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Review

Locating nostalgia among the emotions: A bridge from loss to love

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Abstract

An effective way of identifying the psychological role of an emotion is by probing its position relative to other emotions, such as in terms of appraisals, occurrence, lay conceptualization, and consequences. A set of recent studies offer such comparisons for nostalgia against a backdrop of many other emotions. These studies depict nostalgia as an approach-oriented emotion that resembles positive emotions more closely than negative ones, and place nostalgia especially close to positive social emotions. A complementary new analysis of the correlations between nostalgia and 31 other emotions furthermore locates nostalgia between experiences related to loss and love. Altogether, recent work on nostalgia among the emotions portrays it as a psychological bridge from loss toward love.

Addresses

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Keywords

Nostalgia, Emotion, Affect, Self, Multidimensional scaling.

Nostalgia is often defined as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” [31] (p. 1266). It is a self-relevant emotion [36] that involves self-reflection [39] on past events. It features both pleasant (e.g., friends, fond memories, family) and unpleasant (e.g., yearning, wanting to go back) elements, with the pleasant ones being stronger on balance [7,32]. Nostalgia is typically elicited by the memory of psychologically distal, singular events [20,34] in which the self is accompanied by valued others [11,27]. Nostalgia has a prominent regulatory function [4,38]: It offers solace in the face of

psychological threats (e.g., loneliness, boredom, disillusionment) [16,18,40], for example, through offering social connectedness, self-continuity, and meaning [8,10,21–25,35].

How does nostalgia differ from other emotions? Some scholars addressed this question by examining this emotion in terms of its distinctive features [17,30]. For example, in a systematic review, Srivastava et al. [29] discussed nostalgia as a positive emotion, social emotion, ambivalent emotion, and mental illness. Most of these categories seem incompatible (e.g., positive emotion vs. ambivalent emotion vs. mental illness), suggesting that nostalgia’s location among emotions is unclear (see also [1,2]).

Yet, there have been recent efforts aiming to clarify nostalgia’s position among emotions. As a case in point, Wildschut and Sedikides [37] review how nostalgia used to be equated with homesickness, and then show that the empirical separation of these emotions has helped to delineate nostalgia’s distinct association with approach-oriented variables. As another example, in a multi-week nostalgia intervention, Layous and colleagues [14] demonstrate not only that nostalgia promotes psychological well-being, but that it does so above and beyond influences of general positive and negative affect—indicating that nostalgia fulfills a complementary, and hence partially unique, role to these forms of affect. Furthermore, Dennis and Ogden [5] compared a nostalgia intervention aimed at improving well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown with matched gratitude and optimism interventions, and with a control. Each of these interventions aided well-being to some degree, but nostalgia was particularly beneficial in combatting fear and anxiety. As another example of nostalgia being positioned against other (cognitive-)affective states, Jiang and colleagues [9] found that, relative to brooding and reflection, nostalgia was more conducive to a sense of meaning, self-esteem, positive affect, self-continuity, optimism, and other beneficial outcomes, thereby setting it apart from these other two forms of past-event reflections.

Comparisons of nostalgia, such as the above ones, are certainly helpful to distinguish nostalgia from other states, but, unless many comparators are simultaneously included, it is difficult to assess just how distinct nostalgia is, and where it accordingly sits in the

pantheon of emotion. Does nostalgia sit far from homesickness? Is nostalgia positioned among positive and approach-oriented emotions such as optimism? Does it associate more with anxiety and fear than loneliness? So far, studies that have assessed nostalgia among a much larger set of emotions have been sporadic, but a select few have defied that norm.

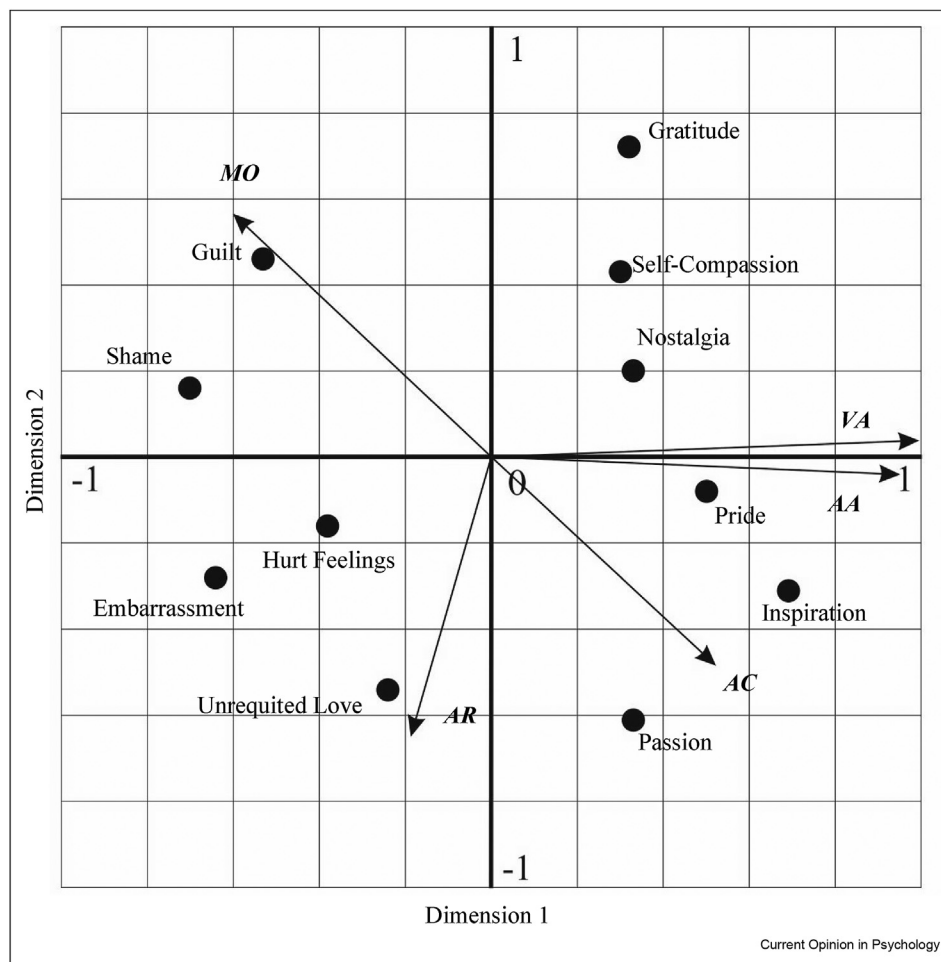
Locating nostalgia among a large set of emotions

In an integrative data analysis, Leunissen and colleagues [15] examined whether experimental inductions of nostalgia elicit positive versus negative emotions. Nostalgia (relative to control) evoked especially positive emotions such as contentment, elation, satisfaction, happiness, and joy, and, to a lesser extent, negative ones such as homesickness, depressive affect,

disappointment, dissatisfaction, and regret. Accordingly, it seems that nostalgia is linked more closely to positive emotions than negative ones. More generally, nostalgia causally induces more positive (than negative) states or guides the individual toward more positive (than negative) sentiments.

In a series of studies on lay conceptualizations of nostalgia (i.e. what people believe nostalgia is), Van Tilburg and colleagues [36] asked participants to rate how similar or different nostalgia was compared to 10 other self-relevant emotion lay concepts. A resultant map of emotions—produced with multidimensional scaling analysis—showed how similar people thought that emotions were, reflected by the distance between them (Figure 1). Participants found nostalgia more similar to positive and approach-oriented emotions such

Figure 1



The Position of Nostalgia Lay Conceptions Among Self-Relevant Emotions. Note: The greater the distance between two emotions, the more different do people think that these emotions are. Vectors represent superimposed emotion attributes, with their lengths proportional to the square root of the attributes' explained variances. VA = negative to positive valence; AA = approach to avoidance; AR = low to high arousal; MO = low to high relevance to morality; AC = low to high activation. Reprinted from "Nostalgia's place among self-relevant emotions", by W. A. P. van Tilburg, T. Wildschut, and C. Sedikides, 2018, *Cognition and Emotion*, Volume 32, p. 750.

as gratitude, self-compassion, and pride, than to negative ones such as feeling hurt, shame, and embarrassment. In lay theories, nostalgia sat among the positive approach-oriented emotions.

Further, Van Tilburg and colleagues [34] examined profiles of cognitive appraisals associated with emotions that were elicited by past events. Here, participants rated these emotions on pleasantness, ir retrievable loss, distance, reflection, and uniqueness. Their first study contrasted the cognitive appraisals of nostalgia against those of 31 other emotions (Figure 2). Nostalgia featured a distinct appraisal profile, characterized by perceiving a past event as pleasant, associated with an ir retrievable loss, psychologically distant, and unique. Critically, the appraisal profile of nostalgia was more similar to those of positive, especially social, emotions such as tenderness, love, feeling loved, and awe, than to those of negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and disappointment. A hallmark feature of nostalgia is its similarity to positive interpersonal sentiments.

The above investigations on the causal impact of nostalgia, its lay conception, and its appraisal profile portray nostalgia as an emotion that promotes the

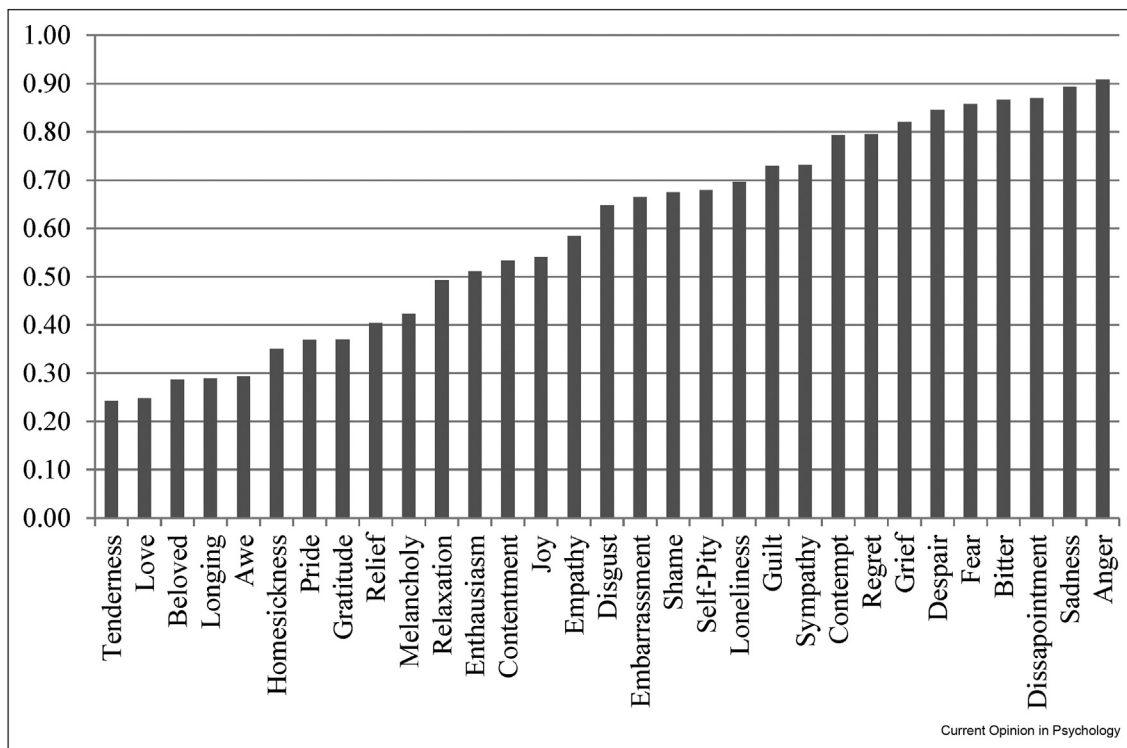
growth of positive feelings, involves an approach orientation, and has close ties to social sentiments. However, these investigations have limitation: None compared nostalgia based on its *actual* experience against that of other emotions. I turn to this issue next.

The relative position of nostalgia as a state experience

Positioning nostalgia among emotions is effectively assessed by examining the actual occurrence of nostalgia and other emotions. Dependency in the occurrence of two emotions within a given situation indicates a greater connection between them than if they occur independently. To illustrate, if nostalgia and, say, longing [12] shared a high correlation, then this would indicate that their occurrence is mutually inclusive (positive correlation) or exclusive (negative correlation)—partially redundant and thus hard to distinguish empirically either way [33].

What position does nostalgia occupy among emotions if one examined its co-occurrence with these other emotions? To answer this question, I re-analyzed data from the first study by Van Tilburg and colleagues [34]. The sample consisted of 1523 participants recruited through

Figure 2



The Difference Between Nostalgia and Other Emotions in Appraisals Profiles. Note: Higher scores indicate greater differences in appraisal profiles relative to nostalgia. Reprinted from “An appraisal profile of nostalgia”, by W. A. P. van Tilburg, M. Bruder, T Wildschut, C. Sedikides, and A. S. Göritz, 2019, *Emotion*, Volume 19, p. 28.

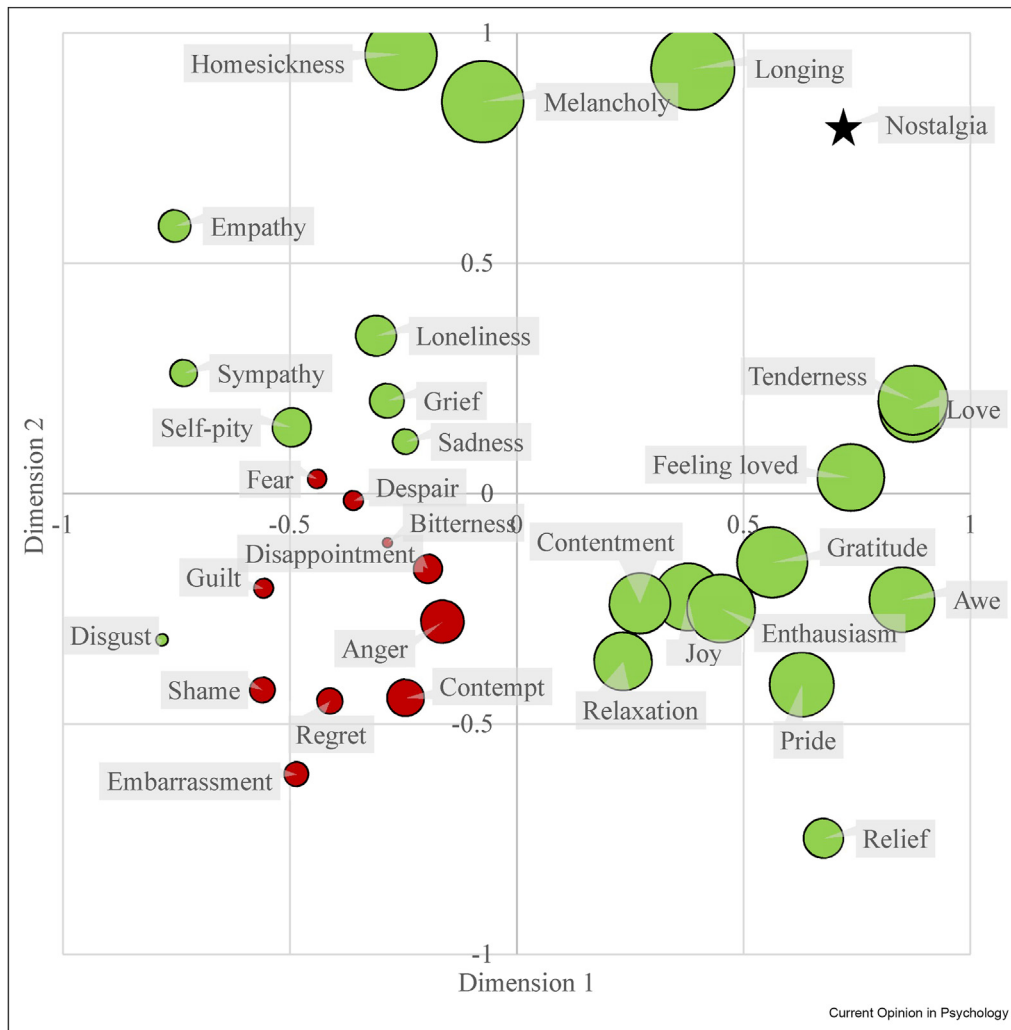
an online academic research panel (*Wisopanel* [6]). Participants rated the intensity of 32 state emotions (including nostalgia) after recalling and describing a past event (e.g., “I feel nostalgic”; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very strongly*). I ran a multidimensional scaling analysis on the absolute correlation matrix capturing the occurrence of nostalgia and the 31 other emotions. I implemented the PROXSCAL program [3] to produce a multidimensional scaling solution, using interval level proximity transformation. I treated absolute correlations as proxy of similarity [13,28].

An initial analysis where I allowed dimensionality to vary from 1 to as many as 10 dimensions produced a scree plot that suggested two dimensions. Relatedly, a two-dimensional solution yielded good dispersion accounted

for, $DAF = .971$, whereas a single dimension did not, $DAF = .840$. Accordingly, I proceeded with the two-dimension model. I display in Figure 3 the resultant spatial positioning of the 32 emotions, and in Figure 4 the Euclidean distance from nostalgia to each of the other emotions.

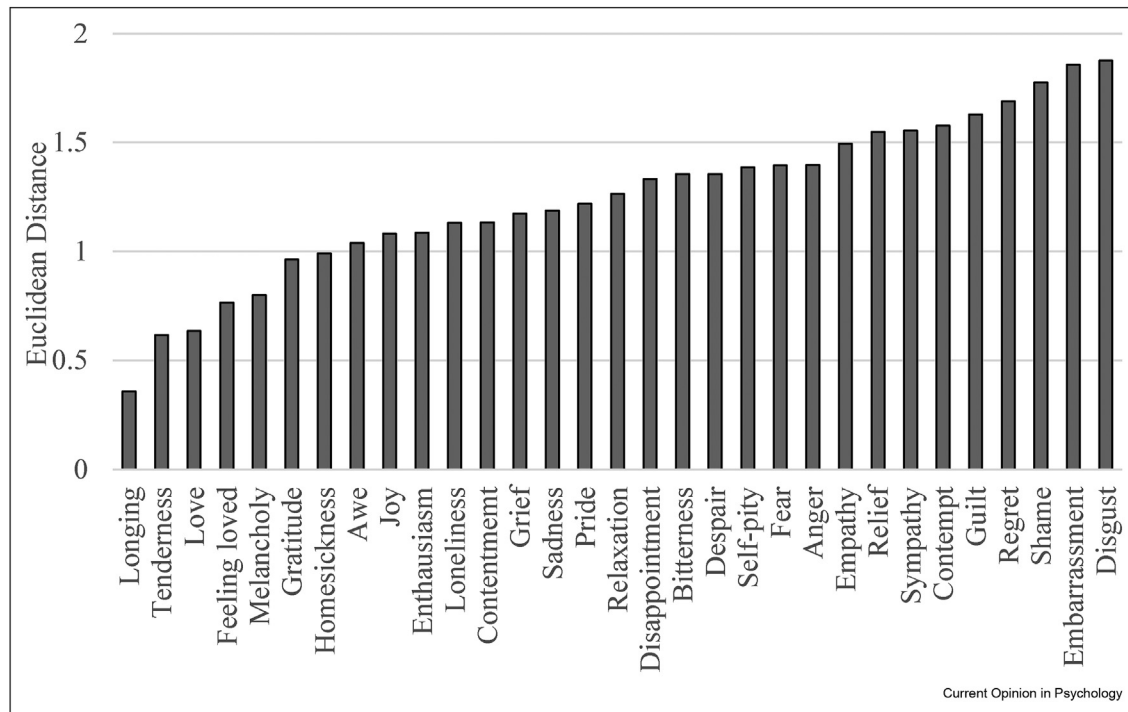
The resultant positioning of nostalgia shows that it is somewhat ambivalent, located between positive and negative emotions. This is consistent with earlier work that examined the affective tone of nostalgia [19,26], albeit that it portrays nostalgia as less predominantly positive. Intriguingly, nostalgia is positioned in-between emotions associated with *loss* (longing, melancholy, homesickness), on the one hand, and emotions associated with forms of *love*, on the other (love, tenderness,

Figure 3



The Position of State Nostalgia Among Emotions. Note: The greater the distance between two emotions, the less they tend to co-occur. Bubble area corresponds to the relative magnitude of zero-order correlation between an emotion and nostalgia. Bubble color (shade) represents the sign of correlation (red/dark = negative, green/light = positive).

Figure 4



Euclidian Distance Between Nostalgia and Target Emotion in Spatial Positioning. Note: Higher values indicate greater Euclidean distance from the position of nostalgia in the emotion map of Figure 3.

feeling loved, gratitude). These new results complement earlier examinations of nostalgia among the emotions by demonstrating its kinship to love-related feelings through its co-occurrence.

Conclusion: nostalgia serves as psychological bridge from loss to love

Understanding how one emotion differs from others can offer insights into its distinct psychological role. This is so with nostalgia as well. The majority of the literature has addressed it in relative isolation or among a small set of other emotions only. Three recent investigations broke away from this tradition and explicated the position of nostalgia among emotions. Leunissen and colleagues [15] found that nostalgia causes positive emotions, such as contentment, elation, satisfaction, happiness, and joy, to intensify, with its impact on negative emotions, such as homesickness, feeling depressed, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and regret, being less prominent. Van Tilburg and colleagues [36] reported that the lay concept of nostalgia sits especially close to other approach-oriented positive emotions such as gratitude, self-compassion, and pride. Finally, Van Tilburg and colleagues [34] located nostalgia, based on its cognitive appraisals, as neighboring positive social emotions. Corroborating and extending this small literature, a new

spatial positioning analysis on the state experience of nostalgia and other emotions indicated that nostalgia is positioned near loss-related emotions such as longing, melancholy, homesickness, and love-related emotions such as tenderness, feeling loved, and gratitude.

Identifying that the environmental niche of nostalgia sits between loss and love broadly resonates with research that has examined the function of nostalgia in relative isolation, rather than as one of many emotions. This past research illustrates that nostalgia offers solace in the face of loss (e.g., meaninglessness, loneliness, disillusionment) and relief in the form of love (e.g., social connectedness, attachment, belongingness). Nostalgia is uniquely positioned among emotions in offering a bridge from loss to love.

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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This article introduces a short nostalgia intervention during the COVID-19 period, inspired by similar work on gratitude, in which participants wrote for 2 min about a nostalgic event. Participants did so at three time points, and the impact of this nostalgia intervention is compared against that of similar (though not identical) gratitude and 'best possible self' tasks (and control). The study shows differential effects of these interventions, with nostalgia being especially helpful in assuaging fear of COVID-19. The other interventions were more effective in overcoming loneliness during the pandemic.
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Nostalgia is one of many ways in which people can ponder the past, and this paper compares the impact of nostalgic reverie against two other prominent ways: brooding and reflection (which are forms of ruminative thought). They do so by experimentally inducing nostalgic, brooding, or reflective thoughts about a past event, using matched inductions. They measure a range of putative outcomes, such as positive affect, optimism, meaning, self-esteem, social connectedness, bitterness and others, and do so in both British and Chinese samples. Their results offer key insights in how nostalgia differs from brooding and reflection: it produced markedly more positive effects than its both or at least one of these two comparators in terms of positive affect, self-esteem, self-continuity, social connectedness, meaning, optimism, and others, with these effects being present across the two groups.
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This paper reports the results of a six-week nostalgia intervention. Each week, participants completed a writing exercise in which they listed keywords and described a nostalgic event. This was compared to a control condition in which participants each time wrote about an ordinary event. On four occasions, the researchers measured positive and negative affect, alongside indicators of subjective well-being. Overall, nostalgia contributed to well-being and positive affect (albeit with diminishing returns over time), and demonstrates its link to these variables at temporal scale larger than the typical nostalgia experiment.
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This paper documents an integrative analysis in which the researchers bundle together a very large number of experiments that examined nostalgia, and then evaluated outcome measures that indicate positive and negative affect. Their comprehensive study shows that the induction of nostalgia produces more positive affect and influences negative affect less clearly. They also document variation in the results depending on the type of induction used, albeit that the general pattern of nostalgia eliciting more positive affect seems to hold. Of particular interest in relation to the current paper is their examination of discrete emotions (see e.g., their [Figure 1](#)), which portrays nostalgia as an emotion closely linked to positive emotions such as contentment, elation, and satisfaction, with the negative emotions being less clearly influenced.
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