

Commentary:

**THE USES OF NOSTALGIA:  
A COMMENTARY ON  
“REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
NOSTALGIC MEMORIES: GENERATIONAL EFFECT,  
GENDER, NOSTALGIA PRONENESS AND  
COMMUNICATION OF NOSTALGIC EXPERIENCES”**

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**Abstract**

In this commentary on Madoglou, Gkinopoulos, Xanthopoulos, and Kalamaras study of nostalgia (2017; see this present issue of JISS), I introduce the distinction between normal and pathological nostalgia. Whereas normal nostalgia is used at the service of adaptation or revolution, with the full acceptance that the past is gone but nonetheless still holds a potential for reparation or transformation of the present, in pathological nostalgia there is a fixation to a past that is idealized and distorted, preventing any meaningful engagement with present and future times. I also discuss some of the psychological mechanisms that underlie the works of nostalgia as a defense formation such as misrecognition of the ego, fetish, fantasy, screen affect, screen memory, and deferred action. My aim in describing these mechanisms is to emphasize the psychological aspects of nostalgia as a complement to Madoglou et al.'s (2017) definition of nostalgia as a form of social memory. My commentary is contextualized within a psychosocial approach which highlights the interplay between psychological and sociological aspects of psychosocial phenomena.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia, psychoanalysis, normal nostalgia, pathological nostalgia, defense formation.

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**COMMENTARY**

*It was this Alexandria I came looking for - knowing I'd never find it. That did not bother me. For I had come not to recover memories, not even to recognize those I'd disfigured, nor to toy with the thought that I'd ever live here again; I had come to bury the whole thing, to get it out of my system, to forget, to hate even, the way we learn to hate those who wouldn't have us.*

(André Aciman, 2000, p. 5)

In this commentary, I will attempt to develop some of the psychological aspects of nostalgia by applying ideas from psychoanalytical theory. In the first place, I will distinguish between normal and pathological nostalgia. Secondly, I will present some of the psychological mechanisms that underlie nostalgia as a defense formation. For the latter objective, I am closely following Hook's (2012) paper on nostalgia as a symptom with clear psychological and socio-political implications. By placing the emphasis on how nostalgia is determined by psychological (and unconscious) aspects, I hope to complement Madoglou, Gkinopoulos, Xanthopoulos, and Kalamaras's (2017; see this present issue of JISS) study which emphasizes more on nostalgia as a product of sociological forces such as social memory, anchoring and social representations. Overall, my aim is to promote an understanding of nostalgia that occupies a place at the intersection between psychological and socio-historical-cultural factors. This perspective is contextualized within a critical approach to social and psychological research termed as "psychosocial studies", a transdisciplinary field of inquiry which explores the interplay between "external" social and "internal" psychic formations, in the sense that what is "out-there" gets "in-here", and vice versa (Frosh & Barister, 2008). Such a complex relationship between inside and outside, between conscious and unconscious, is portrayed by Jacques Lacan in the figure of the Moebius strip. This three-dimensional figure in Lacan's topography problematizes binary distinctions such as inside/outside, since the band of the Moebius strip spatially folds around and turns into the inside without a clear or distinctive break between the two realms (Parker, 2003).

The empirical study conducted by Madoglou et al. (2017) defined nostalgic experiences as representational autobiographical memories reconstructed in a socio-historical and cultural frame. Although such perspective takes into consideration the psychological and the sociological factors in nostalgia, the emphasis appears to be on the latter since personal memories are primarily considered as forms of social memory and social representations. In this sense, personal memories are not solely the product of an individual (re)creation but mainly a social product, capable of being altered and distorted according to pre-existing mnemonic representations determined by the shared socio-historical and cultural conditions of a given society and its *Weltanschauung*. Interestingly enough, Madoglou et al. (2017) do not develop much on what these socio-historical and

cultural conditions for the sample of their study are. For example, what are the specific societal mechanisms that filter, edit, and mediate individual nostalgic memories for the study's sample? What are some examples of the social-cultural and historical forces, milestone events, and practices that shaped the life experience for the different generations of the study, causing them to recall different nostalgic contents? What are the dominant ideologies, discourses, values, norms, institutions, etc. which determine what can, or should, be remembered and what must be forgotten throughout different generations and gender? Also, Madoglou et al.'s (2017) definition of nostalgia does not take into full account the notion of nostalgia as pathological, a type of nostalgia that can further complicate the relationship between autobiographical memories and the socio-historical and cultural frame by removing the subject from the present and from society.

### **Normal nostalgia**

The understanding of nostalgia changed over the last centuries, as it evolved from a medical disease into a psychological and sociological construct (Batcho, 2013). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychoanalytical readings of nostalgia replaced the understanding of nostalgia as characterized by distance and concerned with the longing to bring what is distant near, i.e. the return home, into a mode of wishful thinking that attempts to recreate the temporal reunion with the original lost object: the sense of oneness with the preoedipal maternal (Phillips, 1985). The distinction between normal and pathological nostalgia is not a very clear one (Werman, 1977). Nonetheless, in normal nostalgia the frustrations of the present are intertwined with reminiscences from a lost past, accompanied not only with the joy of this re encounter but also with the depressive acceptance that this past and its objects are gone and can never return. Used as a normal and adaptive coping mechanism, nostalgic memories are usually associated with expansive states of mind, an uplifting mood, heighten self-esteem, feelings of pleasure and joy, etc. (Kaplan, 1987). As a result, the subject is able to achieve personal growth, improve self-understanding and self-integration, accompanied with an enhancement in sociability and object relations (Nikelly, 2004). In fact, the study by Madoglou et al. (2017) concluded that older individuals tend to communicate their nostalgic experiences, thus reducing feelings of loneliness and enhancing interpersonal relations. As a mechanism of adaptation, normal nostalgia can be used in situations that threaten the integrity of the self and personal identity such as mobility and relocation, discrimination, lack of social support, personal and collective losses, etc. Davis (as cited in Nikelly, 2004, p. 184) stated that nostalgia can develop in times of social upheaval due to geographic dislocations and forced emigrations, since such events disrupt traditional modes of living and hinder assimilation into new and unfamiliar environments. Under such situations, nostalgic memories function as a remembrance of pleasant times and places which provide a temporary sense of security as a defense against annihilation. The integration of the relationship between the present and the past accomplished by nostalgic reminiscences seem to prevent the breakdown and

fragmentation of time (Nikelly, 2004). This is perhaps close to what Winnicott described as the effort to preserve the experience of going-on-being in the face of environmental impingement, i.e. situations from the environment that can either strengthen the ego and the sense of self-awareness, or become too traumatic (Abram, 2007).

Although normal nostalgia can be used at the service of adaptation, it also has a revolutionary and subversive potential. In fact, adaptation is a problematic concept. For example Lacan argues that the relationship between the subject and the environment cannot be thought in terms of adaptation since this ideal supposes an essential alignment between psychic life and the reality that must be adapted to (Haute, 2002). Human beings are fundamentally ill-adapted and out of joint since at the very essence of subjectivity is the idea that the subject has to come to terms with an unconscious truth that cannot be controlled. In relation to nostalgia, its revolutionary potential can be understood through Kristeva's (2000, 2002) notion of intimate revolt. This notion is a critique to the Enlightenment's idea of progress with its patriarchal emphasis on linear, teleological, and disembodied notions of time (Söderbäck, 2012). The emphasis on progress and future that are promoted by such Enlightenment's ideas, with the consequent repression of the past, can only result in the repetition of the same past that is being repressed. This is due to what Freud (1919) termed as the return of the repressed, i.e. the reappearance of psychic contents that were previously repressed which can nonetheless reemerge into consciousness albeit in a distorted way. As a response against the foreclosure of the future via the return of the repressed, Kristeva (2000, 2002) introduced the concept of intimate revolt. This is a movement of a perpetual return to the past, but one that introduces something disruptive by re-inscribing the body and the drives into the subject, thus allowing different meanings and novel understandings through displacement, working through, reflection, and a critique of the past.

### **Pathological nostalgia**

Nostalgia can become pathological if used as a psychic escape from the present, where the longing for the past is done without the acceptance that this past is irretrievably lost. In this way, nostalgia is used as a defense mechanism to obtain gratification and reduce anxiety, achieved not only by a fixation in the past, but also by a distortion and denial of this very same past. As a result, the past and its objects are idealized, acquiring a glamour and fascination that they never originally possessed. Reminiscing about this 'lost Eden', the nostalgic obtains a greater satisfaction from the past than from the present (or future). In such states of mind, the nostalgic appears to inhabit what Steiner (2003) termed as a psychic retreat, i.e. a pathological organization of the personality where the subject withdraws into a half-alive/half-dead ontological state as a protection and refuge from anxiety, pain, and guilt. As a consequence, ego development is impaired which not only prevents a movement towards the future but also deprives the subject of the present (Nikelly, 2004). In the mind, a temporal fracture occurs, where the subject is not able to

give up his/hers lost objects through mourning, nor assimilate those lost objects into the ego (Akhtar, 1999). In its pathological form, nostalgia can become closer to melancholia. Werman (1977), citing the work of Geahchan, states that when melancholia is used as a substitute for mourning, the holding of the lost object in the nostalgic's memory prevents the renunciation of the object that is lost. The failure of mourning leads to a continuous search for the idealized object, an incapacity for libidinal investments in new objects, a depreciation of objects in current life, and the endless pursuit of nostalgic memories with the consequent inhibition in many present areas of existence. Nonetheless, although pathological nostalgia and melancholia share some similarities, there are important differences. Whereas in nostalgia the prevailing mood is one of elation and contentment, in melancholia the past is devoid of vitality, the subject isolates him/herself and the associated emotions are of sadness, loss, emptiness, and self-loathing (Kaplan, 1987).

### **Nostalgia as a defense formation**

Whether used in a normal or pathological way, the works of nostalgia are achieved through certain psychological operations. According to Hook (2012), the psychoanalytic operations that underlie nostalgia as a defense mechanism are used in the following ways: 1.) as a misrecognition of the ego, 2.) as a fetish, 3.) in the service of fantasy, 4.) as an affect concealing anxiety, 5.) as a screen memory, and 6.) as a means of reifying the past or present with the dismissal of relations of causation obtained between past, present, and future. Hook (2012) describes how nostalgia can operate within the economy of the ego in a way that it represents an imaginary activity able to idealize the past and it is intrinsically linked to fantasy. This use of nostalgia represents a defensive and narcissistic misrecognition with the aim of assuring and comforting the ego since it supports a given identity by creating effects of understanding, completion, and wholeness. As a fetish, nostalgia can be used to isolate features or activities which enables the disavowal of a threatening reality. Such an ideological use of nostalgia aims to disavow the present of something threatening and to facilitate a type of forgetting, where a selective version of the personal or social past is chosen over more anxiety laden versions of history. With regards to fantasy, nostalgic reminiscences contain a fantasmatic nature due to its dependency on fantasy. Fantasy can bring a sense of illusion to nostalgic reminiscences with the aim of removing discomforting knowledge whilst providing enjoyment and rewards, all causing complacency and resignation at the expense of change and a progressive disruptive potential. As mentioned in Madoglou et al.'s (2017) study, nostalgia is usually associated with bittersweet feelings since it evokes both pleasure and pain. Moreover, Madoglou et al.'s (2017) study emphasized the role of positive emotions in nostalgia since the participants reported more positive emotions than negative ones. However, due to the mechanism of displacement, the sweet side of nostalgia can be considered as a fetish because nostalgia has more to do with what is being avoided, or screened out, than with the obvious content of what is being recalled (Hook, 2012). Therefore, the bitterness or

negativity of nostalgia might be a more reliable indicator of what is being repressed than its sweet aspect.

In nostalgia, the dialectical relationship between memory and forgetting is crucial (Hook, 2012). The remembrance of certain memories can repeatedly surface while remaining cut off from a broader associative network. Freud termed screen memories to the type of childhood memories characterised by both apparently insignificant contents but unusual sharpness and clarity (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Such memories represent a compromise-formation between repressed elements and defense against its emergence, or as Kaplan (1987) argued, between a want to remember and a wish to forget. Some nostalgic memories can function as screen memories, where the embellishment of form for a particular feature is exaggerated in order to screen out a less acceptable memory or implication (Hook, 2012; Kaplan, 1987). Lastly, some implications of the psychoanalytical concept of deferred action (*après-coup* or *Nachträglich*) for nostalgia will be explored. In regards to temporality, nostalgia appears to operate under a clear distinction between the past and the present, the then and the now, under the assumption that time is unrepeatable and irreversible. However, psychoanalytical readings of unconscious mental processes are based on a nonlinear conceptualization of temporality where past, present and future are simultaneously active, creating an unconscious sense of timelessness. Temporality in the unconscious is not guided by the sequential and chronological passing of time, since fantasies from childhood are as fresh in the unconscious as recent events (Hook, 2012). Deferred action is connected with the fact that experiences, impressions and memory traces may be revised at a posterior date in order to fit in with later experiences or with the accomplishment of new stages of development (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Accordingly, the past can only acquire its significance and meaning in the present, because "... the true significance of a past event will only be realized in a subsequent future, once retroactively triggered" (Hook, 2012, p. 235). Moreover, this present which retroactively reinterprets the past is also being changed as a result of this process, or as Johnston (as cited in Söderbäck, 2014, p. 51) claimed: "the contextual parameters of the subject's present retroactively alter the very past which supposedly influences this same present".

Overall, nostalgia does not seem to capture the intricate relationship between past, present and future as well as the concept of deferred action because nostalgia necessarily requires a clear distinction between past and present. As Phillips (1985) claims, although the nostalgic world is always in the past, for events to be experienced as past they need to be experienced in relation to something which follows next. For example, in a nostalgic longing for childhood, this childhood is being created in the present through the nostalgic exercise, because in the past the subject merely lived through his/her childhood and was not a mere spectator of the experience.

**Beyond suspicion, what is the point?**

Madoglou et al.'s (2017) definition of nostalgia as social memory implies that nostalgic reminiscences are mediated by social categories such as society, generation, gender, worldviews, anchoring processes, social identity, historical events, etc. A psychosocial conceptualization of nostalgia requires the understanding of both its social and psychological aspects. In my commentary, I emphasized and described individual psychological unconscious mechanisms involved in nostalgia such as imaginary reconstructions, disavowal, repression, displacements, inhibitions, different temporalities, etc. Situated between the dynamics of the psychological and the social, nostalgia is subject to inner and outer forces that can change, distort, select, and inhibit what is being remembered and the associated emotions. At this point, one can question if there is any value for the empirical research of nostalgia, considering that nostalgia can be a defense formation subject to unconscious processes and/or social ideologies. A possible answer is that the importance of Madoglou et al.'s (2017) study is crucial because even though we must remain suspicious towards what is being recalled in the nostalgic reminiscences, such productions of the ego and/or discourses of society can nonetheless provide us with the access to what is being defended against, namely, the forgotten, the disavowed, the forbidden, the repressed, the unrepresentable, or the unconscious. But only through the critical and reflexive engagement and retrieval of the repressed aspects of the past in the present, does it become possible to release the potentially destabilizing and revolutionary powers of nostalgia. In this way, a future that is beyond the compulsion to repeat becomes possible for the individual and society. A future that is not already inscribed in the present or in past, but is still to come, new, unborn, and unknown.

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