking a critical standpoint, one can question whether this approach is the most valid way to investigate nostalgia. First of all, it is relevant to notice that scientific studies have already confirmed that much remembering takes place in social settings which suggest that there is a social aspect to memory and memory-retention (Radley, 1990). Therefore the process of remembering (which is also included in the experience of nostalgia) often has a social content to it. However, the problem is that many preexisting studies regarding nostalgia do basically

overlook the social-aspect of the phenomenon by only investigating participants separately. Second, it can be quite problematic to carry out investigations in isolated experimental rooms, as the settings may seem artificial to the participants. Finally, much information might get lost, if only investigating nostalgia by asking people *to think* of nostalgic events. Instead, it would be more valid to investigate nostalgia from the moment that the nostalgic experience appears and unfolds through time.

The goal of the current study is precisely to investigate the nostalgic experiences as they occur in “natural” environments, rather than in typical experimental rooms. But in order to do so one must think of how to provoke nostalgic experiences, and how to capture those experiences empirically. The hypothesis of the current study claims that environmental surroundings can trigger nostalgic experiences if a person is being brought back to some emotional memories of his/her past. This hypothesis makes it significant to consider the physical and social environments when investigating nostalgia. In this respect, *Den Gamle By* in Aarhus (The Old Town, Aarhus-Denmark) became very helpful as they have a great 1974 area with apartments, furniture, shops, “odors” etc. from that period of time. These surroundings fit the natural environments of the 1970s and made it possible to trigger and explore the immediate arising of nostalgic experiences as participants were brought back to familiar environments of their pasts (hopefully causing emotional remembering that activates nostalgia).

METHOD

Den Gamle By offers guided tours and it became possible to follow a group of tour-guests who had booked such a tour in the 1974-area of the museum. In advance the group-participants had been informed of the main goal of the current study; namely to explore the experience of nostalgia. All group-participants (60+ years old) had themselves been young adults in the 1970s and each participant had therefore a personal relation to that specific period of time, which became significant to their experiences of nostalgia (cf. hypothesis).

The empirical data consist of three parts: 1) observational data has been collected by videotaping the guided tour and the participants’ walk through the 1970s apartments. 2) One camera, and one dictaphone was given to some of the participants so they could record their own walkthrough-experience as they split up from the group. 3) A qualitative semi-structured interview was conducted with two of the female group-participants (after the guided tour) in order to get further information of their subjective nostalgic experiences of the tour. The interview was carried out in a coffee dinner from the 1970s, which maintained the participants in a nostalgic environment of the past. The collected data aimed at capturing the microgenetic process of nostalgic experiences, thereby exploring the unfolding process of nostalgia. The above described method will provide qualitative information about the phenomenon of nostalgia without interrupting the participants in their affairs (or as little as possible). Hopefully this information will shed new light upon how to perceive the concept of nostalgia and how nostalgic experiences are characterized.

The environmental surroundings of the open museum, *Den Gamle By*, reflect the real life of the 1970s, and the guests are welcome to walk around freely. Thereby it became possible to collect “naturalistic” data that takes its starting point in the immediate experiences of nostalgia. However, one thing is important to notice: even though *Den Gamle By* has the strength of being a reliably set in a specific era and location (1974 in Denmark), this setting also exerts

strong influence over the nostalgic feelings that the participants experienced. This has to do with that the experience of nostalgia is highly influenced by the content of the museum's 1974-area, which makes the experience of nostalgia different from e.g. being nostalgic in everyday-life. However, the methodological setup of the current study will hopefully contribute with new information to the unfolding experience of nostalgia, which would otherwise be difficult to provoke and record through everyday activities.

The people who participated in the current study visited the following places (from 1974-section) at their tour in *Den Gamle By*:

- Coffee dinner
- TV/radio shop (called *Pouls Radio*)
- Apartments:
 - 1) School director, Miss Sneum: single woman
 - 2) The gynecologist
 - 3) Collective: one medicine student, two architect students and a student of social education
 - 4) The Meyer-family: Typical nuclear family from the 1970s

The different environments of the 1974-area represented a society characterized by people coming from different social-, economic- and educational backgrounds. The museum makes a great virtue out of representing a valid picture of the life in 1974 in Denmark where it becomes important to display different lifestyles of the 1970s.

RESULTS

Approximately 35 people participated in the current study and all participants were over 60 years old, which made them all young adults in the 1970s. All participants walked through the 1970s apartments at the same time, splitting into small groups sporadically. The data therefore builds upon the researcher's observations and camera recording as well as the participant's dictaphone and camera recording (one participant walked with the dictaphone during the tour while 3 other participants shifted to administer the camera).

Observing the participants produced more robust results of affective responses to stimuli than would have been the case with standardized experiments or interviews. As such, the current study is designed to capture more naturalistic responses to emotional remembering by observing individuals passing through the exhibit.

All video- and audio-material collected from *Den Gamle By* have been transcribed and processed linguistically. This has been done by going through the empirical data (transcriptions) where all verbal narratives have been calculated (linguistic analysis) to get a sense of how often objects/the environments provoked nostalgic experiences, exposing themselves as verbal narratives. In this respect, it becomes important to separate the *remembering*-narratives from *nostalgia*-narratives. Also, it is significant to elucidate how much information that is required before labeling an expression as a narrative? Some narratives can be very long while others might comprise only one sentence. In the current study the verbal narratives should at least be one sentence long in order to express the participants' relation to e.g. a specific object

(so by expressing e.g. “television” did not count as a verbal narrative, as it only comprised one word).

When coding the collected data it was essential to have some guidelines for how to determine whether an expression could be characterized as a nostalgic experience. As described earlier then nostalgia is characterized by a complex mix of emotions that refer to memories of prior experiences and relationships (cf. Ye, Ngan & Hui, 2013). Therefore, it was crucial to look for emotional expressions and elucidate the participant’s personal relation to those. In this respect, specific words and phrases that fitted into the category of “*emotional relation to the past*” have been counted. The linguistic analysis exposed that the participants used the word “*funny*” quite some times and they laughed a frequently during the tour. The participants also made a great virtue out of expressing their coherent relation to the past and to specific objects, demonstrated through the use of words like “*we*” and “*our*”. These expressions were often used in order to compare the 1970-environments to “*home*”. Furthermore, the personal relations to the 1970-environments was also illustrated through the use of words such as “*have*” and “*had*”. For example did some of the participants express the following: “*I had such a lamp back at home*” or “*I have a special bond to that place because I was one of the last costumers who visited that pastry shop in Aabenraa before it closed*” (trans. from Danish).

The transcriptions and the linguistic analysis set the ground for applying microgenetic methods to investigate: 1) the processes by which objects/ environments trigger nostalgic experiences, and 2) to analyses the unfolding processes of those experiences.

With that said, it is time to turn to the analysis of the current study’s results

ANALYSIS

The first thing to consider from the results is whether the hypothesis of the current study is valid; that environmental surroundings can trigger nostalgic experiences if a person is being brought back to some emotional memories of his past. To confirm or reject the hypothesis it is essential to use the microgenetic method to unfold the processes by which objects/ environments trigger nostalgic experiences.

The trigger of Nostalgia and its Characterization

The transcriptions of the current study expose many personal narratives that have been triggered through the meeting with specific objects, environments and senses. Usually the participants see an object, or recognize a specific smell, in which they report their personal relationships to those through verbal narratives and visual gestures (e.g. by pointing). During the tour, most verbal narratives were presented as small fractions with little details, arriving rapidly one after another. This might be the reason that so many verbal narratives have been told during the tour; they function as small stories, which exhibit the narrator’s relationship to a specific object/time. However, in the qualitative interview with two of the female participants, the expressed narratives became much more rich and detailed, in which the participants elaborated on their personal relations to the past. Here it is relevant to notice that the narratives being told during the interview were not activated by physical triggers (in opposite to the tour), Instead the narratives were generated through conversation between the two interviewees where they elaborated on their personal experiences during the tour in *Den Gamle By*.

In order for the results to be valid, it is crucial to elaborate on whether the verbal narratives of the tour and the interview cover nostalgic experiences? To answer that question it is relevant to take a look at the content of the verbal narratives being told.

Often the participants looked at different objects and expressed their personal relationship to those; e.g. the participants look at a TV and comment, that they had the same kind of TV back in the 1970s, or that *"I have such matches back home"*. Such expressions illustrates that the participants felt a personal connection to the specific objects/environments, which triggered their verbal narratives. The personal connection to the objects/environments made the narratives quite emotionally charged in which they were often expressed through joyful conversations and laughter. The data also revealed that the word *"funny"* was mentioned many times, which indicates that the tour activated many positive memories and joyful experiences at the museum. If it can be accepted that nostalgia comprises a complex mix of emotions that refer to memories of prior experiences- and relationships (cf. Ye, Ngan & Hui, 2013), then many narratives being told during the tour in *Den Gamle By* would definitely fall into this category in which the narratives can be characterized as nostalgic. However, it is also important to elucidate whether the participants themselves found the tour nostalgic and how they perceived the experience of nostalgia.

The participants were directly asked whether they had found the tour in *Den Gamle By* nostalgic, which they all verified. This information supports the argument that the current study have succeeded in collecting data that relates to the actual experience of nostalgia. However, it also becomes essential to clarify how the participants perceive/define the concept of nostalgia. Therefore, during the qualitative interview the two female participants were asked how they perceive and define the concept of nostalgia. To this question they answered that they find nostalgia deals with *"thinking back"*. Nevertheless, to *think back* includes many things, so what is it that makes it nostalgic? The current data suggested that the experience of nostalgia had been characterized as funny; one of the participant comments: *"It is funny to remember the past. It is funny to find out what you remember and what is it that makes you remember a specific thing/event"* (trans. from Danish). However, by asking the participants in the interview whether they considered nostalgia to be *the joy of recognition*, they answered that it is not necessarily just joy; it can also be *recognition* only, or even an unpleasant memory of the past. This opens up for the possibility that nostalgia does not necessarily include happy feelings only. Such a statement support the assumption that nostalgia comprises a complex mix of emotions that refer to memories of prior experiences and relationships (cf. Ye, Ngan & Hui, 2013) as this statement does not refer to positive feelings only.

It is interesting that the immediate experience of nostalgia (at the tour) evoked happy memories and funny experiences, while the qualitative interview opened up for more constructive memories regarding the past. For example, one of the participants (from the interview) shared a memory about her rebellion against the norms of the 1970s:

"In the late 60s, early 70s it was our rebellion against all that was... the neatness... the rule-directedness... the - you should do this and that, and what do others think... so our rebellion went well up against all that ... we did not want that way of life, so we wanted to fight it" (trans. from Danish).

Here we have a situation where the participant has a history of fighting the norms within society of the 60s and 70s, which would explain the less-joyful picture of the past. Though, it is interesting that this specific participant had meanwhile found the tour, and the meeting with the environments of the past, as being nostalgic. This suggests that it is possible for nostalgic experiences to relate to the past in many different ways: e.g. by creating rosy-like pictures of the past, which might come to be altered when having a critical/constructive analysis of those memories.

However, why does there seem to be different experiences of the past? This is the point where it becomes interesting regarding the content of nostalgia! It seems like the immediate meeting with the objects/environments of the past (at the tour) triggered joyful feelings while the interview opened up for more nuanced pictures of the past. As argued previously, the narratives presented at the tour appeared as small fractions with little details while the interview covered more in-depth narratives. This information suggest that the immediate meeting with environments of the past created nostalgic feelings of joy - perhaps because those experiences did not include in-depth analysis of the memories of the past. However, the moments to come after the immediate arising of nostalgic experiences opens up for critical/constructive analysis in which nostalgia can take different forms (thereby becoming less joyful).

To sum up, the results and analysis of the current study advocate that nostalgia can indeed be defined as a complex mix of emotions that refer to memories of prior experiences and relationships, which confirms Ye, Ngan & Hui's theory (2013). Furthermore, the present results and analysis propose that the immediate experience of nostalgia is characterized by joyful feelings, which can come to alter (becoming less joyful) when the individual starts to analyze the nostalgic memories more constructively.

The Unfolding Process of Nostalgia

Now that the trigger and the characterization of nostalgia has been elaborated, it is time to turn focus towards the unfolding process of nostalgic experiences. The following example will illustrate a short event (taken place during the tour) that has been characterized as a nostalgic experience, since it deals with emotional recognition of memories from the past. The following example takes place in one of the apartments from the 1970s in which an employee is working on installing an old TV where he has a conversation with one of the participants.

Employee = E, Participant = P

E: *The TV began to arrive in the mid-70s. I worked in a Radio-TV shop back in 72*

P: *Here in Aarhus?*

E: *Yes. We were just starting to sell.*

P: (P. interrupts): *Where was it (the TV-Radio shop)?*

E: *In Fredensgade*

P: *Yes, it was called Frederiksgade*

- E: *Yes yes*
- P: *(Laughter). My parents traded there. My father, he bought our television from that shop. I'm originally here from Aarhus*
- E: *Yes?*
- P: *Yes! Yes, it's quite funny*
- E: *But at that time a TV costed a monthly salary before taxes*
- P: *Yes, it is absolutely unbelievable*
- E: *We sold one or two TVs per quarter. It was a luxury product*
- P: *Yes and you know what? I just bought a new 32 inch TV for no more than 1300kr (26.7£/29.1\$). It doesn't seem right. It doesn't match together*
- E: *Well, 1300kr is no money today*
- P: *It is no money. It is no money!*

(Trans from Danish)

The above described conversation is triggered by a physical object, a TV, in which the employee shares a personal life-story. The participant gets curious and starts to unfold their coherent bonds to the town of Aarhus in which they are both familiar. The end of the conversation turns focus back on the trigger, the object, in which the participant and the employee compare the TV of the 1970s to the present time. This is an example of how memories of the past can be triggered and developed through conversations. The present example illustrates how an object (e.g. a TV) and a social relation (a conversation) can trigger nostalgic experiences, by affecting what comes to be remembered. This suggest that social relations comes to affect what and how things are being remembered, but this issue will be addressed later.

From the tour in *Den Gamle By* it was clear, that nostalgia can contribute with a sense of coherence among people, who do not necessarily know each other. By unfolding joint histories- and familiar bonds to the past it is possible to use nostalgia as a tool to create coherence among people. Actually, it seems that the familiar-aspect becomes significant for nostalgic experiences to appear as it sets the foundation when recognizing specific items and activating a mix of complex emotions. During the tour in *Den Gamle By* the participants created familiar-bonds to certain objects and to each other, e.g. by referring objects to *home* and by emphasizing their common relation to the 1970s. From this, it appears that the familiar-bond (e.g. specific objects, environments, time etc.) constitutes the core of nostalgia.

To sum up, the results of the current study suggest that the immediate experience of nostalgia is characterized by joyful feelings of recognition. However, the unfolding moments to come after the immediate arising of nostalgia can be followed by less joyful memories, which brakes with the initial rosy like picture of nostalgia. In this respect, nostalgia can unfold in many different ways making it a complex mix of emotions that relates to past memories. The results and analysis of the current study also suggest that nostalgia has the ability to unite people by creating coherence among individuals (even strangers) who share common familiar-bonds to the past.

DISCUSSION

The following section will address some of those issues that relates to the study of nostalgia including a critical review of the method being applied to the current study.

Critical Review of the Method Applied

The present study seems to be ecologically valid since it takes its starting point in actual lived-experiences of nostalgia as they appear and develop in the present moment. In addition, the investigation was carried out in “naturalistic” environments (rather than in experimental rooms), in which participants were not interrupted in their affairs. This methodological design contributes with valuable data, in which it became possible to get access to the unfolding process of nostalgic experiences.

However, it is important to recognize that the experience of nostalgia was activated by physical contents within the museum of *Den Gamle By*. In this respect it can be questioned whether this type of nostalgia is similar to the experience of nostalgia in everyday-life? This topic has shortly been addressed before, but it is relevant to consider how the contexts trigger and affect nostalgic experiences.

The great value of using the contexts in *Den Gamle By* is that the museum covers multiple environments that have a broad appeal because it relates to different social-, economic-, and political backgrounds (from the nuclear family to the political collective). This setup makes it possible to investigate many different ways of relating to nostalgia, each contributing with new valuable information to the field. As the current results suggest then nostalgia can arise with a positive starting point from which it can take numerous forms. This statement challenge many of the preexisting studies regarding nostalgia, as current researchers often perceive nostalgia to be a positive- and self-relevant emotion that improves self-esteem and supports social bonds (cf. Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides & Wildshut, 2006/2008). Because of the ambiguous perceptions about nostalgia it becomes relevant to examine whether nostalgia are to be perceived as a positive or/and negative emotion with beneficial effects.

The Experience of Nostalgia: Positive or Negative?

The current study has illustrated that nostalgia is most prevalent to expose itself through joyful feelings of recognition. Nevertheless, it is relevant to examine what such joyful feelings cover more specifically. Among feeling happy, the participants explained that they found nostalgic experiences linked to feelings of comfort and security because of nostalgia’s familiarity-bonds to the past. But does that mean that there are only positive benefits from experiencing nostalgia? To answer that question it is important to have a look at the original meaning of nostalgia, which initially arrives from the Greek words: *nostos* = *returning home* and *algia* = *longing* or *suffering* (cf. *historical walkthrough*). Please notice that the current study has actually located a direct link between nostalgic experience and the use of the word “home” (cf. *results*). However, does nostalgia also leads to *suffering* or *longing* for the past, as the original meaning of the concept suggests (cf. *algia*)? To answer that question it is relevant to look at the current study’s results. In the interview, one of the participants expresses how she and her family celebrated Christmas when she was a little girl:

"The doors were closed. My father walked in and lighted up the Christmas candles. It was cozy, and I can feel that I lack that part today. We did not get lots of presents, but we were happy. And my father's cousin always gave us a book. And we had such great upholstered chairs in which we could sit all Christmas day reading our new book in our sleeping wear [...]. That I miss." (Trans from Danish)

The quotations expose some information of the participant's current situation; something might be missing since the participant is longing for certain aspects of the past. However, this is a truth with modifications, because the participant explicitly said that even though she misses that specific period of time, she is not suffering from the "loss" of it. This is an interesting point to remember as it nuances how to perceive the concept of nostalgia; namely, that nostalgia can be linked to *longing* without necessarily including the *suffering*-aspect.

As described earlier, nostalgia has for a long time been characterized as a neural- or cerebral disease, suggesting negative side effects of experiencing nostalgia. In this respect, nostalgia was also linked to unpleasant feelings of *suffering* (cf. *historical walkthrough*). The *suffering*-aspect of nostalgia implies losses caused by unpleasant (and perhaps even painful) experiences, which would explain the rather negative assumption about the concept. Current studies have actually confirmed that it is indeed possible to experience negative effects from nostalgia. Such an example can be found in Julio G. Arenas' study (1994) where he suggests that some refugees are suffering from severe cases of nostalgia, by having experienced enormous breaks from their home-countries leaving them in states of suffering from their lost homes. Arenas (1994) claims, that a massive break with the home-country can lead to active states of being nostalgic in which refugees suffer from longing to get back to their lost homes.

The above example can be characterized as a case of *blind nostalgia*, where the nostalgic experiences maintain individuals in their *suffering*-states, reminding them of all those good things they once had, but cannot get back. The state of blind nostalgia prevents individuals from having healthy functioning lives; they become so occupied by remembering and trying to regain nostalgic memories of the past, that it prevents them from living in the ever present-moment. In addition, it can be argued that blind nostalgia maintain individuals in imaginary dream worlds in a way that prevents them from functioning in e.g. social settings, giving rise to an unhealthy relation to nostalgia.

Arenas (1994) argue that some refugees *suffer* from nostalgia by longing back home, but please notice that in this condition, people are not experiencing nostalgia by being brought back to certain environments of their pasts. Rather, those nostalgic experiences take place inside imaginations of individuals, regardless of the environments they find themselves in. This gives new perspectives to the experience of nostalgia in relation to how- and when such experiences can appear and unfold. Apparently, nostalgic experiences do not necessarily need a physical trigger (e.g. an object) to expose their appearance. Rather, it is possible for nostalgic experiences to arise and be maintained within individuals' imaginations.

The above described example illustrates that nostalgia can indeed be linked to unpleasant feelings; e.g. by having people *suffer to return to their lost homes*, which prevent them from having normal-functioning lives. It has also been illustrated that nostalgia can have a positive effect by activating joyful feelings that supports social bonds (cf. the results and analysis of the current study; Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides & Wildshut, 2006/2008). This information sug-

gests that it is difficult to determine whether nostalgia should be perceived as a positive or negative condition. This has to do with the fact that the experience of nostalgia is much complex and consequently it becomes entirely up for the single individual to determine its unique nostalgic experience to be either positive, negative, or a combination of both. Therefore, let this be an appeal for scientists to become more critical about how they perceive the concept of nostalgia and how they impose their assumption to the participants and to the study design.

Individual vs. Social Aspect of Nostalgia

Another aspect that is worth considering when speaking of nostalgia is the social vs. individual aspects of the phenomenon. During the tour in *Den Gamle By* participants told numerous stories relating to their personal memory of the environments. These narratives were based on individualistic approaches to personal memories, which became shared in a social context. By sharing personal narratives, the participants created an atmosphere of joint history through expression such as: “do you remember that we all had Nivea crème.” (Trans. from Danish). This is an example of how nostalgia can take a social form, which creates a sense of coherence among those people involved. Moreover, as illustrated earlier (the conversation between one of the participants and an employee), then it is also possible for social context to affect what is being remembered. Interestingly, memories themselves are also affected by social relations, as lives are never purely individual and thus memories are socially mediated. These arguments suggest that nostalgia can be seen as a social act.

It can be proposed that the social aspect of nostalgia is characterized through different layers; 1) nostalgic experiences take their starting point in memories being socially mediated, and 2) sociality in the moment of experiencing nostalgia with others. However, it becomes relevant to elucidate this viewpoint further.

When expressing “we all had Nivea crème” the participant recalls a social-memory (1), but remembering-processes are also affected by the social context we find ourselves within; e.g. the conversation with the employee (2). This information opens up for different ways of investigating the experience of nostalgia from a social point of view. For example, it is possible to separate participants and test them individually in isolated experimental rooms (as being the case in many prior studies regarding nostalgia). These studies can contribute with information regarding the social content of nostalgic memories (nostalgic memories being socially mediated). However, by letting people interact with each other during the investigation will contribute with other information of how social interaction affects what is being remembered. Said in another way, the nostalgic experiences taking place in isolated contexts (e.g. a person sitting home alone, experiencing nostalgia by looking in the photo-album) are quite different from the nostalgic experiences taking place through actual social interactions (like in the present study); although both cases include a social aspect of experiencing nostalgia though in different ways.

To sum up; the social frameworks function on different levels, in which the experience of nostalgia differs according to whether the individual is alone or interacts in social contexts. Thus, it is essential to notice that nostalgic memories will always be affected by some sort of social relation. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the different social aspects of nostalgia; whether it is the social memory itself or the social interaction in relation to social memories.

Hopefully this information will encourage further investigations to explore how social relations affect the experience of nostalgia, as this aspect has not been processed scientifically (this study have tried to address the issue).

CONCLUSION

The results of the current study suggest that the immediate experience of nostalgia is characterized by happy feelings of joy because those experiences do not include detailed analysis of the past. However, the moments to come after the immediate arisen of nostalgia, can be followed by less joyful feelings as the individual starts to analyze the nostalgic memories more constructively. In this respect, nostalgia can unfold in many different ways evoking a complex mix of emotions. These results support the theory of Ye, Ngan & Hui (2013) that nostalgia comprises a complex mix of emotions that refer to memories of prior experiences and relationships.

The present study illustrates that nostalgia can indeed have positive effects by creating a sense of coherence among people, evoking warm feelings of joy and comfort. Nevertheless, nostalgia can also have negative effects by maintaining people within an imaginary world of the past, which prevents them from living in the present moment. Therefore, it becomes important for researchers to be critical about how they perceive the concept of nostalgia and how this affects their study design as well as their participants. This has to do with the fact that participants' perception of nostalgia is not necessarily similar to the researcher's, which questions the validity of the gained results, if this aspect has not been examined.

Finally, the current study demonstrates that nostalgia is definitely a social act. Nostalgic memories will always be affected by some sort of social relation as life is never lived pure individualistic – memory is socially mediated. Therefore, the social context in which nostalgic experiences unfold (in the present time) will also come to affect what is being remembered. Consequently, nostalgia will come to function on different social levels, which become important to acknowledge and include scientifically.

Further investigations are encouraged to explore whether nostalgia can be applied to practical work with clients in order to create beneficial effects (cf. Kristiansen, 2013; *Memory-dissemination for people with dementia*).

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