

Christmas nostalgia produced by the act of remembering, not the actual memory

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Christmas triggers happy childhood memories for many people, but scientists claim it is not only the memory but the act of recalling it that sparks the warm feeling of nostalgia.

The smell of Christmas food, like brandy sauce, Turkey or cranberry jam, hearing festive songs on TV, radio and in shops and seeing every building festooned with tinsel, Christmas trees and festive decorations are all likely to trigger [nostalgia](#) and create positive memories and thoughts even if the reality of past Christmases were far less rosy according to Tamara Ansons, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Warwick Business School.

Drawing on her body of research, Dr Ansons suggests the actual act of remembering may trigger a warm feeling of happiness, which creates a bias in our nostalgic thoughts.

Dr Ansons said: "Our research provides evidence to suggest nostalgic experiences may occur because of positive feelings that accompany the act of successful recall, rather than reflecting the true nature of the past.

"Bringing to mind experiences from one's life is often accompanied by an idealised sense of times past and a sense of longing to return to those earlier days, Christmas is a perfect example of this. People will remember their childhood with affection during the festive period, although the reality may have been far more mundane.

"An example of a positive recollection would be seeing someone and thinking 'I think I know that person... Oh yes that was my high school chemistry teacher! I remember sitting in his classroom as though it was yesterday'. We feel satisfied on reaching the answer much like we would when solving a puzzle."

For the paper *On Misattributing Good Remembering to a Happy Past: An Investigation into the Cognitive Roots of Nostalgia*, Dr Ansons and Jason Leboe-McGowan, of the University of Manitoba, Canada conducted six experiments investigating how the process of remembering impacts judgments about the past.

In some of these experiments, participants were first presented with a set of words to study. A selection of these words were presented on their own and others were paired with another word multiple times during an initial part of the experiment. When presented with the pair of words, participants were asked to create a mental image of the two words, and just read out the single word to themselves. Participants then received the set of words again, but paired with either a positive word - like 'happy Tiger' – or a negative word - like 'murder Tiger'. Finally, participants were presented with the words and asked to judge if it was previously paired with a positive or negative word.

The results showed that not only were the words that were imagined multiple times remembered more often, but they were more likely to be judged as being paired with a positive word, even when the word had been paired with a negative word.

"It seems the act of remembering made the subjects think the word had a positive word next to it, even though it had a negative word alongside it," said Dr Ansons. "The results show that it is the act of remembering that gives us pleasure not the actual memory which is often inaccurate.

"This happens a lot with avid consumer interest in a range of products, from vintage clothing to antique furniture to classic hits of the 1970s. An interest in them stems from the pleasurable experiences of nostalgia stimulated by them, even if at the time we didn't like them. Similarly, Christmas sparks many nostalgic experiences, when remembering those Christmases as a child produce a warm nostalgic glow, even though they might have been pretty boring at the time.

"Despite the fact that the past may be objectively no more positive than the present, individuals experience a positive longing, or sense of nostalgia, for the past because of the sense of pleasure of recalling an event."

In a second paper, *Looking at the Past through Rose-Coloured Glass: Demonstrations of a Positive Bias for Events from the Distant Past*, Dr Ansons and Dr Leboe-McGowan explored the idea of nostalgia with two further experiments.

Dr Ansons' research in the second paper suggests a nostalgic bias towards the past can even extend beyond that experienced in the person's life. The research showed when presented with news stories from different eras either featuring non-violent or violent themes, participants tended to associate the non-violent articles with a decade from the distant past.

The findings would therefore suggest a bias beyond what is experienced and Dr Ansons has formulated an idea why this is.

She said: "I believe nostalgia is a culturally driven phenomenon that derives from the cognitive process of remembering, a pleasurable act, hence the ubiquitous nature of this emotional reaction to reminiscing about the past."

More information: "On misattributing good remembering to a happy past: An investigation into the cognitive roots of nostalgia." *Emotion*. 2006 Nov;6(4):596-610. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17144751

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