

Review

# Nostalgic intergroup contact and intergroup relations: Theoretical, empirical, and applied dimensions

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## Abstract

Recent research has highlighted the potential of nostalgic recall of intergroup contact as a means of enhancing intergroup relationships and tackling prejudice. In this article, we review the scarce but promising literature that integrates research on nostalgia and intergroup contact. We outline the mechanisms that explain the link between nostalgic intergroup encounters and improved intergroup attitudes and behavior. We further highlight the benefits that nostalgic contact reverie may have for intergroup relations – and beyond. We then discuss the potential of nostalgic intergroup contact as a strategy for real-world, prejudice reduction interventions. Finally, we draw on current research from the fields of nostalgia and intergroup contact to make suggestions for future research.

“... nostalgic memories ... lead to a vivid sense of commonality [which] accelerates the process of acquaintance in a community where formerly only barriers may have existed.” [1, p. 454].

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Nostalgia, “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” [2], p. 1266, is a bittersweet, yet predominantly positive emotion [3] that occurs frequently [4,5], and is conceptualized similarly across cultures [6\*]. An intrinsic characteristic of nostalgia is its sociability [5,7\*\*]. Indeed, many of nostalgia’s positive

consequences emerge as a function of meaningful past relationships that are made accessible during nostalgic reverie [8–11]. In doing so, nostalgia promotes approach motivation, renders it more likely that people will perceive relationship goals as important and achievable, and enhances self-efficacy and optimism about establishing, maintaining and resolving conflict in relationships [12,13].

With these consequences in mind, we argue that nostalgia has excellent potential as a means of bolstering *intergroup* relationships. To explicate this, we review the burgeoning literature which draws a connection between nostalgia and intergroup contact, highlight the benefits this may have for intergroup relations, and rely on research from the nostalgia and intergroup contact fields to make suggestions for future directions.

## Mechanisms underlying the relation between nostalgic intergroup contact and intergroup outcomes

There is extensive evidence that positive social interactions between members of distinct groups help to enhance intergroup relations [1,14], although see Ref. [15], for a more critical perspective). Moreover, the literature highlights that people who feel more confident at engaging in meaningful contact with members of other groups [16,17\*] report having more, and more positive, contact experiences [18\*]. Research has begun examining the link between nostalgia and intergroup contact, and in turn, reduced prejudice. In doing so, it aims to understand the mechanisms underlying this link.

When individuals become nostalgic about an encounter with a known outgroup member, a primary transfer effect occurs [19\*], whereby recall of a nostalgic encounter with an individual from a target group improves attitudes towards that individual group member, and this in turn sets in motion processes that generalize those attitudes to the entire group. Such nostalgic reverie induces social connectedness. Provided that the group membership of that outgroup person is salient [20], social connectedness will culminate in a number of social psychological processes that are associated with more positive intergroup relations: inclusion of the

outgroup in the self, outgroup trust, lowered intergroup anxiety, and perception of a common ingroup identity.

Nostalgia should promote greater inclusion of the recalled outgroup member in the self (IOS) [21], a marker of interpersonal closeness. This may in turn be associated with greater inclusion of the outgroup in general (IOGS) in the self, and subsequently more positive attitudes toward the outgroup [22]. Feeling more connected to others via nostalgia may also augment outgroup trust, a positive expectation about another's intentions and behavior [23\*\*], which is associated with greater outgroup positivity [24]. If perceivers feel more socially connected to an outgroup member as a result of nostalgia, they will feel more trusting toward that individual [25\*\*], which will generalize to the outgroup when group membership is salient.

A barrier to positive intergroup relations is intergroup anxiety [26]. In contrast, experiencing social connectedness is associated with feeling more open to, and confident about, forming relationships with others [5,12]. Under nostalgic reverie, people may therefore be less anxious about interacting with outgroup members. Additionally, considering that nostalgia increases social connectedness [5,27] it would follow that, when people feel nostalgic, they are more likely to perceive those around them as part of one, all-inclusive group. It has been proposed that, when members of two groups form a common ingroup identity, intergroup bias is reduced or eliminated [28]. Below, we outline a number of studies that have applied nostalgic recall of intergroup contact as a means of promoting positive intergroup relations.

### **Empirical evidence for the impact of nostalgic recall of intergroup contact and intergroup outcomes**

In the first studies to examine the impact of nostalgic intergroup recall [25], undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the nostalgia condition, participants were asked to bring to mind a nostalgic event in their life that involved interacting with an overweight person, whereas, in the control condition, participants were asked to bring to mind an ordinary event in their life that involved interacting with an overweight person. Nostalgia was associated with more positive attitudes toward overweight people. The effect of nostalgia on outgroup attitudes was mediated by increased IOGS and outgroup trust. In turn, both mechanisms were associated with more positive outgroup attitudes. A second study ruled out potential confounds (positive mood, perceived typicality of outgroup member) and showed that the effect of nostalgic recall was mediated by increased IOGS,

reduced intergroup anxiety, and an increased perception that overweight and regular weight individuals belong to one overarching group.

Another set of studies focused on whether nostalgic recall of contact would help to tackle mental health stigma [29\*\*]. Participants reflected on a past encounter with an individual with a mental illness. Participants who reflected nostalgically on an intergroup encounter subsequently reported greater IOGS and, in turn, a more positive attitude towards those with a mental illness. Moreover, a follow-up experiment demonstrated that nostalgia increases IOGS and outgroup trust via higher levels of social connectedness. Similar findings emerged in the context of tackling ageism [23\*\*]. Younger adults who recalled a nostalgic encounter with an older adult reported greater social connectedness, which predicted increased IOGS. In turn, increased IOGS was associated with lower desire to avoid older adults.

Others have applied nostalgic recall of contact rather differently [30\*\*]. Greek participants recalled a nostalgic interaction with a Greek national who now lived overseas (in other words, an ingroup member who is now an overseas immigrant). Compared to participants in a control condition, this recall of *ingroup* contact reduced prejudice toward foreign immigrants in Greece via the mediating mechanisms of social connectedness and IOGS. These findings suggest that even ingroup contact can have benefits for intergroup relations, provided that the outgroup in question is perceived as holding a common ingroup membership (in this case, that of immigrants).

The research reviewed above demonstrates that nostalgic recall of contact with an outgroup, or an ingroup with a common outgroup membership, can promote more positive intergroup outcomes via interpersonal (social connectedness) and intergroup (reduced intergroup anxiety, greater IOGS, promotion of a common ingroup identity) mediating mechanisms, in four intergroup contexts: that of weight stigma, mental health stigma, ageism, and immigration. However, these findings did not identify whether such nostalgic recall can influence *actual* behavior. In a preliminary test of the relation between nostalgia and intergroup behavior [31\*\*], nostalgic (vs. ordinary) recollection of contact with an overweight person fostered social connectedness, which was associated with greater IOGS and outgroup trust. These, in turn, were linked to not only more positive attitudes and beliefs about overweight people, but also more positive behavior when anticipating an interaction with an overweight individual [measured as seating distance; see Refs. [32,33].

## Implications and applications

Although the findings to date are comprised of laboratory-based experiments, they have interventional implications. Nostalgia-based interventions are easier to implement and sustain than actual intergroup contact, because the practical difficulties in bringing together members of different social groups do not apply [14]. In this sense, recalling nostalgic contact resembles imagined intergroup contact, where participants who imagine a social interaction with an outgroup member express more favorable outgroup attitudes than control participants [34–36]. Both nostalgic recall of contact and imagined contact involve *reflecting* on an intergroup encounter rather than taking part in one. Yet, imagined contact involves drawing on a fictional encounter with a target individual, whereas nostalgia involves drawing on one's meaningful autobiographical memories of past intergroup contact. Thus, compared to imagined contact, nostalgic recall may be richer in detail and characterized by more genuine positive affect.

There may also be differences in the degree to which nostalgia and imagined contact occur spontaneously. Regarding spontaneous imagined contact, there is considerable variability in the contexts studied, but overall appears to occur relatively infrequently [37]. In contrast, spontaneous nostalgia occurs frequently [several times a week; 4, 5]. These findings suggest that mental travel into the past may be particularly effective in improving outgroup attitudes and, in the long run, in improving the success of face-to-face intergroup encounters. In line with this, considering that interventions involving contact are powerful means of influencing intergroup relations [36,38], perhaps it is the combination of nostalgic recall of intergroup contact with other contact strategies [e.g., extended contact [39]] that constitutes the vital ingredient for maximal intervention effectiveness.

## Next steps in understanding the benefits of nostalgic recall of contact

Drawing on what we know about nostalgic recall of contact to date, we offer a number of suggestions regarding where researchers might go next in order to better understand the impact of nostalgic contact on intergroup relations.

First, it would be useful to consider the broader potential range of outcomes of nostalgic recall of contact. Bicultural individuals who were instructed to think nostalgically about the host (vs. their home) country [40\*\*] subsequently reported higher bicultural identity integration [41]. This relationship was mediated by acculturation to the host (vs. home) culture. Although

participants were not specifically instructed to recall intergroup contact, Petkanopoulou and colleagues argued that their findings may in part be explained by nostalgic recall of interactions with new friends in the host community. Given that biculturalism is strongly positively associated with psychological and sociocultural adjustment, further research should identify the role that recall of nostalgic intergroup interactions may play in producing outcomes that go beyond positive intergroup relations. This would parallel theorizing around intergroup contact and its potential as an agent of cognitive liberalization [42].

Second, it is worth examining if nostalgia can be used as a means of buffering from potentially negative intergroup experiences [43]. Several of studies have revealed that nostalgia can buffer the emergence of certain negative effects by promoting a feeling a sociality [44], and social connectedness [45], see also 27, regarding how nostalgia can buffer the impact of loneliness]. In a separate line of research, individuals who were excluded on the basis of their group membership, and who were low in attachment-avoidance, were more likely to recruit nostalgic memories in order to recover from this ill treatment [46]. Future research could test (a) whether and when participants respond to negative intergroup experiences by recruiting nostalgic memories, and (b) whether when a negative encounter occurs, inducing participants to feel nostalgia might buffer the potential negative impact of that encounter for intergroup outcomes.

In a review of the literature on nostalgia both in Western cultures and cross-culturally [6], it emerged that nostalgia is characterized similarly, triggered in a similar manner, serves similar functions, and is a relatively common experience across cultures. Nonetheless, to date the impact of nostalgic recall of contact has only been examined in the UK and in Greece. The review revealed that future research is necessary to identify whether nostalgic interventions conducted in Western cultures are equally effective elsewhere. Examining nostalgic recall of contact in an array of cultural settings, and the different intergroup contexts that exist in these settings, will be critical to the further development of this research.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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\* of special interest

\*\* of outstanding interest

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