

# Nostalgia and Autobiography: The Past in the Present

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This paper explores the meaning of nostalgia as a personal experience that is undergone by many and that is a significant element in the formation of the autobiographical self. The concept of nostalgia is introduced and considered in terms of its history, cultural origins and emotional and psycho-social content. A small-scale qualitative empirical study conducted by the authors is outlined and the findings explicated and analysed. The dual aspect of nostalgia – that it is both an experience of pleasure and of regret – is very much a central theme of the paper; and from this we argue that nostalgic memories go toward the personal development of our normative evaluations and toward a general appreciation of the unfolding of selfhood in time.

## INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia is a culturally derived emotion. In these terms it dates from the seventeenth century, as will be explored later. Unlike basic primary emotions such as anger and fear, nostalgia is a secondary emotion composed of both positive and negative feelings. It is a personal contemplation of a valued experience in the past – is an experience that one does not expect to have again, so a pain of loss accompanies the contemplation, but so too does a regretful kind of pleasure. Nostalgic thoughts mourn a loss, but they also include acceptance of the loss, and it is that acceptance that makes possible a pleasurable feeling along with an out-rush of regret. In short, nostalgia is a bittersweet emotion, that is in part consciously constructed and that can be reflected upon at will.

The definition of an emotion is somewhat contested (Damasio, 2003: 28–37) and it is important that we say how we are using the word, and the

associated term, feeling. Emotion-inducing stimuli need to be processed in the brain using the sensory cortices and the limbic system. Many of such produced emotions can then be available to conscious experience (i.e. the *feeling* of an emotion). Such consciousness potentially allows choice of reaction to physiological response. It can be said that feeling one's emotions allows 'flexibility of response based upon the particular history of one's interactions with the environment' (Damasio, 1994: 133; Power, 1999). We can distinguish (although there is sometimes overlap) between primary emotions – that is, those least subject to immediate methodical reflection, such as, for example, fear or disgust – from secondary emotions that require for actualization a pre-set of acquired cultural socialization. In other words, an already existing combination of beliefs and repertoire of experiences are antecedent. These secondary emotions, in turn, form a hierarchy of intensity from, for example, great sadness to mild embarrassment. While nostalgia as a secondary emotion does not carry the strength, for example, of hate or grief this does not make it any less an emotion – it allows it to be an emotion that we can, as it were, contemplate as we experience it, rather as we might a play or a novel. In this way, it becomes a species of emotion that can accommodate its interiorization without significant ultimate psychic distress. We will employ, in common with usual practice, the terms emotion and feeling interchangeably.

Nostalgia is experienced in some socio-historical circumstances and not in others. Shaw and Chase (1989) consider that nostalgia is connected with a linear concept of time, and with an industrial, secular, or secularizing, society. They contrast this with a cyclical concept of time in which change is part of a repeating circle of events, where change is not absolute, and in which the past is not lost forever. By contrast, industrial societies, with their continual social change, future orientation, tendency to secularization, and reactive systems of planning, have seen marked increases in linear concepts of time, both generally and individually. Rapidity of change on its own is not sufficient to foster nostalgic feeling; there also needs to be a sense that the present is deficient in relation to the lost past. In relation to secularization Shaw and Chase (1989: 3) comment that 'redemptive histories are infertile ground for nostalgia. If the unsatisfactory present is . . . an antechamber to some better state . . . its deficiencies are tolerable'. A further two points important in the construction of nostalgia are that it is often connected to some notion of a past innocent childhood, and it is frequently associated with nature and the countryside.

To be nostalgic is not simply to be interested in the past, or to have the opinion that some past events or objects are (in some respects at least) better than their replacements. Such a view sees the past in an analytic, historical perspective, even if a cursorily thought-out one. There is no automatic particular feeling associated with the observations, say, that

train restaurant cars were nicer for travellers than the modern buffet car, or that nineteenth-century arcades are more attractive than contemporary shopping malls. Or, if there is feeling associated with such observations, it is often not nostalgia, but in the case, say, of the shopping malls, has to do with an affronted aesthetic sensibility. Nostalgia, by contrast with a historical perspective, does not seek to be analytic, but is allusive. This quality of allusive vagueness exists because nostalgia is primarily a feeling and not a cognitive process.

Some commentators have applied the term nostalgia to literature that expresses intense feeling about the past but this is not necessarily *nostalgic* feeling. Following the definition of nostalgia as a secondary emotion it will be noted nostalgia is a tender rather than an overpowering feeling. Proust's great novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* is centrally about the past and feeling about the past. This feeling is, however, contrary to the claim of Milton L. Miller in *Nostalgia: a psychoanalytic study of Marcel Proust* (1957), not nostalgic feeling. *A la recherche* does not mourn the loss of the past; it seeks to recreate the past, to deny that it is lost. Proust's novel is about the recapturing and reinstating of time past. Additionally the extremity of grief that is often expressed in *A la recherche* is not compatible with the variety of intensity that is the experience of nostalgia. Here the narrator is recalling the emotion he experienced when he and his parents returned later than usual from a walk, and he was told that as a consequence of the lateness of the hour his mother would not be able to visit him when he had gone to bed to supply a goodnight kiss: 'How readily would I have sacrificed them all [pleasures in life], just to be able to cry all night long in Mamma's arms! Quivering with emotion, I could not take my anguished eyes from my mother's face, which would not appear that evening in the bedroom' (Proust, 1981: 199).

Nostalgia is then a complex feeling, or more accurately, set of feelings, and the conditions (social and individual) that give rise to nostalgia are likewise complex. This paper will now explore in some detail the tangled and sometimes contradictory feelings that comprise the experience of nostalgia. At the core of nostalgia is a sense of a loss that is both mourned and accepted – and the social and personal conditions that are associated with the feeling. A small-scale empirical investigation, based on discursive responses to a request for extended writing about nostalgic experiences will be a significant part in our investigation into nostalgia. This investigation, though small-scale, is of particular importance in view of the lack of empirical study in the field. One of the reasons for some neglect in this area may well be the need for interdisciplinarity in researching nostalgia. Current research practices (particularly in universities) often rigidify subject boundaries. Auto/biographical and life history study are two of the few areas that allow research protocols to extend beyond a

subject base and permit a rigorous comprehensiveness. There seems to be only one sociological analysis of nostalgia, that by Fred Davis in 1979 – a monograph with many interesting insights, but suffering from a defective system of reporting its empirical findings.

Before outlining our investigation, there are several issues to be explored. In the next section, we will sketch a history of the concept of nostalgia followed by a review of contemporary views of the concept, which will lead to a description of how the concept is used in this paper. The final two sections will be an outline of the empirical study, and a discussion of the themes that emerged. Finally, there will be concluding remarks.

### **HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF NOSTALGIA AND A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS**

A history of the term nostalgia is found in Starobinski (1966), Davis (1979) and Boym (2001). It was coined by a Doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688, using two Greek words, *nostos*, meaning home, and *algia*, meaning pain or sorrow, to denote a pathological yearning for one's home country (Hofer, 1688). The concept of homesickness was not new and there already existed words for it in many European languages; what was new was that the condition was elevated to a disease, not just a state of feeling, and carried the implication that this condition was to be henceforward a subject for scientific investigation (Starobinski, 1966: 84). The particular context of Hofer's work was the distress and illness of Swiss soldiers serving abroad, but the term was soon applied to any uprooted individuals or groups. Nostalgia was considered to be a serious illness, in some cases resulting in death, and physical as well as emotional causes were proposed for it (Hofer, 1688; Starobinski, 1966: 86, 95).

Boym argues that nostalgia, the new disease, arrived at 'the historical point when the conception of time and history were undergoing radical change' (2001: 8). There was a notion of linear rather than cyclical time, and an increasingly secular and scientific outlook, based on ideas about human progress, rather than on a vision of an immutable religiously ordered cosmos. By the end of the eighteenth century, nostalgia had lost its disease connotation, and returned to being a feeling – a process helped by the fact that tuberculosis, which had sometimes been diagnosed as nostalgia, became clearly classified as a separate disease (Boym, 2001: 11). However, nostalgia did not revert to the pre-1688 state of being an uncomplicated longing for a home or a homeland, but became the complex bittersweet emotion that it is today. Boym (2001: 9) considers that the semantic developments of post-eighteenth-century notions of nostalgia are connected with a process by which there came to be a new division into 'local' and 'universal'. Before this, there had been a plethora of

'locals' and no 'universal' (or a very small and elitist one). A person leaving their local home place had to acclimatize to a new local home place; but to leave one's locality after the eighteenth century meant entering a universal, impersonal sphere not another local place. Moreover, the 'local' shrank to being the family only, as the universalistic sphere expanded and took people into it whether they actually left home or not. Boym does not mention Durkheim, but the division into 'local' and 'universal' has great similarity to his distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1984).

The temporal dimension of human life, the perception of the passage of human lives in time, is particularly protean in terms of what Brockmeier (2000) calls autobiographical time. This is the process by which an individual, in reflecting on and living through his or her life course, 'constantly links the past with the present . . . in the light of present events and future expectations' (Brockmeier, 2000: 55). Roberts (1999), Brockmeier (2000) and Sparkes and Smith (2003) have developed or used concepts of autobiographical time more complex than the linear or cyclical models that we have employed so far. Roberts (1999: 23) has a diagram that examines the way past, present and future interweave in autobiographical narrative. Brockmeier (2000: 61), in distinguishing six models of autobiographical time adds the circular, the spiral, the fragmentary and the static to the more familiar linear and cyclical models. The elaboration of notions of temporality put forward by Roberts and Brockmeier offer frames of analysis for the complex threads through time of a life narrative. But this possible complexity of time frames highlights the important way in which a nostalgic contemplation is almost by definition a memory placed in linear time; it is of its essence that the event reflected on will not recur. The nostalgic experiences of the seven participants in our empirical study were, with one possible exception, related in a linear time frame. The one partial exception will be discussed in the section reporting our research; generally, a nostalgic memory yearns for something that has gone forever, except in memory.

The yearning of nostalgia, originally formulated as a longing for a specific place, need not be for a real place, or indeed a place at all, but may be for past relationships or people, real or imaginary. However, places, specific locales, are consistently important in nostalgic memory, and a psychoanalytic perspective is valuable in showing that locales often represent people and forgotten or repressed relationships with them. 'What was at first defined in relation to the place of birth is thus redefined in relation to parental figures and to early stages of personal development' (Starobinski, 1966: 103). Locales are an important factor in participants' memories in our empirical investigation, as will be seen. It is likely that these places do, in part at least, represent persons, but that a narcissistic

identification of the place with the child that one once was is more important than a representation of an adult. Daniels notes that a disturbing element may be found in nostalgic memories and comments that in the American artist Wyeth's paintings 'the uncanny lurks close by in nostalgia's dalliance with the hidden, pointing to the unconscious ... the *unheimlich*' (Daniels, 1985: 378). Below the surface of the idealized memory of nostalgia there may be hidden conflicts, a point that may explain some of the 'bitter' component of bittersweet memories.

As we indicated in the Introduction, the only empirical sociological exploration of nostalgia is Fred Davis's (1979) *Yearning for yesterday*. The only information about his methodology is found in the Preface, where he explains that he used an 'open ended interview guide' with 12 persons, and that he gave a 'brief questionnaire' to students in several of his university classes (Davis, 1979: ix). He does not follow the usual practice of including a copy of the interview guide and the questionnaire in the book. He supplies many quotations from his respondents but in the absence of adequate contextualizing of his research findings it is hard to draw any conclusions. However, one very striking difference between the expression of nostalgia in his material and that in our sample is that adolescence emerges as a significant period for nostalgic memory in his study, whereas in ours it is childhood. Possibly there are national differences in the expression of nostalgia, as Davis's study is American, while ours (with one exception) is English. One of the participants in our study is French, and it is interesting that her nostalgic recollection is markedly different from the others in the group – but it is similar in the respect that it focuses on childhood. Clearly, with such small numbers and in the absence of proper information about Davis's study, it is not possible to do more than mention the intriguing possibility of national differences.

The central features of nostalgic feeling are the contemplation of an experience in the past that was valued and will not return, accompanied by a mourning of loss that is less anguished than the misery of grief. There is pleasure as well as pain in this contemplation, and – importantly – there is an acceptance of the loss, sometimes nearly amounting to a sense that the loss was deserved. Almost always the loss has some connection with childhood – the loss of the contemplator's own childhood, or, and particularly in literary evocations of nostalgia, an imagined ideal childhood.

#### **DISCUSSIONS OF NOSTALGIA OF PARTICULAR RELEVANCE TO THIS PAPER**

While nostalgia is a culturally acquired feeling it can be conceptually linked to some basic emotions – most notably those of grief and depression. This is particularly so in Freud's discussion of these emotions in his 'Mourning and melancholia' (1957b), where melancholia may be

represented in current usage by the term depression. Grief and depression are reactions to the loss of a loved object – though in depression the sufferer may not be able to perceive what the actual lost object was because it may be masked by repression. The symptoms of both involve feelings of misery focused on the lost object (or, in depression, on an unfocused feeling of loss). This pain is accompanied by withdrawal of interest in the world and loss of the capacity – and the desire – to form or sustain relationships with other people (Freud, 1957b). Freud explains that:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition... This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a ... wishful psychosis.

(Freud, 1957b: 244)

In ordinary grief, gradually and painfully, libido is withdrawn from the lost object, so that when the mourning process is completed ‘the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’ (Freud, 1957b: 253). However, in melancholia the libido continues to be attached to a lost object, and the pain of loss does not lessen in the normal way – a not surprising reaction when, as so often in depression, the sufferer is unaware what it is that is mourned. There is a further important contrast of depression with ordinary grief to be made; the former is usually accompanied by feelings of worthlessness and self-vilification that are absent in mourning. Freud explains this anger and vilification as feelings that have been displaced from the lost or rejecting love object on to the self. In normal mourning, libido is gradually withdrawn from the lost object, and after a period of time is free to be attached to new objects. In depression, the libido: ‘was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* [emphasis in original] of the ego with the abandoned object’ (Freud, 1957b: 249). The consciousness of the loss has been repressed, and then the disappointment and anger that would, as well as grief, ordinarily be directed at the lost object of love, is displaced on to the sufferer’s own ego. Part of the sufferer’s self is then vilified as worthless and contemptible. The melancholic reaction, as opposed to the mourning reaction, to loss results from complications and repression in attachment formation in infancy and childhood. It is unconscious feelings of anger and guilt from this period in a person’s life that re-emerge at a later date as depression, either in response to an immediate loss or, apparently, spontaneously.

There is some similarity between the grief/depression reaction and the nostalgic reaction, since both are responses to loss. It would be possible then to see the nostalgic feeling as a stage in the healing process of grief.

However, a better explanation is to see the nostalgic loss as a *different kind of loss*; in most cases the object lost in nostalgia is regretted rather than yearned for in distraught misery, and never has been thus overwhelmingly felt. The loss is experienced not, for example, as the terrible loss of an infant for a parent. The loss in nostalgia given by the participants in our investigation shows in most cases, the loss of childhood; and childhood is a state that we expect to lose. It is normal and desirable to lose it.

There is regret, certainly, in the loss of childhood and our memory of its way of perceiving the world, but in normal maturation it is not an overwhelming regret. Freud's account of the stages of an infant's attachment formation and of problems with these stages can add to the discussion of grief and depression and loss in the life course. A particular problem of attachment formation outlined by Freud is the narcissistic reaction; and this will be shown to be relevant to some expressions of nostalgia. The infant has initially two love objects – its own self, and the mother figure (Freud, 1957a: 87). In normal development as the child moves on from the early oral phase to the anal and then the genital phases, the nature of these early attachments is modified through the working of the Oedipus complex. The early, all consuming, loves for the self and for the mother figure are transmuted into adult attachments and to a range of love objects. It may happen however that a person will remain more or less fixed in the narcissistic phase and continues to seek his or her self – or some equivalent of the self – as a love object. Freud (1957a: 90) asserts that according to the type of narcissistic response a person may seek:

- a) what he himself is;
- b) what he himself was;
- c) what he himself would like to be;
- d) someone who was once part of himself.

Particularly in choices b) and d) we can see narcissism's connection with children and childhood, and the trope of idealized childhood so often encountered in nostalgia. Freud observes that '[t]he charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility' (Freud, 1957a: 89). However, narcissism is a normal stage in growing up, and is not cast completely away in adulthood, even in normal individuals, so that affection for the child one once was lingers in nostalgic memory. Such affection will be seen in several of our participants' accounts.

#### **THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

The empirical data for this research were gained through a small-scale sample of written descriptions of nostalgic experience. This information



was obtained by the use of a qualitative questionnaire. The sample group consisted of volunteers who had been members of a postgraduate programme at a UK university and were personally known to one of the authors. All members of the respondent group had completed modules in biographical studies. The proposal for a research exercise into nostalgic experiences, using a qualitative questionnaire, was put forward to the group. The definition of nostalgia for the purposes of the research was discussed with the group. In addition to the request for a description of a nostalgic experience the questionnaire requested basic information on age, sex, education, occupation and place of birth.

The preliminary definition statement relating to nostalgia that was included in the questionnaire was as follows:

For the purposes of this research nostalgia is regarded as more than the recalling of an agreeable past event. It must be stronger and deeper than that. It refers to the sense of loss of a past positive time. Your thoughts about the recalled experience must be accompanied by both a real ache of longing and an intensely pleasurable contemplation.

Seven members (out of ten) of the group volunteered to undertake the questionnaire. Participants were given a month to complete and return the questionnaire. It was important that respondents should have enough time (and privacy) to properly consider the nature and character of an experience that held considerable significance for them. The identity of the participants has been kept anonymous (apart from being known to one of the authors). The names used in the accounts are fictitious. Feedback to the participants will be provided. All of them expressed interest in taking part in any follow-up research. The data were collected during the spring and summer of 2005. Although separate the accounts have a degree of communal meaning by virtue of the fact that they are the recognizable experiences of a specific group located in an understood sociocultural context. They therefore provide information on the way in which selves are cognitively and affectively constructed, established and developed, and have particular ways of being-in-the-world.

The questionnaire returns are best characterised as life documents (Plummer, 2001) and more specifically as autobiographical accounts on a particular topic. As such the study comes under the heading of life history or biographical research – an approach, though of distinguished vintage (for example Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918–20; Dollard, 1935), that has in recent years gained reinvigorated recognition. It is located within a broadly interpretive paradigm (for example Denzin, 1989; Ricoeur, 1992; Kelly and Dickinson, 1997; Roberts, 2002). Biographical research prioritizes the narratives by which lives are lived – the stories that constitute for the self the meaning of its personal encounter with the world. Such narratives, no

matter whether partial, fractured or fluent, are an expression of the identity of the individual in society. Nostalgia is a well-known experience that, while individually unique, is generally recognizable to others; and it is as such that the respondents' accounts are credible within the parameters of the wider culture. Nostalgic descriptions are a variety of autobiographical form – a variety of 'self-telling' – that emerged from historical circumstances and that have been incorporated into a culture (Bruner, 1987). In these terms the present research is a contribution to the theory and practice of sociological biographical analysis.

Of the seven participants in the research most were in their mid-fifties, but one was 62 and one 48. There were five women and two men. For all except one the nostalgic experience was of childhood. The natural world and the outdoors were important parts of the recollection for five people. A feeling of freedom and independence from adults was important for five people. Sometimes the feeling of freedom was explicitly related to a period in life free from adult responsibilities. For four of the participants the nostalgic experience was connected with an awareness of transition – that life would not continue in the way it seemingly always had. How these themes emerge from the different accounts and the meaning of the themes will be explored; but first, here is a summary of each of the seven experiences.

- **Mary**, age 62. The experience was of childhood between 3 and 6 years. The locale was Edinburgh, and the valued experience that of visiting known adults, either alone or with her brother. The feeling that went with the visiting was of freedom and exploration. This period in Mary's life came to an end when the family moved to Manchester (less beautiful than Edinburgh), a second brother was born and a strict grandmother joined the household.
- **Brigitte**, age 54. The experience was of childhood from as far back as she can remember. The memory is of family reunions, organized by her grandmother and then by her godmother, where up to 20 family members would sit down to a meal. The children were allowed to leave the table to play between courses. The feeling accompanying the memory is of safety, belonging and security.
- **Joy**, age 52. The experience was of childhood at the age of 11 or 12. The family lived in Kampala, Uganda, but was about to leave for England. This was the first time Joy had become aware that life could change. The memory is of being with her sister at the end of the garden, playing at explorers, as they often had, but with a heightened consciousness that this pleasure would not continue indefinitely.
- **Glenda**, age 54. The experience occurred at the age of 31; Glenda was about to leave her job and was clearing her filing cabinet of personal things, many of which she had forgotten. She came across

photographs that brought back a memory of a beautiful place by a river and a special person who had been present.

- **Keith**, age 52. The experience took place in childhood between the ages of 7 and 15. He lived in mining village, and remembers the freedom of exploring woods and fields and spoil-heaps. There was fishing and escapades with friends.
- **Sheila**, age 48. The experience was between 3 and 7 years, of living near Biggin Hill, of fields and woods and freedom to play.
- **James**, age 51. The experience was at about 11, of exploring country-, river- and pond-side with two other boys of about the same age.

The themes of independence and adventure, of transition and appreciation of the natural world emerge clearly from Joy's account at the age of 11 or 12:

We had a huge garden [in Kampala] and down at the bottom of it was a long flower bed full of cannas and behind that a very tall double hedge – so one could actually crawl between the two. Between the flowerbed and the hedge was a strip of grass where a huge puddle used to form ... During the rainy season there are massive storms and the rain pours down in torrents for a few hours. Then it suddenly stops ... There is often a strange stillness to the air after the rain ... The incident happened on one such day – just after the rain. Another significant feature of that day was that we were about to leave Uganda ... Until that time, it had not occurred to me that our stay in Uganda was temporary, as I had lived there since I was three months old.

My younger sister and I went out into the garden after the downpour ... We were all alone in this huge garden and we went to see the puddle behind the cannas. I can still see in my mind's eye, two little girls engrossed in a fantasy in which we were explorers in Africa ... [T]he air was steaming and all around was the lush, lush green of tropical Africa.

... I have never forgotten the thrill of that adventure, the heightened sense of awareness of the stillness after the rain ...

But the memory is also now tinged with pathos – or yearning – for magical moments in childhood. I had no idea where we were going after Uganda or what lay ahead in life.

The themes of independence and the natural world can be seen in Keith's account:

Most of my memories are based on growing up and exploring the area round the [mining] village. This involved playing in the local woods and fields, fishing in a local pond or canal, and exploring the spoil heaps, slurry ponds and swamps created by mining activity. A great place to grow up in a time when you were simply allowed to go and play as long as you returned home by an agreed time. School also plays a significant role in my nostalgia

... junior school and the secondary school ... [which] involved a two-mile walk ... across the fields.

I often reflect on particularly dramatic events with friends and one particular friend, called Andrew Taylor. [Here follows an account of Andrew climbing into a metal beer barrel and having the lid fixed down in order to float down a stream. The plan was for Keith and other friends to stop the barrel after a short distance. But the force of the water was too great] Andrew was swept along ... downstream and under a road tunnel ... and finally grounded ... we rescued a ... shaken and ... bruised Andrew whose first words were, 'Who's go is it next?'

... All of these [memories] are based on a time of childhood where one had no responsibilities and a great deal of freedom to explore and experiment.

The memories of the two men in the sample focused, as here, on more active events than those of the women. Here is James reflecting on the natural world and the joys of independence.

I am about 11 years old and visiting friends [two brothers about the same age as Ian] ... We are in the country and visiting a pond ... In my pocket I have a newly bought *Observer's Book of Pond Life*. [Near the pond] is a river [where] water voles can be seen and heard. Beyond the river ... is a ... railway line. Every time a train passes we interrupt our pond investigation and wave at the train. Always some people wave back ... The memory fills me with real happiness – the experience of the waving, the people waving back, the contemplation of the pond life and the presence of my friends. I am also very sad that these unreflective joyous moments were the best moments in my life and can never return.

This account is mostly in the historic present tense – a device that suggests that the events narrated are happening now rather than in the past.

Though the men's accounts are of more physical activity than the women's, similar themes of countryside and its associations with independence are found. We have already seen Joy in Uganda. Here is Sheila's account of countryside and independence:

Apart from that one incident [a quarrel between her parents while Sheila was in the garden, during which smashing crockery could be heard], for a long time I had only good feeling from those few years when we lived down the valley in Biggin Hill. In those days there were hardly any houses in the valley, just woods and fields and a long unmade road ...

As very few cars drove along King's Road ... my mother gave us a lot of freedom to roam ...

There is also transition in this account. The Biggin Hill period remained a (relatively) ideal time as: 'life gradually changed after we moved from

Biggin Hill to Bromley ... I can ... see how much of a struggle it was at times ... with five children to provide and care for'.

The four accounts above locate the nostalgic experience in childhood and all recall countryside, and independence as important. Now follow the other three. The first of these, from Mary, recalls childhood (a period between 3 and 6 years). For her awareness of transition was important as was the theme of independence, but the latter was focused on adults who were not family members:

At this time [between three and six years] I had a strong sense of individuality and personal identity. The world was open and I was aware that I could explore it. In these years, it took the form – curiously – of visiting grown ups ... often alone, but sometimes accompanied by my brother who was about seventeen months my senior. These visits included ... afternoon tea with my neighbours, an elderly brother and sister ... and ... another elderly gentleman, the Parrot Man, who kept a rather frightening but fascinating parrot.

In the absence of countryside the city of Edinburgh, where she lived, provided something to provide a sense of the environment for Mary:

My feelings of nostalgia include the sense of personal identity and freedom, as well as a strong sense of place ... Edinburgh which I identify as a beautiful city. [There was] a feeling of wholeness and harmony [not damaged by the arrival of a new baby] when I was about three and a half.

The period of Mary's nostalgic memory ended with a transition to a less agreeable life, marked by the arrival of a new baby, a move to Manchester and the arrival of a 'stern Scottish grandmother' to live with the family. 'The sense of loss was utter and complete.'

The five accounts dealt with so far have marked similarities – childhood, transition, independence – and in all but the last countryside is important. The transition theme seems to mark a point, sometimes consciously noted, of a dawning awareness of the existence of time, that things are impermanent. Of the two remaining accounts, that of Brigitte, while different in several respects from the five already examined, contains a sense of regret for change – a resistance to transition. Her nostalgic memory covers many unspecified childhood and adult years in France, expressed as 'it was always there', of visits to her extended family, central to which were her grandmother, her godmother and an uncle.

So for most of my life until a few years back, three generations were living under one roof. We used to have regular family reunions, quite often on Sundays and of course for religious festivals. The reunion usually meant a very long meal, with ten, fifteen or twenty of us around the table in the

dining room . . . As children we would go out to play between courses. Then our children would be there.

The godmother organized the reunions until her death in her eighties. The house is still in the family, but has been much altered and modernized – ‘but they were anxious to maintain the dining room’.

It has never been the same since. It is nice to think the house has remained in the family (five generations) but it is not a centre of reunions . . . There is a sadness about that. It is changing. What was it about it? It felt safe, it was nice to belong, secure, strong. As I said earlier it was a mixture of strong feelings, as I used to hate it as a teen-ager and I watched our children rebelling against it at times.

Although adults (godmother, grandmother) are important for Brigitte, the form of her recollection cannot be equated with the important adults in Mary’s, since the latter are perceived by her to be outside the family circle. Brigitte’s memory is of a wide, yet all enclosing, family circle that had diminished, or narrowed in recent years. Her nostalgic memory, unlike those of the other participants, touches on notions of cyclical time. Her recollection values cyclical time, a time of repeated family gatherings in the same place, of the same family *gemeinschaft* exercised on the changing cohorts of individuals who grow up under its influence. But since she notes that the warm togetherness has weakened she, like the others, sites her nostalgic memory in linear time, even while regretting that cyclical time is no more.

The seventh account, Glenda’s, is the only one that is not a childhood recollection. While clearing out a filing cabinet, in preparation for a change of job, she came across forgotten photographs, which at first she looked at with interest and pleasure.

It wasn’t until the third one that my heart missed a beat – then the fourth and fifth photograph, by which time I had stopped smiling. Did I really want to continue to look at them, knowing how painful it would be? . . . Of course . . . I looked at the photographs, slowly sliding down the wall until I was crouched on the floor . . . acknowledging [an] ache in my chest and the heavy feeling in my stomach . . . I can instantly recall all the feeling I had that day [of the photographs] . . . The feeling of pleasure, yet fear.

The memory continues with recall of the day of the photographs:

I was at the waters edge of the river . . . I could hear the water flowing past me, I could feel the September sunshine on my face, and I could smell the countryside . . . I looked up at the tree I was leaning against and I heard the sound of a Land Rover in the distance . . .

. . . I wept for what I had shared once – a wonderful, beautiful period of my life . . .

... I will take these wonderful memories to the grave, but before then I will continue to have my private and silent nostalgic moments and be eternally grateful to the one very special person, for giving me such beautiful, warm memories and somewhere that I can escape to in my dreams.

Glenda's experience happened when she was 38. This breaks the pattern of the other accounts in that it is decidedly not a childhood memory or occurring at a stage when reflective consciousness would not be active. However, what is of interest is the potency of her pleasure and her unhappiness. It is possible that the episode is a screen memory obscuring an earlier repressed event. The possibility of Glenda's recollection being a screen memory is perhaps strengthened by the much greater affect that is associated with her memory, as opposed to those of the other participants; and also by the fact that her memory had been forgotten until stirred by the discovery of the photographs. The other participants give the impression that their nostalgic memories are always available to be drawn into consciousness. What Glenda recalled was a conscious (though not readily accessible) memory that may be the echoing of a partially unconscious one referring to an earlier experience of the same character but carrying an emotional intensity unavailable to the conscious mind. The emotion released by the photographs has possibly employed for its conscious articulation a substitute, but akin to, memory.

It seems that the unproblematic manner in which others participate within or are associated with the nostalgic episode (whether or not made much of in the nostalgic descriptions) is a key factor in its importance for the subject.

### **THEMES: DISCUSSION**

There are three notable themes that emerge from the participants' accounts. The first is a new awareness of transition and change, a change in consciousness that can be connected to a move from mechanical to organic solidarity. The second is the expanding ability to love something or someone; the third is, in Freudian terms, a release of tension. Included in this third category, as release of tension, is a strand that emerges, implicitly for the most part, in which is the independence and adventure that are so valued as a part of growing up, exist at the idealized time of the nostalgic experience without the moral dilemmas and responsibility of a completely adult life. In the following analysis of these themes, it is hoped that a better understanding will be reached of the several strands of nostalgic experience.

#### ***Transition, reflective ability, and mechanical and organic solidarity***

The transition theme contains two related elements, the arrival of a reflective ability and the arrival of awareness of time and discontinuity in the life

course. They are both part of the new kind of consciousness that develops in individuals as they move from mechanical to organic solidarity. Durkheim (1984) used these concepts to analyse change in types of society; but they can also be used in analysing the development of individuals, for example Bernstein (1971; 1996). The individuated consciousness of organic solidarity has a well-developed sense of the self as a reflecting entity. Such a reflective self is a prerequisite for awareness of the discontinuities of time. Or, to put it the other way round, the unreflecting consciousness of a person embedded in mechanical solidarity is attuned to the small, and repetitive, changes of the passage of days and seasons and growth, but is not attuned to the discontinuities of historical time.

The consciousness of mechanical solidarity is little differentiated from other consciousnesses (from other people); it is not a reflective and analytic consciousness. As James said of his own change of consciousness: 'I am sad that these unreflecting, joyous moments will . . . never return.' For three participants there was a memory of a specific, disagreeable, or at least alarmingly novel occurrence that was felt to mark the end of the nostalgic memory – and the arrival of the awareness of discontinuous time. Mary moved with her family to Manchester and the stern grandmother, and a not entirely welcome brother was born. Sheila lost the freedom of countrified suburbia, and became aware of her parents' problems. The awareness of discontinuous time came for Joy as she contemplated a move from Uganda to England.

This process of the arrival of the organic solidarity reflective consciousness and awareness of discontinuous time elucidates the mixture of pleasure and sorrow in nostalgic memory. It is at a specific moment of maturation that an individual comes to experience time as divided into historical phases and not as a day-to-day but otherwise unbroken continuum; and at the same moment he or she perceives the change in consciousness from mechanical to organic. It is the mingled feeling about this change from unreflective embeddedness in a social milieu to the individuated consciousness of organic solidarity that produces nostalgia; it is a change that is both regretted and welcomed. In addition, a recalled episode that a person perceives as a change for the worse is an event that often sparks – or is perceived to spark – the arrival of a reflective consciousness. There have probably been many disagreeable episodes in a person's unreflective past, but if they have not been consciously reflected on as a marker of a transition they will be forgotten. It is, we suggest, the coincidence of a disagreeable event and the arrival of reflective consciousness that is particularly likely to spark a nostalgic memory. The happy unreflective and undifferentiated past becomes imbued with a perception that it was all good in the period that preceded the remembered disagreeable event, when in fact all that is necessary is that the period immediately preceding the transition should be recalled as happy.



***Ability to love: the development of one's own attachments***

All the nostalgic experiences recounted by the participants had other people in them as important components. Usually these were people outside the family circle – child friends (Keith, James, and, to a lesser degree, Sheila) or adult friends (Mary). Joy was with her sister at the time so not a non-family member. But the two girls were outside the family house and were experiencing an adventure of their own making. The feeling for the countryside of Africa is vivid in Joy's recall, and is a reminder of the importance of countryside (its beauty and its freedoms) in other accounts. It is particularly strong in Keith's, James's and Glenda's; and it is present in Sheila's. Mary was brought up in a city, Edinburgh, but she records appreciating its beauty as a city in contrast to the less favoured Manchester.

Thus we have a complex consisting of strong positive feelings for:

- new relationships with people outside the family circle
- the out of doors, in particular the countryside
- freedom, adventure.

There is strong positive affect connected with this complex of components and pleasure in the ability to develop these attachments. Earlier we noted Freud's discussion of the process by which, in normal development, the child's early exclusive love for the mother figure and its own self, is transmuted into adult attachments to a range of love objects. This process can be seen at work in the recall of nostalgic experiences. The early narcissistic love of the child's own self can be seen lingering in the nostalgic experiences of the participants. This is particularly marked in the experiences of the two men in our sample; for both of them other boys of a similar age attract strong feelings of affection. These other boys may be seen as other versions of the narrator's self, attracting narcissistic love.

The importance of the natural world is interesting (Keith, James, Joy, Glenda) in view of the association of 'idealized child' and 'rural past' that Robson (2001) notes in nineteenth-century literature and art. She stresses the 'past' rather than the 'rural' and sees it as a backward-looking trope. Possibly in the context she is writing of this is correct. But in our participants' accounts the natural world (that is the 'rural' in Robson's formulation) is foregrounded and can be better seen as a forward-looking component in the developing attachments of our participants. In Keith, James and Joy's accounts the countryside/outdoors is associated with growing independence and action in the world. It is 'child-in-natural-world' that is important, and this composite can be seen as a narcissistic representation of the child in the narratives. It is also worth observing here that it is much more difficult in 2006 to imagine children having the freedom to roam alone or in

small groups in the manner recounted by some of our participants. Parents have necessarily become more nervous of allowing their children to venture outside than used to be the case a generation ago. If parents have become over-protective they have become so, regretfully, for entirely understandable reasons.

### ***Release of tension***

In relation to the attendant tension within nostalgia (between current regret and remembered pleasure) a Freudian perspective offers some further explanatory value. Freud asserts that while the pleasure principle determines the purpose of life, its programme seems at odds with the world – in both its macro and micro realizations: ‘one is inclined to say that the intention that man should be happy is not included in the plan of creation’ (Freud, 1961: 76). None the less there are gaps and interstices in reality where the release of pent-up needs for happiness and satisfaction can occur. This, obviously, is not to be in any continuous sense, and can be ‘only possible as an episodic phenomenon’ (Freud, 1961: 76). Nostalgia, in a manner paralleling Freud’s discussion of jokes, supplies a brief experience in which pleasure is allowed its way, circumventing briefly the constraining seriousness of everyday reality (Freud, 1960). The movement from the psychic relocation of the nostalgic episode, and the knowledge of its unrecoverability, supply the defusing and raising of tension. This condition is susceptible to overall super-ego management, but in abnormal circumstances one could imagine that it could take on a pathological aspect. This latter may be the reason why nostalgia has in the past been categorized as a medical condition (Starobinski, 1996: 84).

Tension is usually a result of conflict between what one wishes to do and what one feels one ought to do, or is expected to do. Thus in some of our participant’s accounts there is a regretted pleasure in the memory of a time (or an imagined time) when one had no responsibilities and there was no ‘ought’ – for example James talking of the ‘unreflective joyous moments’ before responsibilities arrived. However, this was certainly not an amoral or immoral time, but rather that interpersonal relations were unproblematically harmonious in the nostalgic memories. Keith’s childhood memory of the episode when one of a group of friends was shut (by agreement) in a barrel and floated down a river is interesting in this respect. The experience was almost certainly uncomfortable and frightening and could have led to disagreement within the group of friends and to a very much less than happy memory. The barrel-traveller, however, trusted that the others had not meant any harm, and continued a loyal definition of the event as fun calling out ‘Who’s go is it next?’ as soon as he was released from the barrel.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although individual, the nostalgic accounts presented earlier have a shared degree of meaning by virtue of the fact that they are generally identifiable experiences belonging to a widely recognizable sociocultural context and historical period. They therefore provide information on the way in which selves are cognitively and affectively developed. In this respect, given their context, they can add to the emotional repertoire from which normative evaluations relating to the selfhood of others may be formed. Nostalgic memories can become part of an emotional stock from which we may make normative evaluations, have sympathetic understanding and express appreciations of the development of selfhood in time. These considerations chime with the movement in moral philosophy and the human sciences that links narrative experience with an understanding of ethics and moral reasoning (for example MacIntyre, 1985; 1999; Nussbaum, 2001).

Here the reference has been not to extraordinary, highly extreme narratives but to the stories of everyday lives lived in ordinary ways. And, of course, much of life is not lived *in extremis* but in a broad affective range that, in most cases, is in real crisis only occasionally; in any case, intense experience by no means always carries with it loss of rational function or physiological trauma. It is in these situations that the majority of interactions occur, that most of living in complex western societies takes place and in which the nostalgic examples we provide are realized. For the participants the nostalgic recollections are vivid, and also encapsulate a set of intersubjective relations that are guileless, uncoercive and which take their place as part of the subject's view-of-life, whether they take the form of Brigitte being a child close to a large affectionate family, or James waving from a distance to passengers on a passing train. The transpositional duality made between the adult, contemporary, self and the pre-reflective self refers to nostalgia as the simultaneous holding within the self of a place that is at once haven and also a place from which one has been banished. While nostalgic feeling is a regretful one for an unrecoverable, pre-reflective past the lasting information its conscious retrieval supplies is a recognition that mature, current relations with others are often best grounded in an appreciation that lives are generally characterized by a mixture of hope and regret. The content of each of the nostalgic accounts would be intelligible to all participants – in this sense the authors of the accounts share, in Habermasian terms, a pre-reflective life-world solidarity (Habermas, 1990). Further, the dual emotional aspect of nostalgia suggests for the subject that the value of autonomous existence is often best understood through the acknowledgement of interdependence. In these terms we can say that the individual experience of nostalgia can be a type of social learning as well as a private feeling. The episode of Keith and his friends

with the barrel is an illustration of this process; a potentially unpleasant incident is remembered with pleasure. Keith draws no explicit moral points from the event, but it is possible to point to implicit social learning of several things – the value of loyalty, trust and fortitude. It is not the event itself that is of central importance in this process of learning, but the reaction of the participants and their definitions of what took place. It seems possible that quarrels and distrust could have arisen – in which case of course the memory of the event could not be a nostalgic one, in that remembered pleasure is a key element in nostalgia.

It could be said that nostalgic experiences not only have good things in them (that they are thought of as pleasurable and worthwhile) but that they are also indicative of a moral environment, that could not exist without the kindness of others. The depiction of nostalgic events does not provide in itself patient moral analysis, but our reflections on them allow us to see that what were occasions for imaginative feelings can produce insight into the best and simplest ways that life could be – not in the reclamation of the same experiences but in the establishment of a moral perspective. Perhaps it may be argued (and we have earlier broached this point) that the others in the nostalgic reverie are versions of the self. If this is sometimes so, it does not seem to matter in interpersonal terms for we must also be rehearsing what it is like to be interactive and intimate and to have taken within us the possibility of the recognition of others, and of having harmonious, uncaricatured relations with them. We would say that the interpersonal self of the nostalgic event provides, in Charles Taylor's terms, 'a heightened sense of interconnectedness with others [that acts as a] remedy to the loss of resonance, depth [and] richness [found] in our current human surroundings and allows us to refine our interior contemplations and dealings with others' (Taylor, 1989: 501). As for each of our participants nostalgic recollection is *per se* significant it is a form of autobiography that has within it communitarian, epistemic gain (Taylor, 1989).

The recall of nostalgic moments develops the autobiographical facility and nostalgic accounts provide a significant category for analysing selves. If nostalgic recall is more common in a contemporary society that offers individuals few effective general meaning systems it is likely to be not because of a simplistic wish for golden days, but because the *integrative features* of the nostalgic episode are needed to bolster the *integrative capacity* of the present self. Perhaps nostalgic experience will become a genre within autobiography and find its place as a part of a project recommended by Jerome Bruner: 'I cannot imagine a more important psychological research project than one that addresses itself to the 'development of autobiography' – how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of life' (Bruner, 1987: 32).

What we have produced in this paper is our initial account of nostalgia and its relationship to autobiographical identity. There is more to elaborate and extend in the area at historical, conceptual and empirical levels. This is a study we propose to contribute to ourselves. There is considerable information worthy of analysis relating to the way we have spoken about nostalgia in children's literature (particularly that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Further, in terms of our participant data, we have yet to explore all its content and ramifications. Also, the connections between emotion, episodic memory and neurological science are still to be extensively related to that continuum of pleasure and regret that is the nostalgic experience.

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