What’s Left Behind: Identity Continuity Moderates the Effect of Nostalgia on Well-Being and Life Choices

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Previous research has demonstrated that nostalgia for the past can have positive consequences for individuals’ psychological well-being and their perceived ability to cope with challenges in the present (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). We propose that this effect is limited to circumstances in which individuals have maintained identity continuity between the past and the present. Support for this moderation hypothesis is obtained in a longitudinal survey (Study 1) and two experiments (Studies 2 and 3) among students entering university. Whereas previously observed positive effects of nostalgia were confirmed when identity continuity had been maintained, feeling nostalgic about the past in the context of lower identity continuity had negative consequences for well-being (Studies 1 and 3), perceived ability to cope with challenges (Studies 1 and 2), and interest in new opportunities (Studies 2 and 3) rather than focusing on familiar experiences (Study 3). Taken together, results indicate that the extent to which individuals view the present as linked to the past has important implications for the outcome of their nostalgia.

Keywords: nostalgia, identity continuity, life transitions, social identity, change

I can see less because I’m so captivated by the past, or I can see more because I add the vision of the past. (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 37)

We live in an age of unprecedented social movement. Individuals, families, and even entire groups migrate between suburbs, cities, countries, and continents for various reasons: to pursue higher education, to take up new jobs, to reunite with family, or to generally seek a better life. Such change can reflect a complex psychological experience; although these individuals are looking to make a fresh start in a new context, they may also experience nostalgia when they fondly reflect on the lives they have left behind.

The first part of the above quotation suggests that individuals’ nostalgic rumination about the past may hinder their ability to successfully navigate the transition to a new context. Indeed, nostalgia has historically been conceptualized as a medical disease and a psychiatric illness, characterized by feelings of loss and mourning (for reviews, see Davis, 1979; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). This clinical view has typically investigated nostalgia in extreme contexts of traumatic change (e.g., war or exile). However, the second part of the quotation suggests that nostalgia can also serve as an important resource to individuals in times of transition. Countering the historical clinical perspective, social psychologists have recently argued that individuals’ nostalgia about relatively ordinary aspects of their past (e.g., people, places, and events) can increase their psychological well-being and their capacity to cope with challenges in the present (see Sedikides et al., 2004).

In this article, we use the context of life transitions to explore the conditions in which nostalgia might have either positive or negative consequences. Although we do not wish to revive the historical view of nostalgia as pathological and maladaptive, we propose that reflecting on the past may not always be beneficial or productive. More specifically, we hypothesize that the implications of nostalgia are moderated by the extent to which individuals are able to maintain a sense of identity continuity during times of change: it is only when individuals feel a connection to the fondly remembered past that their nostalgia will have positive consequences for well-being and ability to cope with challenges. Below we review the literatures on nostalgia and identity continuity before developing our hypotheses.

Conceptualizing Nostalgia: Triggers and Consequences

Nostalgia is defined as a “sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past” (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 2011). This emotion can be experienced about a range of targets, including individuals, groups, animals, events, places, and periods of time (see Kessous & Roux, 2008; Wildschut et al., 2006; Studies 1 and 2). As a result, nostalgia can be differentiated from more specific emotions such as homesickness for a place.

The historical view of nostalgia as a psychiatric illness has received little systematic empirical attention. Indeed, evidence for this perspective is primarily anecdotal or drawn on a limited number of case studies (for a review, see Davis, 1979). More
recently, psychological frameworks have conceptualized nostalgia as a positive emotion that has functional utility (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). This approach proposes that people feel nostalgia when faced with threat, because nostalgia serves a restorative function by producing beneficial effects for psychological functioning.

There is evidence that individuals experience nostalgia for the past when facing a threat in their present circumstances (see Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). For instance, a series of experiments (Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 3 and 4) manipulated individuals’ mood to show that nostalgia is elicited by higher levels of negative affect and loneliness. Research has also demonstrated that concrete threats such as organizational change can increase employees’ nostalgia for the past (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Milligan, 2003).

Direct evidence for the functional utility of nostalgia comes from a series of experiments comparing the responses of participants who were induced to feel nostalgia and those who were induced to experience a neutral mood (Wildschut et al., 2006; Studies 5–7). In the nostalgia condition, participants were asked to recall an event from the past that they felt nostalgic about, whereas in the neutral mood condition, participants were asked to recall an ordinary event that had occurred in the last week. Compared with participants in the control condition, participants in the nostalgia condition reported higher levels of positive affect, higher levels of personal self-esteem, and more secure adult attachment styles (Wildschut et al., 2006; Studies 5–7). These results were interpreted as indicating that nostalgia increases psychological well-being, increases self-positivity, and fosters affiliation (see also Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008).

Another set of studies has demonstrated that nostalgia can also strengthen individuals’ resolve to cope with threats. For instance, nostalgia has been shown to help buffer against the negative effects of mortality salience (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008) and has been conceptualized more broadly as helping individuals cope with existential threat (Sedikides et al., 2004). Similarly, nostalgia can increase perceptions of social support in the face of loneliness (Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008), especially among those individuals who tend to rely on social bonds to regulate distress (Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, & Cordaro, 2010). More broadly, immigrants’ nostalgia for their home communities has been conceptualized as facilitating the process of adjusting to the new context (see Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, Arndt, & Zhou, 2009). Taken together, this research suggests that nostalgia can serve as a resource to help individuals cope with threats and challenges in their environment and encourage them to take advantage of new opportunities that they may encounter (Sedikides et al., 2004).

Explaining the Positive Consequences of Nostalgia: Identity Continuity as a Mediator

Why should experiencing nostalgia for the past have such positive consequences for individuals in their present circumstances? Theories of nostalgia propose that the answer lies in the way this emotion links an individual to his or her past (Davis, 1979). Nostalgia can increase individuals’ perceptions of identity continuity, such that “who they are now” is connected to their sense of “who they were in the past” (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008). Identity continuity can be established on the basis of any dimension that is relevant to the self, such as roles and activities, attitudes and beliefs, interpersonal relationships, group memberships, and culture (see Bluck & Alea, 2008; Chandler & Proulx, 2008; Iyer, Jetten, & Tsivikos, 2008; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, et al., 2008). Individuals are said to “derive a stronger sense of selfhood, an increasingly unified self, by putting together pieces of past lives through nostalgia” (Sedikides et al., 2004, p. 206). In other words, nostalgia can serve as an enabler of identity continuity (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, et al., 2008).

Identity continuity, in turn, has many positive consequences for psychological functioning (see Bluck & Alea, 2008). Perceiving a sense of identity continuity over time and across different contexts can help individuals feel grounded in a social and cultural context and thus manage their existential terror (see Landau, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2008). As such, identity continuity increases individuals’ psychological well-being (see Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008) and bolsters relational bonds (see Bluck & Alea, 2008).

Identity continuity is thus proposed to serve as a mediator of the relationship between nostalgia and well-being: Nostalgia has positive implications for well-being because it increases perceptions of identity continuity (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, et al., 2008). The explicit assumption in this mediation model is that nostalgia (i.e., the independent variable) and identity continuity (i.e., the mediator) are directly linked (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). To date, empirical research has provided consistent evidence for this view. For instance, experimental studies have shown that people who were asked to recall nostalgic experiences report a heightened perception of continuity between their past and present selves compared with people who were asked to recall ordinary experiences (Routledge et al., 2006). Qualitative analyses of organizational change also suggest that nostalgia allows individuals to develop a sense of identity continuity (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Milligan, 2003).

The implicit assumption in this mediation model is that high levels of identity continuity are always possible—that individuals can always feel connected to who they were in the past. However, to our knowledge, previous work has not directly examined contexts where such continuity may not exist. Research has typically manipulated and measured nostalgia in general terms, without reference to specific targets. That is, manipulations of nostalgia have asked individuals to recall any event that makes them feel nostalgic (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 5–7). Measures of nostalgia assess the extent to which participants are generally experiencing this emotion rather than in relation to specific targets (e.g., Routledge et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2008; Wildschut et al., 2006). We suspect that, as a consequence of this procedure, participants in these studies may simply be choosing positive targets that allow for high levels of identity continuity. This, in turn, suggests that the documented positive consequences of nostalgia may not always be experienced.

Extant work has not systematically investigated the possibility that nostalgia and identity continuity may operate independently. For instance, individuals may experience nostalgia for a target that does not allow for high levels of identity continuity. In such cases, we propose that identity continuity may serve to moderate, rather than mediate, the consequences of nostalgia. That is, nostalgia may...
have positive consequences when identity continuity is high but may have negative consequences when identity continuity is low.

**Limits on the Positive Consequences of Nostalgia: Identity Continuity as a Moderator**

An individual’s ability to establish or maintain a sense of identity continuity may be constrained in several ways. First, there may be some physical or chronological distance between the lives individuals once led and the lives they lead now. As a result, for instance, immigrants may experience a disruption in identity continuity because of the distance between them and their culture of origin. Similarly, middle-aged adults may believe that their current set of responsibilities and obligations make them very different from the carefree individuals they were at 16 years of age.

Second, a change in abilities or resources is likely to constrain an individual’s ability to maintain his or her regular activities and social contacts, thus impacting their levels of identity continuity (e.g., C. Haslam et al., 2008). Individuals who suffer brain injury after a stroke, or who become very wealthy and leave their old neighborhoods, may find it difficult to maintain a sense of identity continuity over this transition. Third, an individual’s claim to identity continuity may be rejected by others (see Iyer et al., 2008). For instance, others may perceive a person’s resources or roles to have changed too much for them to remain a legitimate member of the group. At the group level, organizational mergers and restructurings may pose structural constraints that limit group members’ ability to maintain their view of the group as stable and unchanging (Jetten & Hutchison, 2010).

In a departure from previous work, the present research investigates how such limits on identity continuity may moderate the consequences of nostalgia for individuals’ well-being and life choices. We propose that when identity continuity is constrained with respect to a specific target in an individual’s past, nostalgia for that target will serve as a painful reminder of what is lost to the past. Recalling the target with longing and affection will then be unlikely to serve the positive functions that have been conceptualized for nostalgia. Rather, when individuals no longer feel connected to a past that they recall with fond memories, they are likely to experience a heightened sense of loss and to believe that these resources can no longer serve them in good stead. As a result, individuals should experience lower levels of well-being and should feel less confidence in their ability to tackle challenges in their present environment. Nostalgia is also likely to impact on individuals’ willingness to embrace new opportunities and experiences: they may be more interested in trying to recapture the past than in taking advantage of new opportunities.

In contrast, when an individual perceives a high level of identity continuity between the nostalgic target and the present, the positive consequences of nostalgia that have been proposed and documented in the literature should become evident. In such cases, nostalgia should indeed serve as a bridge between the past and the present and should therefore provide a resource to individuals. Nostalgia should thus increase levels of psychological well-being and confidence in tackling challenges and obstacles. As proposed by previous work (e.g., Sedikides et al., 2004, 2009), emphasizing identity continuity means that individuals should feel assured that the target of nostalgia is still relevant and available to them. Having such a solid foundation as a resource suggests that individuals should be interested in taking advantage of new opportunities rather than remaining focused on familiar experiences and surroundings. We tested these ideas in three studies.

**The Present Research**

We investigated the independent and interactive effects of nostalgia and identity continuity on three dependent variables previously identified as positive consequences of nostalgia: psychological well-being, ability to cope with challenges, and willingness to take advantage of new opportunities. In Study 1, we measured nostalgia and identity continuity in a longitudinal survey of students entering university. In the next two studies we independently manipulated nostalgia and identity continuity among students who had just started their university studies.

Our approach differed from previous research in two important ways. First, we conducted our studies during a life transition that allows for constraints on identity continuity. When undergraduate students are starting their university program, they are likely to experience changes in their physical location, social networks, and daily activities. Such changes can limit their ability to maintain a high level of identity continuity. They may no longer perceive that the past and the present are interconnected. This allowed us to test the moderating role of identity continuity on the effects of nostalgia.

Second, we investigated nostalgia and identity continuity with respect to a specific target rather than in general terms. We considered individuals’ lives immediately prior to the transition as the target of nostalgia (i.e., the aspect of the past that is the object of individuals’ emotion) and as the referent for identity continuity (i.e., as the comparison standard by which to assess whether individuals maintained their identities after the transition). By measuring (Studies 1–3) and manipulating (Studies 2 and 3) these two variables with respect to the same general target, we could directly assess their independent and interactive effects. In Study 2, we induced nostalgia about a specific object from the past (i.e., family and friends), and in Study 3, participants could choose their own specific object of nostalgia from their last year in high school.

We hypothesized that identity continuity would moderate the effects of nostalgia on well-being, ability to cope with challenges, and willingness take on new opportunities. When identity continuity is high, nostalgia is expected to be associated with the positive consequences that have been demonstrated in previous research, including increased psychological well-being (Studies 1 and 3), increased confidence in ability to face challenges (Studies 1 and 2), more interest in new opportunities (Studies 2 and 3), and less interest in familiar opportunities (Study 3). In contrast, nostalgia should have negative implications under conditions of low identity continuity. High levels of nostalgia for a past that has been left behind should result in lower levels of psychological well-being (Studies 1 and 3), less confidence in ability to face challenges (Studies 1 and 2), less interest in new opportunities (Studies 2 and 3), and more interest in maintaining identity continuity by focusing on familiar opportunities (Study 3).

**Study 1**

Undergraduate students completing their first year of university participated in a longitudinal survey of their experiences. We
assessed how well nostalgia for a specific target (i.e., students’ home community) predicted their life satisfaction and perceived ability to cope with academic obstacles at university. In addition, we examined whether identity continuity over the transition period moderated this relationship.

In Study 1, identity continuity was operationalized as social identity continuity — or the extent to which students maintained their group memberships from their home community during the transition to university. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1986), individuals’ group memberships are represented in their social identities, which form an important part of their self-concept. Providing support for this view, previous research has indicated that the maintenance of group memberships serves as a good indicator of identity continuity1 (C. Haslam et al., 2008; Jetten & Hutchison, 2010; for a review, see Iyer et al., 2008).

We hypothesized that nostalgia should have positive consequences at higher levels of identity continuity, with respect to psychological well-being and the perception that the academic challenges posed by university are manageable. At lower levels of identity continuity, in contrast, nostalgia was expected to have negative implications for well-being and the perception that the academic demands of university study are manageable.

Method

Participants and procedure. All undergraduate students entering a British university (N = 2,635) were invited to participate in a longitudinal study.2 Questionnaires were mailed to students’ home addresses approximately 2 months before the start of the university term (August; Time 1). Completed questionnaires were returned from 934 students (35% response rate). After being at university for 2 months (November; Time 2) all first-year students received an e-mail inviting them to participate in an online study about their experiences at university. Five hundred and sixty-one students completed this on-line questionnaire (21% response rate). During the Easter holidays 4 months later, the third questionnaire was mailed to students’ home addresses (March; Time 3). Of these, 326 students returned completed questionnaires (12% response rate). Participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily at Time 1 and were provided monetary incentives (entry in a drawing to win vouchers to an online retailer) for their participation at Times 2 and 3.

The questions of interest in the present study focus on students’ reflections on the past after they have completed the transition to university. As a result, we disregarded students’ responses at Time 1, as this pretransition questionnaire did not address any of the key variables (i.e., experiences of nostalgia and identity continuity). The final sample included only the 120 students who completed the Time 2 and Time 3 questionnaires. These participants included 96 women and 23 men, whose ages ranged from 18 to 38 years (M = 19.30, SD = 2.15).

Measures. Participants completed all measures using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Time 2 nostalgia for home community. A single item was used to measure students’ level of nostalgia for their home community: “I am feeling quite nostalgic about life back home.”

Time 2 identity continuity. Two items adapted from C. Haslam et al. (2008) assessed the extent to which students had maintained their pre-university group memberships (α = .86): “Even though I am now at university, I have stayed a member of the same groups I belonged to back home” and “I have maintained strong ties with the same groups I belonged to before coming to university.”

Time 2 and Time 3 perceived academic obstacles. Students’ belief that they were facing unmanageable academic demands at university was assessed with three items (Time 2 α = .62; Time 3 α = .70): “The other students in my classes seem to know much more than me”; “I am able to keep up with the coursework here at university” (reverse scored); and “The academic work at university seems easier than I thought it would be” (reverse scored).

Time 2 and Time 3 life satisfaction. Five items (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) assessed students’ overall satisfaction with life (Time 2 α = .84; Time 3 α = .86). Sample items included “I am satisfied with my life” and “The conditions of my life are excellent.”

Results

Preliminary analyses. We first examined whether attrition rates across the longitudinal study had a significant impact on the type of participants who remained in our final sample (i.e., students who completed the Time 2 and Time 3 questionnaires; N = 120). Independent samples t tests showed no mean differences on the variables of interest between our final sample and the full sample of students who completed the questionnaire at Time 2 (N = 561), all ps > .10. Similarly, the mean scores in our final sample were virtually identical to those in the full sample of students who completed the questionnaire at Time 3 (N = 326), all ps > .10. When comparing the correlation matrices for these three samples, the relations between the variables of interest were generally very similar. Thus, there is good reason to believe that the participants in the final sample were not significantly different from those who dropped out of the study.

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the final sample are presented in Table 1. Participants did not report significantly different levels of life satisfaction between Time 2 and Time 3, r(119) = −0.75, p = .46. However, they did perceive fewer academic obstacles at Time 3 compared with Time 2, r(119) = 1.98, p = .05.

1 Of course, it is possible to maintain membership in a group and yet perceive little continuity in this group over time. For instance, the group may look very different because its actions, goals, or character may have shifted, whether unintentionally or by design. However, we are reasonably confident that our participants’ reported maintenance of group memberships was essentially equivalent to reporting high levels of identity continuity. This is because we ask university students to reflect on the continuity of group memberships from just a few months earlier. Given this very limited time frame, it seems unlikely that the characteristics and activities of these groups would have changed so dramatically as to result in perceptions of discontinuity.

2 These data were collected within the context of a large longitudinal study examining students’ transition to university. Other parts of this data set have been reported by Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, and Haslam (2009); Jetten and Iyer (2010); and Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, and Young (2008).
Participants’ reported feelings of nostalgia at Time 2 were moderately positively correlated with the perceptions of higher identity continuity at Time 2 (see Table 1). Nostalgia at Time 2 was not correlated with life satisfaction (at either Time 2 or Time 3) or with perceived academic obstacles at Time 3. However, there was a significant positive correlation between nostalgia and perceived academic obstacles at Time 2.

**Main analyses.** We sought to test whether perceived identity continuity (at Time 2) moderated the relationship between nostalgia (at Time 2) and important outcomes at Time 3 (i.e., life satisfaction and perceived academic obstacles). A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted with (mean-centered) nostalgia and identity continuity entered as predictors in Step 1. In order to demonstrate that nostalgia and identity continuity could account for unique variance in the Time 3 outcome variables, we also entered the baseline level of each variable (i.e., measured at Time 2) as a predictor in Step 1 of the relevant analysis. The interaction between nostalgia and identity continuity entered as a predictor in Step 2, and each dependent variable in turn served as the criterion (Aiken & West, 1991).

**Perceived academic obstacles.** There were no significant effects of Time 2 nostalgia, \( \beta = .08, t(115) = 0.83, p = .41 \), or Time 2 identity continuity, \( \beta = -.10, t(115) = -0.99, p = .32 \), on students’ perception that they faced academic obstacles at Time 3. However, perceived academic obstacles at Time 2 were a significant negative predictor, \( \beta = -.48, t(115) = -4.70, p < .001 \). Interestingly, then, perceiving academic obstacles at Time 2 was negatively associated with the perception of similar obstacles at Time 3.

This effect was qualified by a significant two-way interaction between nostalgia and identity continuity: \( \beta = -.28, t(115) = -2.90, p = .005 \). This interaction was examined with simple-slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991), which assessed the significance of the regression coefficients for nostalgia at both low (−1 SD) and high (+1 SD) levels of identity continuity (see Figure 1). Nostalgia negatively predicted perceived academic obstacles at high levels of identity continuity, \( \beta = -.27, t(115) = -2.90, p = .005 \), but was a positive predictor of perceived academic obstacles at low levels of identity continuity, \( \beta = .32, t(115) = 2.45, p = .016 \). Thus, consistent with hypotheses, nostalgia was associated with more positive beliefs about the level of academic obstacles when identity continuity was high. Moreover, as expected, nostalgia predicted more negative beliefs about academic obstacles when identity continuity was low.

**Life satisfaction.** There were no significant effects of Time 2 nostalgia, \( \beta = -.12, t(115) = -1.57, p = .12 \), or Time 2 identity continuity, \( \beta = .09, t(115) = 1.26, p = .21 \), on students’ life satisfaction levels at Time 3. However, life satisfaction at Time 2 was a significant positive predictor, \( \beta = .63, t(115) = 10.66, p < .001 \). Not surprisingly, students who reported higher life satisfaction at Time 2 were significantly more likely to report higher life satisfaction at Time 3.

This effect was qualified by a marginally significant two-way interaction between nostalgia and identity continuity, \( \beta = -.14, t(115) = -1.72, p = .08 \). This interaction is displayed in Figure 2. In contrast to hypotheses and previous findings, nostalgia did not predict life satisfaction at high levels of identity continuity, \( \beta = .09, t(115) = 0.85, p = .40 \). However, as expected, nostalgia negatively predicted life satisfaction at low levels of identity continuity: \( \beta = -.15, t(115) = -1.99, p = .049 \). Thus, nostalgia had negative consequences for well-being when identity continuity was low.

**Discussion.** A longitudinal study of students entering university provided preliminary evidence that perceived identity continuity moderates the consequences of nostalgia. At high levels of identity continuity...
ity, nostalgia was associated with perceiving fewer academic obstacles at university. This is consistent with previous work that has demonstrated the positive consequences of nostalgia (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006) and suggests that nostalgia can indeed serve as a resource to help individuals cope with ongoing challenges. However, this effect was not found on the well-being measure: At higher levels of continuity, students’ nostalgia was not a significant independent predictor of their life satisfaction at Time 3. This fails to replicate previous work showing that nostalgia has positive implications for emotional well-being (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006). It is not clear why this is the case; we return to this issue in Study 3, where we assess the implications of nostalgia and identity continuity for emotional well-being.

Consistent with hypotheses, nostalgia had negative implications when levels of identity continuity were low: Nostalgia predicted increased perceptions of academic obstacles and lower levels of life satisfaction. This suggests that nostalgia serves as a resource only when individuals believe that their identities are still connected to this aspect of the past. When this connection is absent (i.e., with lower levels of identity continuity over time), recalling the past may simply serve as a painful reminder of what is lost. In this case, nostalgia can result in lower levels of psychological well-being and a diminished view that the challenges in the present circumstances are manageable.

One puzzling result in this study was the negative association between perceived academic obstacles at Time 2 and Time 3. Such a negative relationship is not typical of the standard pattern of positive test–retest effects found in longitudinal studies (Menard, 2002). However, this result may not be so surprising when considering the context of our investigation. For instance, it is possible that participants who perceived academic obstacles at Time 2 worked harder at their studies, or sought help from academic tutors, and thus perceived that they were better able to cope with university-level academic work when completing the Time 3 questionnaire. Alternatively, students who were struggling at Time 2 might have engaged in social creativity strategies, such as normalizing academic obstacles as being part and parcel of student life or focusing on other dimensions of self-worth at university. Such strategies could have reduced the extent to which academic challenges continued to be appraised as a stressor at Time 3 (see S. A. Haslam, O’Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, &Pennan, 2005). In this way, participants may have improved their ability to cope with university-level academics by the time they completed the Time 3 questionnaire and thus would have been less likely to report academic obstacles at Time 3.

This study offers preliminary support for our hypotheses in a longitudinal analysis of students’ transition into university. This psychologically rich experience allowed for a rigorous test of the hypotheses in a real-world context. However, there are at least two limitations that should be noted. First, we measured the key independent variables (albeit in a longitudinal design) rather than manipulating them directly. Thus, definitive statements about the causal effects of nostalgia and identity continuity cannot be made.

Second, our measurement of the key independent variables arguably could be refined. Nostalgia was measured with a single item, which would limit its internal reliability. Moreover, the identity continuity items emphasized one aspect of the self-concept (i.e., group memberships and social identity continuity) rather than assessing continuity more generally. Other approaches have focused on continuity with respect to other aspects of the self, such as interpersonal relationships, culture, roles, and activities (for a review, see Sani, 2008), and these dimensions were not captured in our measure. Replicating our results using a broader operationalization of identity continuity would allow us to assess the generalizability of the Study 1 findings. We address these limitations in two subsequent studies.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was again conducted in the context of students’ transition into university, with participants recruited in their first semester of studies. Thus, the target of nostalgia was specified as the home community that students had left when they started university. Identity continuity was also examined within the specific parameters of this transition. Rather than emphasizing specific aspects of the self (e.g., group memberships), we focused more generally on the extent to which participants felt connected to their lives before university.

We developed independent manipulations of identity continuity and nostalgia in order to assess their independent and interactive effects on two outcome variables. First, as in Study 1, we assessed the extent to which students believe they face unmanageable academic obstacles in their studies. We also included a new dependent variable: interest in taking advantage of new opportunities and experiences at university. If nostalgia serves as a resource to individuals, it should bolster initiatives to take on new challenges (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008).

Identity continuity was hypothesized to moderate the consequences of nostalgia for students’ perceptions of the challenges and opportunities they face at university. On one hand, when identity continuity is maintained, high levels of nostalgia should have positive consequences (compared with low levels of nostalgia) for students’ belief that the academic challenges at university are manageable and their interest in taking advantage of new opportunities. At low levels of identity continuity, on the other hand, we expected high levels of nostalgia for the past to have more negative consequences for these dependent variables compared with low levels of nostalgia.

![Figure 2](image-url)
Method

Participants. Participants included 85 first-year undergraduate students at a large Australian university who received course credit for their participation. Three participants did not complete one of the manipulations and thus were excluded from analyses. The final sample of 82 students included 57 women (69.51%) and 24 men (29.27%), in addition to one participant who did not specify gender. Participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 28 years ($M = 18.72$, $SD = 1.94$).

Design and materials. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a $2$ (nostalgia: low or high) $\times 2$ (identity continuity: low or high) experiment. The first pages of the questionnaire packet included the independent manipulations of nostalgia and identity continuity.

Manipulation of nostalgia. Participants were asked to reflect on a particular topic and write down their thoughts. Participants in the high-nostalgia condition were asked to think about the things they appreciated about their social network of family and friends back home. Following previous work on nostalgia (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006), the exercise was intended to focus participants’ attention on their fond memories of this particular aspect of their past.

Participants in the low-nostalgia condition were asked to reflect on their hobbies and list them, a task that was expected to be pleasant in nature. The goal was to induce a positive mood in the control condition so that we could differentiate the effects of nostalgia from the effects of positive affect more generally (for a discussion, see Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008).

Manipulation of identity continuity. Participants read a brief report that ostensibly summarized the experience of previous first-year students at the same university. Identity continuity with respect to the home community was manipulated by systematically varying the extent to which these students reported feeling connected to their lives back at home.

Participants in the high-identity continuity condition read that nearly all of the students who were surveyed had been able to maintain links with their home communities. These students reported that they had needed to make very few changes in their lifestyle since starting university and that it was easy to stay in contact with friends and family. Overall, the report stated that these students felt like “very much the same people as they were back at home” even though they were now at university.

In contrast, participants in the low-identity continuity condition read that very few of the surveyed students had been able to maintain links with their home communities. These students reported that they had experienced significant changes in their lifestyle since starting university and that it was difficult to stay in contact with friends and family. Overall, according to the report, these students felt like “very different people at university, compared to who they were back at home.”

Measures. Participants completed all measures on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Nostalgia manipulation check. Four items ($\alpha = .86$) assessed the extent to which participants felt nostalgic about their lives and communities before university. Sample items included the following: “Now that I am at university, I long to be back home”\(^3\) and “I am feeling quite nostalgic about my life before university.”

Identity continuity manipulation check. Four items assessed the extent to which students believed that they had maintained their identities since having started their university studies ($\alpha = .68$). Sample items included the following: “I see studying at university as breaking with the past” (reverse scored) and “Being at university has not changed much of who I am.”

Perceived academic obstacles. The three-item measure developed in Study 1 was used to assess participants’ perception that they were struggling with the academic demands of university ($\alpha = .78$).

Interest in new opportunities. Participants’ level of interest in taking advantage of new opportunities and experiences at university was assessed with three items ($\alpha = .80$): “I am looking forward to meeting new people this year”; “I plan to take advantage of new opportunities this year”; and “There are many new things I want to try while at university.”

Results

A series of 2 (nostalgia: low vs. high) $\times 2$ (identity continuity: low vs. high) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to assess the impact of the manipulations on the measures.

Manipulation checks. Nostalgia. There was a main effect of the nostalgia manipulation on levels of felt nostalgia, $F(1, 71) = 3.98$, $p = .049$, $\eta^2_p = .06$ (where $\eta^2_p$ represents partial eta-squared). Participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported feeling significantly more nostalgic about their home communities ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.44$) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.39$). There was no significant main effect of the identity continuity manipulation, $F(1, 71) = 2.41$, $p = .12$, $\eta^2_p = .03$, as participants reported the same levels of nostalgia in the low-continuity ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.20$) and high-continuity ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.19$) conditions. The two-way interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 71) = 0.06$, $p = .81$, $\eta^2_p = .008$. Taken together, the results suggest that our manipulation of nostalgia was successful and operated independently of identity continuity.

Identity continuity. There was a main effect of the identity continuity manipulation on levels of perceived identity continuity, $F(1, 71) = 4.10$, $p = .047$, $\eta^2_p = .058$. As expected, participants perceived higher levels of identity continuity in the high-identity continuity condition ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.16$) than in the low-identity continuity condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.18$). There was no significant main effect of nostalgia, $F(1, 71) = 1.76$, $p = .19$, $\eta^2_p = .027$. Participants reported the same levels of identity continuity in the low-nostalgia ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.17$) and high-nostalgia ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.17$) conditions. Finally, the two-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 71) = 0.62$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2_p = .009$. These

\(^3\) It is possible that this item measures homesickness specifically rather than the more general construct of nostalgia for the past. However, dropping this item from the nostalgia manipulation check measure does not change the results. We have also dropped this item from the measure in Study 3.
findings indicate that our manipulation of identity continuity was successful and operated independently of nostalgia.

**Main analyses.**

**Perceived academic obstacles.** There was no significant main effect of the nostalgia manipulation, as participants perceived similar levels of academic obstacles in the low-nostalgia ($M = 4.94, SD = 0.18$) and high-nostalgia ($M = 5.04, SD = 0.18$) conditions, $F(1, 71) = 0.20, p = .675, \eta_p^2 = .004$. In addition, the identity continuity manipulation did not have a significant effect, $F(1, 71) = 0.049, p = .826, \eta_p^2 = .000$. Participants perceived the same level of academic obstacles in the high-identity continuity condition ($M = 5.02, SD = 0.18$) as they did in the low-identity continuity condition ($M = 4.96, SD = 0.17$).

The two-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 71) = 5.50, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .022$. Follow-up simple effects analyses revealed support for the hypotheses (see Figure 3). At high levels of identity continuity, participants in the high-nostalgia condition perceived significantly fewer academic obstacles ($M = 4.55, SD = 0.36$) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition ($M = 5.49, SD = 0.38$), $F(1, 72) = 4.64, p = .035$. The opposite pattern of results was found at low levels of identity continuity: participants in the high-nostalgia condition perceived significantly more academic obstacles ($M = 5.51, SD = 0.36$) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.40$), $F(1, 72) = 3.99, p = .049$.

**Interest in new opportunities.** There was no significant main effect of the nostalgia manipulation, $F(1, 71) = 2.44, p = .12, \eta_p^2 = .040$. Participants expressed equally strong interest in trying new opportunities in the low-nostalgia ($M = 5.91, SD = 0.11$) and high-nostalgia ($M = 6.15, SD = 0.11$) conditions. In addition, the identity continuity manipulation did not have a significant effect, $F(1, 71) = .25, p = .616, \eta_p^2 = .001$. Again, participants were equally interested in new opportunities in the high-identity continuity condition ($M = 6.07, SD = 0.11$) and in the low-identity continuity condition ($M = 5.99, SD = 0.11$).

These effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 71) = 8.15, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .089$. Simple effects analyses revealed a pattern of effects that supported our predictions (see Figure 4). At high levels of identity continuity, participants in the high-nostalgia condition expressed significantly more interest in trying new opportunities ($M = 6.42, SD = 0.16$) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition ($M = 5.74, SD = 0.17$), $F(1, 71) = 9.32, p = .03$. Consistent with hypotheses, the opposite pattern of results was found at low levels of identity continuity. In this case, it was participants in the low-nostalgia condition who reported a significantly stronger desire to try new opportunities ($M = 6.08, SD = 0.15$) compared with participants in the high-nostalgia condition ($M = 5.74, SD = 0.14$), $F(1, 71) = 3.99, p = .049$.

**Discussion**

The aim of Study 2 was to more precisely assess the independent and interactive effects of identity continuity and nostalgia on individuals’ ability to cope with challenges and their willingness to take advantage of new opportunities. Manipulation checks indicated that we successfully developed independent manipulations of identity continuity and nostalgia. Replicating and extending the findings from Study 1, these two variables interacted to influence the dependent variables.

The consistent pattern of simple effects provided support for our hypothesis that nostalgia should have positive consequences primarily under a particular set of circumstances. When individuals experience a life transition that does not appear to disrupt their sense of identity continuity, feeling nostalgic about this past serves as a resource. As in Study 1, these participants viewed their ongoing challenges as manageable, and they looked forward to new opportunities. However, feeling nostalgic for a past to which one no longer feels connected can have detrimental effects. Being reminded of what is left behind may only amplify a sense of loss, thus making it difficult to successfully navigate challenges in the present context or to move forward by taking advantage of new opportunities.

Taken together, the first two studies provide evidence for our hypothesis that the positive consequences of nostalgia are limited to circumstances in which high levels of identity continuity are maintained. More specifically, we differentiated between the effects of nostalgia for the past and the effects of general positive affect under conditions of high and low identity continuity. However, our fairly narrow manipulation of nostalgia suggests three possible limitations to the generalizability of our results.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
*Figure 3.* Effects of identity continuity manipulation and nostalgia manipulation on perceived academic obstacles, Study 2. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.

![Figure 4](image-url)  
*Figure 4.* Effects of identity continuity manipulation and nostalgia manipulation on interest in new opportunities, Study 2. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.
One limitation is that our instructions could have manipulated general focus of attention as well as levels of nostalgia: Participants in the low-nostalgia condition thought about their hobbies and leisure activities (self-focus), whereas participants in the high-nostalgia condition thought about the positive characteristics of individuals in their past social networks (other-focus). A related limitation is that our low-nostalgia condition focused on ongoing activities rather than on the past. As such, the present study did not allow us to compare the effects of nostalgia with the effects of more objective reflection on the past, which has been emphasized in previous work (see Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008).

Third, we directed participants to reflect on a particular object of nostalgia (i.e., the things they appreciated about their friends and family back home). Although this approach allowed us to manipulate identity continuity with respect to a specific target, it may not necessarily reflect individuals’ everyday experiences of nostalgia. People are typically able to choose what they feel nostalgic about and thus may not often encounter such a distinctive contrast between nostalgia and identity continuity as the one we introduced in this study. As we noted in the introduction, previous work on nostalgia has typically allowed participants to choose their own target of nostalgia. Even though these three limitations do not provide an alternative account of the findings, we conducted a third study to improve upon our manipulation of nostalgia.

Study 3

We conducted the third study in the context of students making the transition into their first year of university studies. We included a more ecologically valid manipulation of nostalgia, whereby all participants were instructed to think about their last year in high school. They were asked to think of either a nostalgic event (in the high-nostalgia condition) or an ordinary event (in the low-nostalgia condition). In this way, general focus of attention was not unintentionally manipulated, and we could differentiate between the effects of nostalgia for the past and the effects of a more objective reflection on the past. In line with previous work (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006), both conditions allowed participants to choose their own specific target from the past.

Identity continuity was manipulated following a similar strategy in Study 2. We provided participants with information about the extent to which they were likely to still feel connected to their past lives before university. In this way, we hoped to manipulate the extent to which participants perceived continuity between their present lives and the specific objects they chose from the past.

As in Study 1, we assessed the interactive effects of identity continuity and nostalgia on psychological well-being, including students’ levels of excitement and sadness about the transition. Building on Study 2, we also assessed students’ willingness to try new opportunities and experiences, operationalized as the extent to which students were interested in summer jobs or volunteer work in a new location (i.e., outside the state they in which they lived). Last, we investigated students’ desire to remain in familiar surroundings and thus preserve their current identities. That is, we assessed students’ desire to remain in the local area for their activities over the summer. We hypothesized a two-way interaction effect: At high levels of identity continuity, high levels of nostalgia should have more positive consequences for the outcome variables (compared with low levels of nostalgia), whereas at low levels of identity continuity, high levels of nostalgia should have more negative consequences for the outcomes (compared with low levels of nostalgia).

Method

Participants. One hundred students in their second semester of undergraduate study at a large Australian university completed the study for course credit. The sample included 84 women and 16 men, whose ages ranged from 17 to 48 years (M = 19.89, SD = 5.11).

Design and materials. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (nostalgia: low vs. high) × 2 (identity continuity: low vs. high) experiment. The first pages of the questionnaire included the manipulations of nostalgia and identity continuity.

Manipulation of nostalgia. We sought to develop a more ecologically valid manipulation of nostalgia (where participants could choose any type of target from the past) while still identifying a set of parameters for these targets so that we could effectively manipulate identity continuity for all participants in the study. Thus, we asked participants to focus on an event from their last year in high school and to briefly describe this experience. The aim was to contrast a high-nostalgia condition with a low-nostalgia control that allowed us to differentiate the effects of nostalgia from the effects of more general reflection on the past (see Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Wildschut et al., 2006). The specific instructions (adapted from Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 6) varied between the two conditions.

Participants in the high-nostalgia condition were provided with a definition of nostalgia (“a sentimental longing for the past”) and were asked to “think of a nostalgic event from your last year in high school—a nostalgic event that has personal meaning to you” (adapted from Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 6). Participants in the low-nostalgia condition were asked to “think of an ordinary event that took place in your last year of high school . . . as though you were an historian recording factual details (e.g., I got on the number 109 bus)” (adapted from Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 6).

Manipulation of identity continuity. The research report presented in Study 2 to ostensibly summarize students’ experiences was adapted for use in this study. Identity continuity was manipulated by systematically varying the extent to which the previous cohort of first-year students had reported feeling connected to their lives before university. Participants in the high–identity continuity condition read that 95% of these first-year students had been able to maintain links with their home communities and that they had made very few changes in their lives since starting university. Overall, the report stated that first-year students “tend to feel closely connected to their past lives, even after they had commenced study at university.”

In contrast, participants in the low–identity continuity condition read that only 15% of the survey respondents had been able to maintain links with their home communities and that they had made many changes in their lives after arriving at university. Overall, the report stated that first-year students “tend to no longer
feel closely connected to their past lives after they had commenced study at university.”

Measures.

Nostalgia manipulation check. Three items from Study 2 were used to assess the extent to which participants experienced nostalgia about their lives before university: “I am already feeling quite nostalgic about my life before university”; “Now that I have started university, I miss my previous lifestyle”; and “I long for my life before university” (α = .85). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each item using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Identity continuity manipulation check. The four items developed in Study 2 were used to assess the extent to which participants perceived continuity in their identities across the transition to university (α = .73). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each item using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Emotions about the transition. To assess levels of emotional well-being, participants were asked, “How do you feel about being at university?” They then rated how much they felt each of a range of emotion terms using a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Four items assessed excitement (excited, optimistic, eager, hopeful; α = .88), and three items assessed sadness (sad, discouraged, lonely; α = .78).

Interest in different opportunities. Participants read that “students do various things during the summer after their first year at university.” They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they were interested in pursuing each of five options (1 = not at all interested; 7 = very interested). An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on these items, with maximum likelihood extraction and oblimin rotation. Two distinct factors emerged, one of which could be interpreted as Interest in New Opportunities (explaining 40% of the variance) and one of which could be interpreted as Interest in Familiar Opportunities (explaining 21% of the variance).

Three items loaded onto the Interest in New Opportunities factor (loadings of .51 and higher): “take a paid job or internship outside [the state],” “do volunteer or charity work outside [the state],” and “travel” (α = .71). Two items loaded onto the Interest in Familiar Opportunities factor (loadings of .49 and higher): “take a paid job or internship in the [local] area” and “do volunteer or charity work in the [local] area” (r = .44, p < .001).

Results

Preliminary analyses. We first examined the targets that participants chose to reflect on from their last year of high school. Two raters coded these targets using the seven categories identified by Wildschut et al. (2006, Study 1). Interrater reliability (assessed by Cohen’s kappa; Orwin, 1994) ranged from .87 to .96, with disagreements resolved through discussion.

In the high-nostalgia condition, participants were asked to identify and reflect on a “nostalgic event” from their last year of high school. Most participants (48%) focused on momentous events (e.g., graduation or the last formal dance). The next most common object of nostalgia (reported by 36% of participants) focused on the activities and atmosphere that characterized participants’ lives in their last year of high school (e.g., not having much homework or having a structured schedule of classes). Finally, 14% of participants reflected on specific individuals (e.g., friends and family members) and groups (e.g., rugby team and the school orchestra). In the low-nostalgia condition, participants were asked to identify and reflect on a “normal event” from their last year of high school in an objective way. Here, most participants again focused on specific events (78%), followed by the activities and atmosphere characterizing their daily lives (12%), and specific places and settings (12%). Taken together, the results suggest that students chose a range of targets from the past and that the nature of these objects did not differ substantially across the low and high nostalgia conditions.

Manipulation checks. We conducted a series of 2 (nostalgia: low vs. high) × 2 (identity continuity: low vs. high) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA)s to assess the impact of the manipulations on the measures.

Nostalgia. There was a main effect of the nostalgia manipulation, F(1, 96) = 3.99, p = .049, ηp² = .040. Participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported feeling significantly more nostalgic about their lives before university (M = 5.66, SD = 1.83) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 4.32, SD = 2.10). There was no significant main effect of the identity continuity manipulation, F(1, 96) = 1.55, p = .216, ηp² = .016. Participants reported the same levels of nostalgia in the low-continuity condition (M = 4.91, SD = 1.69) and high-continuity condition (M = 4.99, SD = 1.85) conditions. The two-way interaction was also not significant, F(1, 96) = 0.41, p = .52, ηp² = .000. Taken together, the results demonstrate that this manipulation of nostalgia was successful and was independent of the identity continuity manipulation.

Identity continuity. There was a main effect of the identity continuity manipulation, F(1, 96) = 729.37, p < .001, ηp² = .83. As expected, participants perceived higher levels of identity continuity in the high-identity-continuity condition (M = 5.59, SD = 0.77) than in the low-identity-continuity condition (M = 2.67, SD = 0.52). The nostalgia manipulation did not have a significant main effect, F(1, 96) = 2.69, p = .10, ηp² = .019. Participants reported the same levels of identity continuity in the low nostalgia (M = 4.12, SD = 1.58) and high nostalgia (M = 4.20, SD = 1.64) conditions. Last, the two-way interaction was not significant, F(1, 96) = 0.48, p = .49, ηp² = .003. Building on Study 2, these findings indicate that our manipulation of identity continuity was successful and was independent of the nostalgia manipulation.

Main analyses.

Excitement about being at university. There was no significant main effect of the nostalgia manipulation, as participants reported equal amounts of excitement in the low-nostalgia (M = 3.18, SD = 0.94) and high-nostalgia (M = 2.87, SD = 0.86) conditions, F(1, 96) = 2.54, p = .11, ηp² = .016. The identity continuity manipulation also did not have a significant effect, F(1, 96) = 2.68, p = .104, ηp² = .019. Participants reported equal levels of excitement in the high-continuity condition (M = 3.25, SD = 0.85) as they did in the low-continuity condition (M = 2.81, SD = 0.88).

These effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction, F(1, 96) = 22.81, p < .001, ηp² = .135. Follow-up simple effects analyses provided support for the hypotheses (see Figure 5). At high levels of identity continuity, participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported significantly more excitement about being at university (M = 3.58, SD = 0.86) than did participants in
the low-nostalgia condition (M = 2.91, SD = 0.90), F(1, 96) = 35.09, p < .001. In contrast, participants in the low-continuity condition showed the opposite pattern of effects: Participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported lower levels of excitement (M = 2.17, SD = 0.81) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 3.44, SD = 1.02), F(1, 96) = 53.57, p < .001.

Sadness about being at university. The nostalgia manipulation did not have a significant effect, F(1, 96) = 0.04, p = .84, η²p = .000. Participants reported equal levels of sadness in the low-nostalgia (M = 1.37, SD = 1.05) and high-nostalgia (M = 1.36, SD = 0.95) conditions. There was a significant main effect of the identity continuity manipulation, F(1, 96) = 25.48, p < .001, η²p = .162. Participants reported significantly more sadness in the low-continuity condition (M = 1.85, SD = 1.06) than they did in the high-continuity condition (M = 0.88, SD = 0.89).

These effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction, F(1, 96) = 6.35, p = .013, η²p = .042 (see Figure 6). Simple effects analyses revealed that at high levels of identity continuity, participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported significantly less sadness about being at university (M = 0.59, SD = 0.50) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 1.20, SD = 0.62), F(1, 96) = 6.49, p = .013. Consistent with hypotheses, participants in the low-continuity condition showed the opposite pattern of effects: Participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported higher levels of sadness (M = 2.16, SD = 0.66) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 1.53, SD = 1.29), F(1, 96) = 7.74, p = .007.

Interest in new opportunities. There was no significant main effect of the nostalgia manipulation, F(1, 96) = 0.00, p = .95, η²p = .000. Participants in the low-nostalgia condition reported equal interest in seeking out new opportunities over the summer (M = 5.99, SD = 1.53) as did participants in the high-nostalgia condition (M = 5.90, SD = 1.55). The identity continuity manipulation also did not have a significant impact, F(1, 96) = 0.98, p = .33, η²p = .010. Participants reported equal interest in new summer opportunities whether they were in the high-continuity condition (M = 5.90, SD = 1.55) or the low-continuity condition (M = 6.00, SD = 1.52).

The two-way interaction was significant, F(1, 96) = 4.18, p = .04, η²p = .04. Simple effects analyses provided support for the hypotheses (see Figure 7). At high levels of identity continuity, participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported significantly more interest in new opportunities over the summer (M = 6.22, SD = 1.58) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 5.58, SD = 1.48), F(1, 96) = 3.98, p = .05. In contrast, participants in the low-identity continuity condition showed the opposite pattern of effects: Those in the high-nostalgia condition reported significantly less interest in new opportunities (M = 5.60, SD = 1.53) than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 6.40, SD = 1.47), F(1, 96) = 4.36, p = .04.

Interest in familiar opportunities. There was no significant main effect of the nostalgia manipulation, F(1, 96) = 0.468, p = .50, η²p = .005. Participants in the high-nostalgia condition were equally interested in familiar opportunities for the summer (M = 3.84, SD = 1.77) compared with participants in the low-nostalgia condition (M = 4.08, SD = 1.77). There was also no significant main effect of the identity continuity manipulation, F(1, 96) = .05, p = .82, η²p = .001. Participants were equally interested in familiar opportunities whether they were in the low-continuity condition (M = 3.92, SD = 1.86) or in the high-continuity condition (M = 4.00, SD = 1.69).

Figure 5. Effects of identity continuity manipulation and nostalgia manipulation on excitement about the transition, Study 3. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.

Figure 6. Effects of identity continuity manipulation and nostalgia manipulation on sadness about the transition, Study 3. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.

Figure 7. Effects of identity continuity manipulation and nostalgia manipulation on interest in new opportunities, Study 3. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.
There was a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 95) = 4.21, p = .043$, $\eta^2_p = .042$. Simple effects analyses provided mixed support for the hypotheses (see Figure 8). At high levels of identity continuity, participants in the high-nostalgia ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.58$) and low-nostalgia ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.84$) conditions reported equal levels of interest in familiar summer opportunities, $F(1, 96) = 0.94, p = .34$. In contrast, and consistent with predictions, the simple effect of nostalgia was significant in the low-identity continuity conditions, $F(1, 96) = 3.975, p = .05$. Compared with those in the low-nostalgia condition ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.68$), participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported significantly more interest in familiar opportunities for the summer ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.58$).

**Discussion**

Study 3 included a novel manipulation of nostalgia, which allowed participants to choose any type of target from the past. Consistent with previous work (Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 1), participants chose various targets ranging from momentous events to features of their daily lives to significant persons and groups. This free choice of targets allowed us to test our hypotheses under conditions similar to previous research on nostalgia. It also provided a more ecologically valid manipulation of nostalgia that is consistent with individuals’ everyday experiences of this emotion.

In order to effectively manipulate identity continuity, we needed to ensure that all participants were choosing targets from the same general time period. Thus, we asked them to focus on an event from their last year in high school and then gave them different information about the likelihood of maintaining identity continuity between the participants’ current lives and their lives prior to starting university. In an extension of Study 2, this study demonstrated that identity continuity can be successfully manipulated even while individuals are choosing a range of targets.

Results provided consistent support for the hypothesis that identity continuity moderates the implications of nostalgia for individuals’ emotional well-being and choices for future activities. When the experimental manipulation assured identity continuity for participants, high levels of nostalgia improved emotional well-being. Students with high levels of induced nostalgia felt more excited, and less sad, about being at university than did students with low levels of nostalgia. Although this effect on well-being failed to reach conventional levels of significance in Study 1, it was significant here. A possible explanation is that this more specific measure of emotional reactions to the transition was more sensitive to the manipulations than was the general life satisfaction measure used in Study 1.

In contrast, and consistent with the results from the first two studies, students’ nostalgia for their lives prior to university had negative consequences when they believed that they would not be able to maintain links to this identity. In the low-continuity conditions, students who felt more nostalgia experienced less excitement, and more sadness, relative to those who felt less nostalgia. In sum, these results replicate previous work demonstrating the positive consequences of nostalgia for well-being (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006) and also indicate that there are limits to this effect.

An identical pattern of interactive effects was found when investigating participants’ interest in new opportunities in the near future. At high levels of identity continuity, students who were nostalgic about life before university expressed more interest in taking on a job or internship in novel surroundings than did students with low levels of nostalgia. These results provide additional evidence for the claim that nostalgia can serve as a resource that helps individuals adjust to a new context (see Zhou et al., 2008). However, the results in the low-identity continuity condition indicate the limits of nostalgia: In this case, participants in the high-nostalgia condition reported less interest in pursuing new opportunities than did participants in the low-nostalgia condition. Thus, it appears that there are circumstances in which nostalgia can stand in the way of individuals moving forward after a life transition.

Nostalgia’s role as a potential obstacle was also evident when assessing participants’ attempts to maintain a link to familiar surroundings. To our knowledge, this is the first direct test of nostalgia’s effect on efforts to preserve identity continuity. Interestingly, we only found evidence for a negative effect of nostalgia in the low-identity continuity condition: When high identity continuity had been established, nostalgia did not impact students’ interest in familiar opportunities. Thus, it appears that nostalgia is a less powerful predictor of attempts to preserve identity continuity when this continuity has already been assured. In the context of discontinuity, however, nostalgia seems to motivate endeavors to hold onto one’s identity. This certainly could be a positive outcome, as there is evidence that identity continuity can be beneficial to individuals’ well-being (e.g., Bluck & Alea, 2008; Landau et al., 2008; Sani et al., 2008). However, it is also possible that efforts to hold onto the past may limit individuals’ ability to take advantage of new experiences.

**General Discussion**

In three studies, we sought to examine the effects of nostalgia and identity continuity on psychological well-being: ability to cope with challenges and obstacles; and life choices with respect to taking advantage of new opportunities or trying to hold onto familiar experiences. We conducted our investigation in the context of a life transition, which allowed for the possibility that identity continuity may be constrained. To our knowledge, Studies 2 and 3 provide the first demonstration that nostalgia and identity continuity can be independently manipulated. This suggests that
identity continuity can serve to moderate the effects of nostalgia rather than solely functioning as a mediator. Consistent with previous work (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006, 2010), the present studies show that nostalgia can have positive implications for psychological functioning. We also extend this work by showing that nostalgia serves as a resource under a limited set of circumstances that are determined by identity continuity. When a high level of identity continuity was perceived (Study 1) or assured through an experimental manipulation (Studies 2 and 3), participants who felt nostalgia about this target reported increased emotional well-being, increased perceptions that the challenges they faced were manageable, and increased interest in pursuing new opportunities. As a result, we do not view our results as dissimilar to those shown in previous work (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2006; for reviews, see Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, et al., 2008). Rather, nostalgia has positive consequences in our studies in precisely the conditions that have been identified by Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, and Routledge (2008)—when identity continuity is high.

Our findings also provide some evidence for the historical view of nostalgia as a problematic emotion. The present research contributes to this perspective by elaborating on the conditions of discontinuity in which nostalgia is likely to hinder individuals’ psychological functioning. All three studies demonstrated that when there is a break between the past and the present, a nostalgic longing for the past can serve as a painful reminder of what is left behind and thus can impede individuals’ ability to move on and make the most of the opportunities in their present environment. We found that when identity continuity was perceived to be low (Study 1) or was experimentally constrained (Studies 2 and 3), participants who felt nostalgia responded more negatively than participants who did not experience nostalgia, as demonstrated by lower levels of well-being, a decreased perception that challenges in the present environment were manageable, decreased interest in pursuing new opportunities, and increased interest in familiar surroundings and experiences.

The effect of nostalgia on this last dependent variable is especially interesting to consider. On the one hand, the choice to focus on opportunities in familiar surroundings has clear positive consequences, as it is likely to allow individuals to maintain a sense of identity continuity. However, this choice also means that individuals forgo opportunities for learning and growth and, as such, can have the unintended consequence of limiting their ability to learn from new experiences. In this way, individuals may sacrifice the long-term benefit of learning from new opportunities for the short-term benefit of feeling secure in familiar contexts that cultivate feelings of identity continuity.

We believe our effects to be robust and ecologically valid, as we have documented them using different measures and using both longitudinal and experimental designs. We experimentally manipulated nostalgia to compare its effects with the effects of positive affect more generally (Study 2) and with the effects of reflecting on the past in an objective way (Study 3). We also found consistent effects for nostalgia regardless of whether we instructed participants to focus on a particular target from the past (Study 2) or allowed them to choose their own target (Study 3). Of course, individuals may sometimes strategically choose beneficial targets of nostalgia that will help them regain a sense of well-being and mastery in a difficult set of circumstances (see Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). However, we argue that this is not the full story. There may be times when individuals are confronted with objects of nostalgia from which they are now disconnected, or there may be circumstances that force a sense of discontinuity from the object of nostalgia. Our results indicate that, under these circumstances, nostalgia can have relatively negative consequences.

Our operationalization of identity continuity also varied across the three studies, from maintenance of group memberships across a transition (social identity continuity; Study 1) to continuity with a social network before the transition (Study 2) to continuity with one’s life generally before a transition (Study 3). Our aim was to capture the various aspects of the self that could be reflected on a sense of identity continuity (see Sani, 2008). These could include elements of individuals’ personal identity (reflecting their uniquely individual characteristics, possessions, and activities), their interpersonal relationships with other individuals, and their social identity (reflecting their memberships in various groups).

Implications and Future Directions

At a broader level, this research underscores the importance of specifying the distinct targets of emotions such as nostalgia and the referents for constructs such as self-continuity (for a similar argument, see Iyer & Leach, 2008). It is clear that the specific context of people’s psychological experiences needs to be taken into account and that their subjective interpretations of these contexts matter a great deal. A past that is clearly left behind (i.e., indicating low levels of identity continuity) is not necessarily problematic if the individual is ready to let it go and move on in life (i.e., indicating low levels of identity continuity). Only with the acknowledgment of contexts and interpretations can we begin to understand the psychologically rich experiences of those who are simultaneously considering the past and having to adapt to the present. The present research indicates that nostalgia serves as a resource when individuals believe that they can draw on their past to serve their goals and interests in the present. In contrast, when individuals feel that the past may be slipping away from them (i.e., when identity continuity is disrupted), they may focus on the past rather than the present and try to hold onto it.

There are also some parallels between our analysis and the regulatory focus framework (Higgins, 1997, 1998). More specifically, our findings suggest that nostalgia and self-continuity can interact to influence individuals’ regulatory focus, whereby a prevention focus is associated with a preference for stability and a promotion focus is associated with openness to change. Indeed, previous research suggests that life transition can reflect changes in regulatory pressures (Higgins, Israela, & Ruble, 1995). Future work could further develop the connection between nostalgia, self-continuity, and the regulatory focus individuals develop over the course of a life transition.

Another direction for future research is the broader range of social contexts in which nostalgia should be important. In our three studies, we investigated planned and structured transitions that should generally have positive consequences for individuals. How-
ever, it would be interesting to determine whether nostalgia and identity continuity exhibit the same interactive effects in more unpredictable or extreme contexts—such as war or forced migration—in which various additional social and practical considerations are likely to influence individuals’ responses.

In addition, it may be important to examine the implications of nostalgia at the collective level. This would complement recent work suggesting that group-level identity continuity can have substantial impacts on health, well-being, and intergroup dynamics (Sani, 2008; for a review, see S. A. Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). For example, disruptions in collective continuity have been found to increase suicide rates within indigenous communities (Chandler & Proulx, 2008). Other research shows that the anticipation of collective discontinuity can lead to social unrest and collective resistance to change (Jetten & Hutchison, 2010). By examining the extent to which nostalgia is a shared emotion within a group, we may be in a better position to understand responses to discontinuity in groups and social identities.

Final Thoughts

By accounting for the fact that individuals may not necessarily feel connected to the aspects of the past about which they feel nostalgic, we were able to shed light on the conditions in which they are more or less successful in navigating a life transition. We found that in the process of adjusting to change, nostalgia can be both a medicine and a poison (Ritvoi, 2002). Nostalgia in the context of discontinuity between past and present has rather toxic effects: this experience can leave us stuck in the past, and thus can alienate us from our present circumstances by limiting the perceived range of attractive opportunities. Alternatively, when the past and present are clearly linked, nostalgia has beneficial effects: It can replenish and bolster the self, thus opening our eyes to a world of possibilities.

References


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