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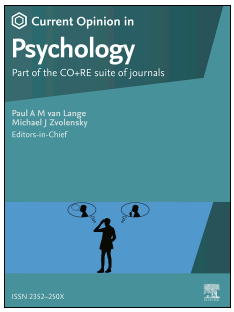

Nostalgia in Organizations

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Nostalgia in Organizations

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Abstract

Scholars have proposed that nostalgia plays various important roles in organizations. At present, there is no comprehensive overview of the role of nostalgia in this context. To help develop such an overview, we review research on personal nostalgia, insofar as it includes outcomes that are organizationally relevant, and research on organizational nostalgia. We propose a model that summarizes the processes through which nostalgia operates in organizations. In this model, we propose that threatening circumstances such as injustice or organizational change evoke organizational (and possibly personal) nostalgia, this evoked nostalgia subsequently counteracts the negative effects of threat on outcomes such as organizational identification and experienced work meaningfulness. We end by discussing implications and future research directions.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Organizations, Organizational Behavior, Emotions,

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Introduction

Nostalgia is "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past" [1, p. 1266]. Various authors have argued that nostalgia is a commonly experienced, even dominant, emotion in organizations [2-4]. Indeed, nostalgic recollections about successful or otherwise memorable days of one's organization come up as a recurrent theme in ethnographic work [3-9]. In the current article, we review research on nostalgia that is relevant to organizations, focusing on two research streams. First, we review studies on personal nostalgia, that is, nostalgia for past experiences in personal life (e.g., one's childhood, one's marriage) including outcomes that are relevant to organizational life or have taken place in one's organization. Second, we review research focusing on organizational nostalgia, nostalgia for past experiences in the organization in which one works. We end by proposing a model that summarizes how nostalgia operates in organizations, and we sketch an agenda for future research.

Personal Nostalgia and Outcomes Relevant to Organizations

Most relevant literature has focused on personal nostalgia. Some findings are nevertheless relevant to organizational life: Personal nostalgia may equip organizational members to cope with challenges that they face. For example, a fundamental challenge in organizations is foregoing self-interest and contributing to the collective instead. Personal nostalgia acts as a potent reminder of social relationships and connectedness [10] and, in so doing, renders them more willing to engage in behavior that benefits the collective [11] even at one's own expense [12]. Yet, though increased social connectedness, nostalgia also increases bribe-taking [13].

Nostalgia also fulfils self-related functions that help employees cope with workplace challenges. Nostalgia strengthens the intrinsic self, that is, it facilitates the expression of the individual's true or core attributes [14], and it reduces concern with meeting extrinsic value standards [15], an important pre-condition for intrinsic motivation [16]. Furthermore, stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic predicts lowered authenticity (a sense of alignment with one's true self), but also heightened nostalgia. Nostalgia in turn increased authenticity, thus counteracting the impact of COVID-related stress on it [17]. Finally, nostalgia increases self-

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continuity (being connected with one's past self, [18, 19]) and strengthens a sense that life is meaningful [20-22].

Personal nostalgia has motivational implications that are relevant in organizations [21]. Indeed, personal nostalgia strengthens approach motivation [11, 23] ("the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior toward, positive stimuli"; [24, p. 111]), positive affect [25], interest in novel experiences [26], inspiration [27], willingness to pursue important goals [21], creativity [28], and optimism [29]). These variables thus seem to reflect nostalgia as facilitating performance.

Personal Nostalgia in Organizations

Researchers have explored the potential of personal nostalgia to galvanize coping with adversity in the workplace. Van Dijke and colleagues [16] studied how personal nostalgia at work helps employees to cope with interactional injustice (i.e., being subjected to disrespectful, impolite, or untruthful treatment by organizational authorities) by maintaining intrinsic motivation. An experience sampling methodology study, a field experiment, and a controlled experiment showed that nostalgia increased intrinsic motivation, but only among employees who experienced interactional injustice at work. From a different angle, interactional justice was negatively associated with intrinsic motivation, but this association was annulled under high levels of personal nostalgia. Additionally, interactional justice was negatively associated with spontaneously experienced daily nostalgia (Study 1), supporting the notion that nostalgia is experienced in reaction to threat (see [32], for similar findings of nostalgia on intrinsic motivation in an educational setting).

Personal nostalgia also acts as a coping mechanism in the context of low procedural justice: being denied voice in authorities' decisions [33]. Being denied the opportunity to voice one's opinion on important decisions typically lowers employees' willingness to contribute to the organization. Given that procedural injustice is experienced as psychological threat, the authors hypothesized that nostalgia buffers the negative effect of procedural injustice on contributing to the organization, specifically organizational citizenship behaviors (i.e., voluntary extra-role

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behaviors that benefit the organization). Survey and experimental studies supported the notion that nostalgia attenuates the negative association between procedural injustice and organizational citizenship behavior. A key reason that low procedural justice shifted employees away from cooperativeness was a weakened sense of social connectedness (i.e., " the sense of belonging and subjective psychological bond that people feel in relation to individuals and groups of others" [34, p. 1]). Personal nostalgia provides an alternative route to social connectedness, which resulted in employees remaining cooperative in the face of procedural injustice.

Organizational Nostalgia

Some research has focused specifically on organizational nostalgia: nostalgic narrative(s) situated in the organization the employee works in. The nascent literature on organizational nostalgia is mostly qualitative and concerned almost exclusively with organizational and professional identity (e.g., restructuring, loss of autonomy) in the face of threat.

Gabriel [2] was among the first to coin the term organizational nostalgia. He interviewed with employees from various organizations. Nostalgic narratives centered on managers, departed colleagues or other characters, and buildings. Also, nostalgic narratives pertained either to a sense of belonging (being cared for and being able to rely on others) with managers or colleagues who had moved on, or how old buildings used to stimulate social interactions. A different underlying theme was how interior design changes resulted in different working conditions such as the building lacking character, loss of autonomy over the environment (e.g., no longer being able to open the windows), or noise. Gabriel speculated that nostalgia is instigated by discontinuity in the workplace and that nostalgia helps employees to cope with discontinuity.

Gabriel's suggestion found support in subsequent qualitative work [35, 36]. This work addressed organizational nostalgia against a changing university environment. The authors conclude that organizational nostalgia functions as a coping mechanism for negatively perceived organizational change and sustains organizational identity. Organizational nostalgia also strengthens professional identity, such as that of medical practitioners who experienced threat to their autonomy by new ways of working [37]. Finally, organizational nostalgia sustains

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organizational identity after employees leave; corporate alumni maintain identification with the organization in which they had previously worked by nostalgizing about their time in the organization [38].

Organizational nostalgia also separates identities. Milligan built on participant observation and interviews to argue that, following organizational change, collectively experienced organizational nostalgia facilitates identity continuity among employees, but separates those employees who were organization members before the change from those who joined thereafter [39]. Milligan studied the closure of a beloved coffee house on campus, which was replaced by a modern one. Employees who worked in the old coffee house developed an identity based on having worked at the old coffee house, thereby separating themselves from newer employees who had not worked there [39]. Similarly, long-standing employees of a Dutch amusement park shared nostalgic stories about the glorious past of the park that not only glued together their identities, but was also associated with oppositional discourse towards the commercialization of the park by a new generation of park managers [9].

Strangleman [4] took a different approach to organizational nostalgia, advocating that nostalgia can be a management tool. Managers can strategically cast the past of an organization in a nostalgic light. Using a historical analysis of British Rail, he illustrates how by reflecting on the glory days of the British railway industry, managers strengthen employee commitment to organizational change.

Experimental work on organizational nostalgia has focused on work meaningfulness and turnover intentions [40]. To induce organizational nostalgia, Leunissen and colleagues used a variant of the Event Reflection Task [31]. Employees recalled a nostalgic or ordinary event at work. Findings showed that organizational nostalgia increases work meaningfulness, lowers turnover intentions, and that work meaningfulness mediated the effect of organizational nostalgia on turnover intentions. In a follow-up study, the authors additionally focused on burnout, a stress-related syndrome characterized by low work meaningfulness. They found that organizational nostalgia increases work meaningfulness, particularly among those who lack it, that is,

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employees high on burnout. Moreover, because organizational nostalgia increases work meaningfulness particularly among those high on burnout, organizational nostalgia lowered turnover intentions particularly in these employees.

Implications

Research during the past three decades has provided some insights into organizational nostalgia. To further research on the topic, we present a model on organizational nostalgia (Figure 1) and provide an empirical agenda.

A Model on Nostalgia in Organizations

Our model on organizational nostalgia originates in the regulatory model of nostalgia [41]. It proposes that nostalgia in organizations is beneficial via two routes. First, threat increases nostalgia, which in turn increases adaptive outcomes. Second, nostalgia buffers the negative effects of threats on adaptive outcomes.

Threat leads to nostalgia in organizations. Most qualitative work on the topic suggests that threats to established ways of working might trigger nostalgia (e.g., [35, 36]). Other research shows that employees who work under low interactional justice experience more nostalgia during their working day [16] and that experiencing stress induces nostalgia [17]. Once activated, organizational nostalgia sustains well-being, such as work meaningfulness, intrinsic motivation, authenticity, and cooperation. As such, rather than viewing nostalgia as maladaptive—as is sometimes suggested in theorizing on the role of organizational nostalgia in organizational identification [42] — nostalgia is an emotion that should be fostered in organizations.

Moreover, nostalgia buffers the negative effects of threat on organizational outcomes. Nostalgia maintains cooperative behavior within the organization in the face of low procedural justice [33], sustains intrinsic motivation and work effort in the presence of low interactional justice [16], and preserves work meaningfulness and low turnover intentions for employees high on burnout [40]. As such, nostalgia constitutes a coping mechanism helping employees to counter negative work-related experiences.

Empirical Agenda

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We sketch an empirical agenda, identifying four key areas. First, research should test the domain specificity of nostalgia. Some studies have focused on personal nostalgia in organizations [33, 16], others on organizational nostalgia [40], and still others on both types of nostalgia [17]. Follow-up investigations should explore the differences between personal and organizational nostalgia. Is organizational nostalgia more effective in shaping organizationally relevant outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior and managing work stress, than personal nostalgia? Do personal and organizational nostalgia increase performance and well-being via the same processes? Such empirical forays will provide a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical relevance for distinguishing organizational from personal nostalgia.

Second, what predicts whether people become nostalgic about their workplace? Research should examine situational antecedents (e.g., organizational change, restructuring) and constituents of organizational life (e.g., organizational culture, leadership). It should also examine type of threat. For instance, are envisioned threats (e.g., a looming change) more likely to make organization members nostalgic than materialized threats (e.g., an ongoing change)?

Third, most research on organizational nostalgia addressed the identity implications of organizational nostalgia [36, 37]. These findings indicate that organizational nostalgia is conducive to identity continuity, particularly during organizational change. Little is known of effects of organizational nostalgia beyond this identity function. Therefore, the nomological network of organizational nostalgia needs to be widened. For example, studies on personal nostalgia show that the emotion has motivating potential. Has organizational nostalgia, in an organizational context, similar motivational properties?

Fourth, organizational nostalgia is conducive to an organizational identity, but organizational nostalgia can also separate employees into ingroups and outgroups. Events that become the focus of organizational nostalgia often occur in social settings, meaning that some employees were part of the nostalgic events and other employees were not [39, 9]. Hence, these nostalgic events can become part of a group identity (e.g., employees of the old coffee house [39]), which also defines an outgroup (e.g., new employees who never worked in the old coffee

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house). This influence of nostalgia on creating separate identities along certain lines (e.g., old vs. new employees) within organizations deserves additional scrutiny. Are narratives about nostalgic events perceived as positive or exclusionary by those who did not experience those events? Does introducing organization newcomers to such nostalgic narratives help or hurt their integration and socialization? Such enquiries promise to advance understanding of organizational nostalgia and potentially uncover maladaptive outcomes of this emotion.

Conclusion

Organizations are fertile ground for nostalgia. A small but growing body of research on the emotion has provided insights into the outcomes and working of it. We hope this review will spark a renewed interest in organizational nostalgia.

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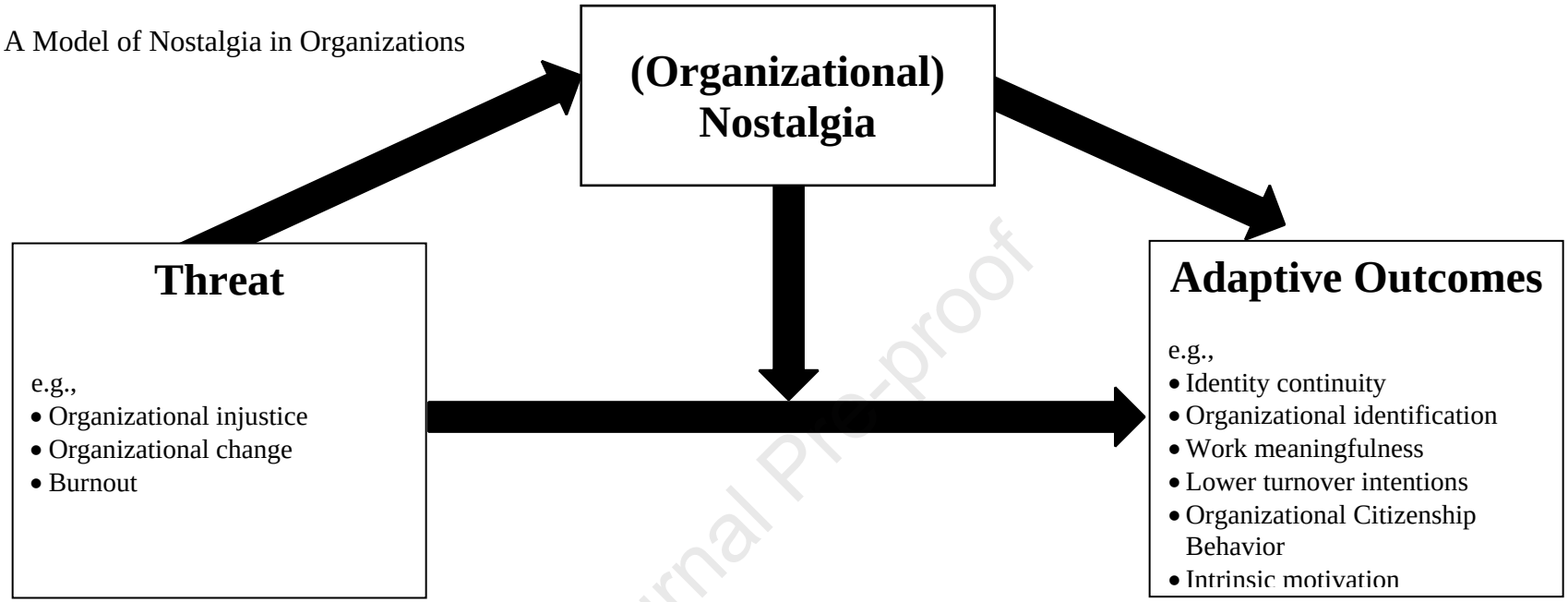
Figure 1

A Model of Nostalgia in Organizations



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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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