

‘Good Amongst the Grey Clouds!’ Nostalgia, Authenticity, and Well-Being in Autistic Adults: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Nostalgia promotes authenticity and well-being in non-autistic people. We explored whether this also holds true for autistic people, a group who experience reduced authenticity and well-being. We interviewed ten autistic young adults about nostalgic experiences, insights gained into the self, and nostalgia’s well-being benefits. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identified three themes: ‘The comfort of nostalgic memories’ included social connectedness and recognizing the self as accepted by others. ‘The hazards of nostalgic feelings’ involved avoiding challenging memories to prevent past sadness from infecting present experiences. ‘Growth and redemption’ involved recognizing self-development and overcoming obstacles. Despite being a challenging affective experience at times, for reflective participants, engaging in nostalgia brought a number of benefits: boosting mood, promoting feelings of social connectedness, self-esteem, as well as providing insight into the true self. Nostalgia can be used to enhance authenticity and well-being for autistic people by developing self-understanding and emphasizing the benefits of being open about who one is.

KEYWORDS: Authenticity, autistic, emerging adulthood, nostalgia, self, well-being

Nostalgia, “a sentimental longing for the past” (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023, p. 1) promotes authenticity, “a sense of alignment with one’s true self” (Kelley et al., 2022, p. 1) and well-being of individuals in the general population. But does nostalgia provide the same benefits to autistic² people? Compared to non-autistic people, autistic people are more likely to experience reduced authenticity (Cook et al., 2021) and lower well-being (Van Heijst & Geurts, 2015). However, despite extensive research in this area in the general population, very little research has explored the concepts of nostalgia, authenticity, and well-being and how these concepts interact in autistic people. Specifically, due to the lack of research into how autistic individuals experience these phenomena, it is uncertain whether reflecting on nostalgic memories might be useful to support authenticity and well-being in autistic people, factors which are very important in this population. Thus, this study addresses this gap in the literature and is, therefore, novel and important. The current study used a qualitative approach to explore nostalgic experiences, insights gained through nostalgic memories into the self and well-being

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² There are different ways to describe “individuals with autism” in the literature. Many professionals in the scientific community often use person-first language (e.g., “person with autism”), whereas members of the autism community (autistic people, carers, and support networks) prefer identity-first terms, such as “autistic” or “autistic person” (Kenny et al., 2016). The American Psychological Association (2021) also now recommends the use of identity-first terms as part of their inclusive language guidelines. This study therefore employs the “identity-first” approach throughout.

benefits of nostalgia in autistic young adults, with a view to identifying whether nostalgia could be used by autistic individuals in their daily lives to support their own well-being.

Nostalgia

We begin by describing what is known from research in the general population about nostalgia, authenticity and well-being and their interrelationships. First, nostalgia. Nostalgia is a complex, self-relevant, and social emotion (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023). Nostalgia involves a cognitive process—the recollection of and reflection on a nostalgic memory, reflecting on a contrast between the past and the present. Nostalgia is often evoked by triggers such as sensory inputs or negative feelings (Wildschut et al., 2006). Typical nostalgic memory narratives (versus ordinary autobiographical memories) are often self-oriented (Wildschut et al., 2006) and social in nature, with the self together with close others (Juhl & Biskas, 2022). In terms of related affect, the nostalgic experience is often described as bittersweet (Hepper et al., 2012), although often more sweet than bitter (Leunissen, 2022).

Self and Authenticity

Although there is no consensus as to the definition of the self, it is regarded as a multi-faceted system of knowledge and processes, an entity that is malleable and dynamic (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In the current study, the main aspect of the self to be considered is authenticity. Authenticity also includes knowledge about one's self, for example, one's characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses, and self-regulatory processes (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). Self-Determination Theory holds that authenticity arises when people self-regulate to meet their fundamental human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). There are multiple conceptualizations of authenticity. Although shaped by two conceptualizations of authenticity, The Authenticity Inventory (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and the Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008), the current study is anchored in the conceptualization by Wood et al. (2008), that is, this theory guides the entire research design of this study. Wood et al.'s (2008) conceptualization refers to the idea of a *true self*. Wood et al. (2008) describe three components of authenticity: (1) Self-alienation, feeling out of touch with the true self—one's physiological states, emotions, and beliefs, and cognitions; (2) Authentic living, behaving or relating to others in line with one's true self and (3) Accepting external influence, rejecting social pressure to behave in ways that differ from one's true self.

True Self

Lay people believe in the idea of a true self (Strohming et al., 2017), a concept that is central to some conceptualizations of authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Although some scholars are skeptical, others have supported the idea of the true self. The real self has been described as “that central inner force, common to all human beings and yet unique in each, which is the deep source of growth” (Horney, 1950, p. 411). The true self was also viewed as hidden behind an individual's false front and that positive outcomes stem from helping people to get in touch with their true self (Rogers, 1961). In sum, the true self can be described as *who* people believe themselves to be at their *core*. One's motives, feelings, desires, beliefs, values, characteristics, and self-relevant cognitions are essential to the subjective experience of the individual (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Furthermore, like the self, the true self is a dynamic entity, continually developing (Sparby et al., 2019).

Interrelationships between Nostalgia, Authenticity, and Well-Being

Research in the general population has highlighted interrelationships between nostalgia, authenticity, and well-being (Kelley et al., 2022). First, nostalgia is beneficial for well-being, increasing positive affect (Layous et al., 2021; Leunissen et al., 2021), enhancing self-esteem (Umar Ismail et al., 2020) and enhancing feelings of social connectedness (Juhl & Biskas, 2022). Authenticity is associated with a number of aspects of well-being, such as positive affect and self-esteem (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Some have made the link between nostalgia and authenticity. For example, being more prone to nostalgia is associated with greater intrinsic self-expression, that is, knowing and expressing who you really are (Baldwin et al., 2015). Moreover, nostalgia confers well-being through authenticity (Kelley et al., 2022; Naidu et al., 2024), meaning that reflecting on nostalgic memories is helpful for well-being in part because it aids alignment with the true self.

Autistic differences

The current study focuses on the experiences of autistic people. Autism is best described as a *constellation* of related lifelong conditions or differences (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). Autism is diagnosed, albeit from a normative and deficit perspective, on the basis of behaviors in two areas: (1) social communication/interaction, for example, an atypical social approach, reduced sharing of emotions, or difficulties in understanding and maintaining relationships and (2) restricted and repetitive behaviors (RRBIs), for example, preference for sameness, or hyper or hypo reactivity to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Such behaviors may impact the autistic experience of nostalgia, and therefore, the overarching aim of the current study was to explore how autistic people experience this emotion. Based on the diagnostic criteria above, there may be reasons to expect differences in nostalgic experiences between autistic and non-autistic individuals. More specifically, for example, atypical sensory function (South & Rodgers, 2017) may lead to differences in the nature, frequency, or intensity of the sensory triggers, which evoke nostalgic experiences. Differences in relation to the autistic self, such as self-awareness (Huang et al., 2017) and the increased social isolation of autistic people (Umagami et al., 2022) may result in differing content of nostalgic memories. Increased emotional self-awareness difficulties (Huggins et al., 2021) may also mean that autistic people experience affect evoked by nostalgia differently.

Aims

As mentioned above, the overarching aim of the current study was to explore autistic people's experience of nostalgia. Only two studies to date, taking a quantitative/experimental approach, have explored nostalgia and well-being in autistic individuals (Bennett et al., 2024a; Bennett et al., 2024b). In the first study, using an online survey, Bennett, Rathbone, and Wilmot et al. (2024) found that autistic people experienced nostalgia (triggers and related affect) in a similar way to non-autistic people, although the methods used precluded detecting any nuanced differences (if they even exist). However, Bennett et al. did show that autistic compared to non-autistic participants were less prone to nostalgia in the sense that they *missed* typical aspects from their past (e.g., friends, school, and holidays) much less. The authors suggested that this may be because such aspects from the past may not always entail positive memories for autistic people due to adverse childhood experiences (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020). In the second study, Bennett, Wilmot, and Rathbone (2024) took an experimental approach with an online survey, using music to evoke nostalgia. Findings showed that music evoked nostalgia versus control and boosted positive affect, self-regard, and authenticity in autistic and non-autistic individuals.

The authors suggested that nostalgia could be used as a positive activity (an informal activity that individuals can do independently to support their well-being) in their daily lives.

The overarching aim of the current study was divided into three smaller aims, which are now described in turn. The first aim was to explore the content of autistic people's nostalgic memories—a gap in the literature as neither of the two studies described above explored this area.

The second aim was to explore whether nostalgia promoted authenticity in autistic people. As authenticity may be lower in autistic people, this is an important area of research. In one study, autistic³ versus non-autistic individuals reported lower authenticity (Bennett et al., 2024a). Furthermore, a closely related body of work also considers authenticity in autistic people: *autistic masking*. Masking refers to the use of behavioral strategies by autistic people to cope within the non-autistic world (Cook et al., 2021). Masking is common among autistic people (Sedgewick et al., 2022) and has detrimental consequences: For example, participants in one study masked so much that they felt out of touch with who they really were (Hull et al., 2017). In sum, masking hinders authenticity and is related to reduced well-being (Cook et al., 2021). As the content of typical nostalgic narratives tends to include self-oriented and personally meaningful memories (Wildschut et al., 2006), nostalgic memories may provide a bank of useful information for autistic people to better understand the true self. Therefore, the second aim drew on authenticity theory to explore the notion of developing knowledge of or feeling in or out of touch with one's true self. Specifically, the second aim was to explore whether (or not) and in what ways autistic adults make sense of their nostalgic memories to gain insight into who they really are (true self).⁴

The last aim was to explore whether (or not), and in what ways, autistic adults find engaging in nostalgia beneficial for well-being. As already mentioned above, Bennett, Wilmot, and Rathbone (2024) showed that autistic individuals who listened to a nostalgic compared to an ordinary song reported increased state well-being. Well-being is an important research area for the autistic community (Roche et al., 2021). Compared to non-autistic people, autistic people tend to experience reduced well-being in a variety of domains (Barlattani et al., 2023; Lever & Geurts, 2016). In addition, despite a wealth of experimental research pointing to the positive benefits of nostalgia on well-being for people in the general population, a handful of studies using daily diary methods have shown that people's experiences of nostalgia in everyday life (usually through automatic/involuntary nostalgic recollection) are less rosy than captured in experiments (Newman & Sachs, 2022). As autistic people often experience many adverse childhood experiences, they may have an increased tendency towards more involuntary (and more negative) nostalgic recollection. Therefore, it's important to explore the impact of recalling such nostalgic events on the well-being of autistic people.

Most nostalgia research to date is quantitative/experimental and may not be representative of the complexity of nostalgia in daily life (Batcho, 2023). Therefore, we chose different methods; a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for exploring in-depth human experiences and understanding complex phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2022), such as nostalgia. We used semi-structured interviews because this approach aligned with the study's aims. For example, interviews allowed participants the time and space to describe the content of their nostalgic memories and to explain how they made sense of their nostalgic memories. Interviews also

³ Although autistic participants with a diagnosis of autism reported lower authenticity compared to the non-autistic participants, it was participants who self-identified as autistic who scored statistically significantly lower compared to the non-autistic participants.

⁴ The second research question evolved from the one that was pre-registered on Open Science Framework. As the interviews progressed, and the researchers became more familiar with the data, it became clear that the current research question was a better fit for the data.

allowed participants to provide their perspectives and give examples exploring whether or not they found engaging in nostalgia beneficial for well-being.

This study was concerned with the nostalgic experiences of autistic young adults aged 18 to 25. This period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) is a time in which many autistic individuals explore their identity (Cribb et al., 2019) and may also involve life transitions, a factor that evokes frequent nostalgic reverie in this age group (Wang et al., 2023). Using this qualitative approach, we hoped to gain a more nuanced picture of nostalgic experiences, insights gained through reflecting on nostalgic memories, as well as any perceived benefits of engaging in nostalgia.

Materials and Methods

Consultation/Advisory Group

Five autistic adults (aged 18 – 25) from the UK participated in workshops and provided feedback on the study materials and procedures to ensure that these were accessible and sensitive to the needs of autistic individuals.

Development of Interview Topic Guide

We developed novel interview questions to explore the study's aims. Incorporating feedback from our consultation group, we paid particular attention to the nature of the interview questions. One question, for example, asked participants to describe a specific nostalgic memory from the past, asking them to describe when it was, who they were with, where they were, what they were doing, how they felt, etc. Although research shows that recalling specific personal episodic memories is more challenging for autistic compared to non-autistic people (McDonnell & Nuttall, 2018), research also shows that autistic people can better recall specific memories with appropriate visual-verbal prompting (Norris et al., 2020). Therefore, we produced a participant interview guide with guiding visual and verbal prompts to scaffold responses to the above question. Furthermore, consultation feedback suggested that the questions would be manageable if participants had some time to think about their responses in advance. Therefore, one week prior to the interview, we sent the interview guide to participants, which included the list of questions, along with the visual prompt described above and a photo of the researcher who was conducting the interview, giving them the opportunity to prepare in advance if they wished.

Participants

Ten people aged 18 to 25 (inclusive), all with a diagnosis of autism, participated in semi-structured interviews on Zoom. We recruited seven participants from a connected online survey study (Bennett et al., 2024a) and three using an advert on Twitter. Nine of the ten participants were residents of the UK, and one in the US. Four people reported their gender as men, four as women, one as bi-gender, and another as gender non-conforming female. Four were full-time students, two were employed full-time, one was self-employed, two were studying and working part-time, and one was not studying or working at the time. Four of the ten participants reported other diagnoses (above and beyond autism), such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, anxiety, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Two participants preferred not to provide information about other diagnoses.

Interview Procedure

We gained written and verbal consent from those who were willing to participate in interviews. One of the research team carried out all ten interviews. Core questions tapped into what they tended to get nostalgic about and the benefits and drawbacks of engaging in nostalgic memories in terms of well-being. Participants were also asked to describe a nostalgic memory from the past, saying how it made them feel in the here and now and what they thought the memory told about who they are. In this way, the interviews tapped into participants' everyday experiences of nostalgia as well as how nostalgia made them feel in the moment.

Interviews lasted between 18 – 44 minutes (interview questions only, minus the introductions, and icebreakers). Interviews were conducted and recorded in Zoom and were transcribed verbatim. All interview participants were remunerated with a voucher for taking part. This study was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (see <https://osf.io/rkgx8>) here a copy of the interview schedule is also available) and was given ethical approval by Oxford Brookes University's Research Ethics Committee (no 221571) on March 28, 2022.

Data Analysis Procedure

Two members of the research team began the analysis⁵. We analyzed the data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2022). The sample size for RTA is not determined by saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2022) but by a mix of pragmatism and the concept of “information power” whereby researchers balance ‘information richness’ of the dataset with the study’s aims (Malterud et al., 2016). Our sample size is appropriate in light of the following aspects of information power: the research has a focused aim, deep rather than thin data, and is analyzed by experienced qualitative researchers. RTA was chosen as this approach is suitable for use with interviews and for exploring the experiences and perspectives of participants. In addition, RTA suited the researchers’ analytic sensibility. In this approach, the researcher is at the heart of knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019), thoughtfully engaging with the data, making decisions, and actively identifying themes. The research team was also drawn to the flexibility and creativity of this approach, in that researchers are invited to decide on the story that they want to tell based on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In addition, RTA can deliver “rich, complex, non-obvious themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 332), which was in line with the study’s aims to delve more deeply into the nuances of nostalgia. Furthermore, in contrast to other forms of thematic analysis, RTA allows for a collaborative process to develop a richer and more nuanced interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

An essential part of RTA is researcher *reflexivity*, that is, critically reflecting on one’s positionality, one’s worldview, shaped by many aspects, including one’s gender, ethnicity, career, values and beliefs (Holmes, 2020). In this respect, RTA is well suited to exploring the experiences of autistic individuals. Reflexivity encourages researchers to reflect on their own perspectives, including any possible non-autistic/neurotypical biases, centering autistic perspectives. Here it is worth noting the positionality of the two researchers who conducted the initial data analysis. Both researchers consider themselves to be non-autistic. Both have close autistic family members and see the challenges that autistic people experience. Both are keen supporters of improving the lives of autistic people. Therefore, it was extremely important to reflect on the impact of positionality throughout the data analysis period. We were guided by the six stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012):

⁵ On the Open Science Framework registration for this study, we stated that the initial data analysis process would be completed by one researcher. However, following registration, a second qualitative researcher became involved in the study, and two of the researchers carried out the bulk of the initial data analysis together, allowing for a more collaborative approach.

- 1) We familiarized ourselves with the data by listening to the audio files, reading through the transcripts, and writing a summary of each interview.
- 2) We used both NVivo and Excel to code the interview transcripts, revisiting the codes many times.
- 3) In line with the RTA approach, we actively generated themes through engaging with the data. This stage of the data analysis process involved “considerable analytic work” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). We shared and discussed codes, participant themes, positionality and significant thoughts towards answering the research questions, along with actively questioning and querying the assumptions whilst coding and interpreting the data. Overall, the approach taken to coding and theme development was more inductive than deductive⁶. However, some deductive analysis was used as we analyzed and interpreted the data to some degree through the lens of the theory of Authenticity by Wood et al. (2008), as well as through the ways in which participants found nostalgia helpful (or unhelpful) for well-being.
- 4) We initially developed six themes. We considered our themes using reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). For example, we initially included one separate theme called acceptance by others. However, it became clear that this initial theme was perhaps too salient. Therefore, this notion of acceptance was instead incorporated into another main theme. The initial six themes were reduced to a final set of three, each with two subthemes, which holistically addressed the study’s aims.
- 5) In discussion with the whole research team, and with several iterations, we generated names and definitions of themes and subthemes and selected illustrative quotes.
- 6) The two researchers who conducted the initial analysis began writing the report, and the whole of the research team then finalized the report together.

⁶ In our Open Science Framework pre-registration for this study, we had initially planned to use an inductive process to coding and theme development. However, during the data analysis process it became clear that a mix of inductive and deductive methods was more appropriate for this study.

Results

We identified three key themes, each with its own subthemes (Table 1).

Table 1
Themes, Subthemes, and Descriptions

Theme	Description	Subtheme	Description
1) The comfort of nostalgic memories	Fond nostalgic memories provide comfort and reassurance.	Nostalgic memories of close others and acceptance	Comfort through nostalgic memories of close others and acceptance by others.
		Nostalgia as a pleasurable experience	Recollection of fond nostalgia is pleasurable – it feels good (uplifting and soothing) and provides hope.
2) The hazards of nostalgic feelings	Potential complexities of the nostalgic affective experience	Challenging memories	The impact of sad and challenging memories on the nostalgic experience.
		Experiencing and managing nostalgic feelings in the here and now	The different ways (feelings of loss, rumination, and avoidance of memories) in which participants experienced and managed feelings evoked through nostalgia in the here and now.
3) Growth and redemption	Self-reflection through nostalgic memories highlights growth and/or a sense of overcoming difficult times.	Developing self-understanding	Self-reflection through nostalgic memories helps to develop and understand one’s thinking, feelings, values, and characteristics.
		Overcoming difficult times	Realization of overcoming difficult times and/or leading a more authentic life now than in the past.

Theme 1: The Comfort of Nostalgic Memories

This theme is centered around the comfort and reassurance that fond nostalgic memories (reflections on happier, safer times and times of social connection) often provided for participants. This theme has two subthemes: (1) Nostalgic memories of close others and acceptance and (2) nostalgia as a pleasurable experience.

Subtheme 1: Nostalgic Memories of Close Others and Acceptance

Participants were comforted by nostalgic memories of close others and of memories of feeling accepted by others. Thus, this subtheme links to the first aim of the study, providing examples of the typical content of participants’ nostalgic memories; as well as to the third aim, by highlighting how such memories were comforting and beneficial for well-being. For example, one participant reflected on nostalgic memories of playing games with a sibling: “So, thinking about that, it sort of makes me happy, and I guess maybe secure would be the right word to use, to think my bond with my brother is very secure and it’s always been secure” (Pt 7). This quote suggests that the participant takes comfort from their strong connection with their brother and the constancy of their relationship over time. Another participant described a

cherished nostalgic memory of a celebration with close family members, which highlighted the absence of another close family member:

“It was the whole of the family at the Easter table ... so there was an empty seat which is the seat my grandmum usually sits in ... Everyone was happy and then all of a sudden there was just a sudden change in mood when everyone sat down at the table and saw the empty seat .. Then I experienced some feeling of sadness .. then after a little while, a feeling of sort of like happiness because we believed she has gone and she’s gonna watch over every single one of us” (Pt 10).

In the above quote, using the word “we,” the participant highlighted the importance of connection to close others – being a member of a group of relatives over time. This participant seemed comforted by the shared family belief that the deceased grandmother would watch over the rest of the family. Participants also described fond nostalgic memories of feeling accepted by others. For example, this participant recalled a nostalgic memory of working on a ship:

“Being on a ship, they sort of like do become your second family. I had only been on there for like a month, but they were all so welcoming, so... So nice really, like I didn’t feel left out, I didn’t feel like an outsider” (Pt 8).

The above memory of feeling accepted by others was meaningful for this participant. It seemed that being accepted by others was not the norm at other times. Similarly, this poignant, nostalgic memory of a graduation memory, when the participant’s friend made a kind speech about them, highlighted the first time that they felt accepted by others:

“That was the first time I actually felt free. That was the first time someone had said kind words genuinely to me that weren’t my parents, that didn’t feel like it was out of pity, because I didn’t see pity in her eyes, I saw someone who saw me for me....that’s the first time I felt like I had a life and I was going into a world that was ready to be able to accept me for what I can do or what I am willing to try to achieve” (Pt 9).

This memory seemed meaningful on two counts. First, this nostalgic memory provided them an important positive marker—a milestone whereby life seemed to take on greater meaning. Second, this memory represented a moment of being in the presence of another person who valued them for who they were. This participant not only felt accepted by others and the world, but they were also prepared to accept themselves for who they really were.

In their descriptions of their nostalgic memories, participants explained that when they felt accepted and did *not* feel judged, they were able to behave more freely. For example, one participant recounted a nostalgic memory with close friends in a big city on their own for the first time: “I felt like I could be who I am without anyone judging me ...if I did something which maybe to someone else wouldn’t look as me acting normally, my best friends wouldn’t judge me for that” (Pt 5).

It is possible that the above participant identified this memory as meaningful because it represents a sense of freedom, that is, behaving naturally. This may also help them to gain a sense of who they could be in any given situation, one that is chosen, consistent with who they are.

Subtheme 2: Nostalgia as a Pleasurable Experience

This subtheme focuses on two pleasurable consequences of nostalgic experiences—that recollection of fond nostalgic memories feels good and provides hope for a positive future. Thus, this subtheme highlights the pleasures and positives of engaging in nostalgia and the benefits to well-being, relating to the third aim of the study. Participants expressed that verbalizing, reflecting on, and sharing fond nostalgic memories with the interviewer was pleasurable, uplifting, and soothing. For example, one participant, in an excitable manner, said that describing a nostalgic memory of an Easter egg hunt with family members was “totally helpful” and that they could “describe it in even more detail for such a long” (Pt 4). The above

participant relished the experience of being transported back in time to this day and the opportunity to share this story.

Another participant described a traumatic period growing up but enjoyed describing a nostalgic memory of playing the piano in solitude: “It’s quite nice to talk about that, ...and other moments related to sort of being there on my own with the piano” (Pt 1). For this participant, describing this nostalgic memory offered comfort in the here and now, much like it was comforting to play the piano in the past.

The second pleasurable consequence of engaging in fond nostalgic reverie was that nostalgic memories provided hope—a reminder that good times happened in the past and, therefore, they can happen again in the future. For example, one participant recalled fond nostalgic memories of baking for college friends and realized that they could do this again: “That there is good amongst the grey clouds, you know, there is some nice stuff to think back, and because I did baking before it’s never too late to do it again” (Pt 1).

We inferred that the “grey clouds” referred to adverse memories. However, despite these adverse memories, this participant did have some fond nostalgic memories to draw as a reminder of good times. In recalling this memory, the participant realized that they could have good experiences now and in the future. Similarly, another participant described a lack of friendships at present but felt happy when they reflected on a nostalgic memory when they did feel connected with others: “I guess happy is the simplest way to put it, in the sense that it’s nice to remember things I used to do. Nice to think that I might do it again” (Pt 2). This participant recognized that there was at least hope of experiencing social connectedness joyfully again in the present or future.

Theme 2: The Hazards of Nostalgic Feelings

This theme involves a substantial shift in tone compared to Theme 1, highlighting the potential challenges around nostalgic feelings. This theme has two subthemes: (1) Challenging memories and (2) experiencing and managing feelings in the here and now.

Subtheme 1: Challenging Memories

This subtheme is about the impact of adversity on the nostalgic experience. We did not set out to elicit challenging memories. However, during the interviews, most participants referred to many adverse experiences e.g. school difficulties, PTSD/trauma, which impacted their nostalgic experiences. As we did not wish to trigger negative effects during the interview, we did not explore these memories further during interviews. Therefore, what follows in this subtheme are declarations that nostalgic recollection can be sad rather than descriptions of sad, nostalgic memories per se.

Many participants mentioned that nostalgic memories could include more negative ones and not just fond ones. In this respect, this subtheme links to the first aim of the study, exploring the content of nostalgic memories. For example, one participant explained:

“I know that nostalgia generally in common speech has a positive connotation...maybe because when people are seeking nostalgia, they’re seeking nostalgia of positive things. But ...I get that feeling with reflecting on negative things too sometimes...like remembering a negative interaction with a parent, it’s like ... it feels a bit different, but I guess in the same way that the positive thing is bittersweet to remember, it’s sort of like remembering the bad thing also is like – ugh – I’m so glad that that’s not there anymore” (Pt 7).

In the above quote, this participant felt relief that this negative event was over. A couple of participants reported recalling more negative than fond nostalgic memories: “I’m sort of explaining using your chosen fields, the difficulties of nostalgia when there’s a lack of good memories to have with them” (Pt 2). This participant seemed to associate nostalgia with *good*

memories or perhaps felt compelled to provide an example of a good nostalgic memory. Unfortunately, when asked to recount a nostalgic memory, this participant struggled to find an example of a fond nostalgic memory. They seemed to have few fond memories from which to choose, or perhaps more negative memories overshadowed more pleasant ones.

For a couple of participants, some memories that they regarded as nostalgic were unwanted and could be difficult to cope with, at least at the present time. In this respect, this subtheme also links to the third study aim, highlighting that reflecting on such challenging nostalgic memories could be troublesome and not necessarily beneficial to well-being in the present moment: “They’re [nostalgic memories] important, but I think at this point - harmful to me, because I have more sad memories than happy ones” (Pt 9). This participant hinted that sifting through their memories was troublesome at this point in time. We inferred that this was because, to get to the fond nostalgic memories, they would also have to be transported back to difficult memories.

Subtheme 2: Experiencing and Managing Feelings in the Here and Now

This subtheme is centered around the challenges associated with experiencing and managing feelings evoked by nostalgic recollection in the present moment and, therefore, relates to the third study aim, highlighting that engaging in nostalgia is not always beneficial to well-being in the here and now. First, looking back on nostalgic memories highlighted feelings of loss, especially the loss of closeness of precious relationships, often due to transitions in their lives. For example, this participant experienced the loss of family celebrations since moving away from home, in stark contrast to their present life:

“Growing up my parents always liked to celebrate every little thing, so every given holiday, we always celebrated it... and now that I’m on my own, I don’t usually do so, so I do get nostalgic about those times” (Pt 10).

Similarly, another participant described a nostalgic memory of a day out in the city with close childhood friends but had since moved onto university away from these friends: “I do really miss my friends ... like it makes me feel really happy to remember it, but it also reminds me of like all the other memories that we have and that makes me miss them more” (Pt 5). In this quote, the participant’s reflection on one nostalgic memory reminded them of other connected memories, intensifying the feelings of loss of closeness with these friends. Another participant became both happy and tearful when they described fond nostalgic memories of playing with their brother, as this highlighted a loss of closeness for them:

“Well, I’m happy because I’m remembering what it was like to be happy in the moment and to understand what it was like back then. So, at the same time, it’s like my brother and I have parted ways in our life...it’s just not as close as it was” (Pt 7).

Participants also described different ways in which they managed their nostalgic feelings in the here and now, such as rumination and avoidance of memories. For example, for some participants, nostalgia tilted them over into rumination (a form of involuntary, repetitive, negative thinking). For example, one participant reflected on happy, nostalgic memories of fun times playing with siblings:

“I personally get a bit like caught up in it [nostalgia] and then I feel a bit down sometimes... almost like wishing, I wish I appreciated it more when I was younger... yeah definitely ruminate on it, all the happy things” (Pt 4).

Dwelling on the loss of such fond times with siblings made the above participant feel sad. They also realized that these were events that were worthy of appreciation, but they did not appreciate them at the time. Other participants avoided looking back on some or all negative, sad or difficult nostalgic memories (school in particular), often because recalling such nostalgic memories was overwhelming: “If it’s a bad memory I just don’t want to think about it because then it’ll just make me unhappy or it’ll make me sad or it’ll make me think of things that went

wrong” (Pt 8). This participant avoided “bad” memories so as to control any possible emotional burden in the here and now. Another participant described having fifteen boxes of childhood objects “just filled with items of pure, of almost purely nostalgic value” (Pt 2). However, the boxes were left at their childhood home because they were wary of them: “It’s more protection from them. I mean, for example, I’ve chosen not to bring them [the boxes of nostalgic objects] to the flat, at least not yet, because they are both a mental and practical burden on me” (Pt 2). Through using the word “protection,” this above participant intimated that engaging with these nostalgic objects could evoke emotional pain in the here and now. Thus, by leaving all these childhood objects boxed up, this participant avoided experiencing unwanted emotions in the present.

Theme 3: Growth and Redemption

Key to this theme is self-reflection. Participants reflected on the changes that come with the passing of time, often comparing the former to the present self. This reflection through nostalgic memories highlights growth and/or overcoming difficult times – a sense of redemption. This theme has two subthemes: (1) Developing self-understanding and (2) overcoming difficult times.

Subtheme 1: Developing Self-Understanding

Self-reflection on nostalgic memories helped participants to develop self-understanding—that is, their thinking, feelings, values and characteristics. In this regard, this subtheme links to the second aim of the study, highlighting how nostalgic memories support participants to gain insight into who they really are. Participants provided examples of ways in which they had developed self-understanding through nostalgia. For example, one participant recalled difficult times at school:

“I’ve been able to logically think about them [nostalgic memories], and I was like well, you know, if I perhaps opened up at school maybe I could have had like a better chance of having a life that wasn’t as difficult as it was” (Pt 1).

In the above quote, we interpreted progress in this participant’s thinking through reflecting on regret and missed opportunities at school. Another participant explained how they benefited from their nostalgic memories in general in terms of understanding their current feelings:

“They’re [nostalgic memories] very important to me because I have a hard time understanding myself and my motivations, so going back into the past and seeing how I acted in the past and my feelings in the past can reveal a lot about my feelings in the present” (Pt 7).

Self-reflection on nostalgic memories also helped participants to understand their characteristics. For example, one participant reflected on what a nostalgic memory of work abroad said about them: “If I get given an opportunity I will take it, ...but I’m not gonna be one that shies away from it because I’m unsure of how it’ll go” (Pt 8). This quote showed that, through nostalgia, this participant gleaned an understanding of their core characteristics—that they were someone who enjoyed making the most of different opportunities that arise in life. Another participant who described a nostalgic memory of playing the piano in solitude reflected on what this memory said about them as a person:

“I am more introverted than people think. I like to sort of be in myself and I like to be in my own world. I feel like I am really truly a calm person, but I do mask lot of the outgoingness and the hyperactivity because sometimes I feel like I have to do that, when actually, I am quite reserved” (Pt 1).

In the above quote, we interpreted that nostalgia revealed to the participant an incongruence between how they see their true qualities (introverted and calm) and how the

participant often feels obliged to present very different qualities (outgoing and hyperactive) in the here and now.

Subtheme 2: Overcoming Difficult Times

Reflecting on nostalgic memories enables a realization of overcoming difficult times and/or leading a life that is more in line with one's true nature. As this subtheme highlights aspects such as reflecting on one's true nature, it relates to the second study's aim, in that it reveals the ways in which nostalgic memories support participants to gain insight into who they really are. For example, one participant who described difficulties in their past life explained how nostalgic memories were helpful to them: "I'd say they're [nostalgic memories] helping me see how far I've come, from thinking what I would be like as an adult and what I am like as an adult" (Pt 8). We interpreted this quote to mean that this participant was aware of overcoming difficult times as a younger person and was developing hope as a young adult. This reflection highlights that there are possibilities for change –there is hope for a brighter future. Another participant described adverse experiences growing up and mentioned that witnessing autistic children and their struggles in the here and now often evoked nostalgic recollections of similar tough times from the past:

"OK, being autistic, my life hasn't been the easiest ...when I see other autistic children and see what they go through and how no difference has been made from that time till now, there's always a flashback to all the things I went through and all the things I couldn't share, because I had to go through a lot of therapy to be able to even be here right now, to have an interview with you, it didn't used to be this way for me while growing up" (Pt 9).

We interpreted this quote to mean that, although there were still challenges, the present, compared to the former self, was a better place. We believed that this participant was aware of overcoming difficulties. Another participant reflected on nostalgic memories of family and school and realized that they had masked a great deal in the past:

"And thinking back to sort of like my family experiences and school, I realize how much I masked through all that. People had absolutely no idea what was going on beneath the surface. It's quite weird to see myself in the past. Like, I know when I look at those photos and stuff, it's like that's not really who I was." (Pt 1).

With the above quote, this participant recognized a mismatch between whom they appeared to be on the outside and whom they knew they were on the inside during the time when the photos were taken. We interpreted that this realization of masking was helpful for the participant in that it helped them to understand more about their true feelings and characteristics in the present.

Discussion and Conclusion

The overarching aim of the current study was to explore the autistic experience of nostalgia, and was divided into three, each discussed next. The first aim was to explore the content of these autistic young adults' nostalgic memories. Much of the content was aligned with previous research in the general population (Hepper et al., 2012; Wildschut et al., 2006), such as memories of close others, places or settings, momentous occasions, past selves, periods of life and peaceful times in solitude. According to the Self-Determination Theory, relatedness to others is a fundamental psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In line with this theory, nostalgic memories of close others and social connectedness were extremely important to these young adults. Family members often appeared to provide a lifeline, perhaps because other close relationships were few and far between. Indeed, being a member of a family unit provided an important sense of continuity over time. The importance of such nostalgic memories with family members highlights the crucial role that family members play for autistic people in

creating fond experiences to look back on and, potentially, to draw comfort from.

For many participants, feeling accepted by others and/or not feeling judged and self-acceptance featured highly in nostalgic memories. This finding in relation to the benefits of self-acceptance aligns with Kernis and Goldman's (2006) conceptualization of authenticity—acceptance of one's feelings, desires, thoughts, strengths, weaknesses, and characteristics and the psychological benefits that this brings. However, many participants alluded to the fact that they were often not accepted in society as they are. This idea is consistent with other research (Lee et al., 2022). Lee et al. (2022) suggested that acceptance from others in society is crucial for autistic young adults as they transition to adulthood. A lack of acceptance by others in society may make it more difficult for autistic people to accept themselves, hindering the path to authenticity.

Most participants were of the opinion that nostalgia could include both fond and difficult memories. Furthermore, in our discussions of nostalgia, most participants referred to sad and/or difficult memories (as well as fond ones). It was clear that a couple of participants regarded these difficult memories as nostalgic. At other times, it was unclear if participants regarded such difficult memories as nostalgic memories or whether our discussions of nostalgic memories provoked thoughts about the past in general. This presented us with the question of whether it is possible to feel nostalgic for more negative events. Feeling nostalgic for negative events seems at odds with the definition of nostalgia, "a sentimental longing for the past" (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023, p. 1). The words "sentimental" and "longing" suggest that nostalgia involves reflecting on a fond memory. How can one long for a bad experience? One potential explanation is that, rather than feeling nostalgic about a specific event (episodic memory), people engaged with the idea of nostalgia for a lifetime period (semantic memory), for example, when I was at secondary school. This lifetime period featured some negative episodic memories but was still associated with a sense of wistful longing as it represents a previous self, an important part of that person's life story.

Alternatively, nostalgic experiences may be much broader than the current literature suggests. Support for a broader nostalgic experience comes from three sources. First, there is no complete understanding of nostalgia (Batcho, 2023), and it has been defined in many ways such as: "remembering with emotion or a feeling which evokes memories" (Batcho, 1998, p. 412) or "an emotional reaction towards an absence" (Madoglou et al., 2017, p. 82). These more neutral definitions suggest that nostalgia could encompass remembering a variety of experiences (not just fond ones) and could evoke a variety of feelings.

Second, research exploring lay conceptions of nostalgia suggest that people associate bad times, past pain, and sad events with nostalgia, although people rate these as peripheral rather than central features of the emotion (Hepper et al., 2012). Third, a small body of daily diary studies exploring how people experience nostalgia in everyday life suggests that nostalgic experiences within persons are variable (Newman & Sachs, 2020; Newman & Sachs, 2022; Newman et al., 2020), and that accompanying feelings may vary in intensity, valence, and effect on well-being (Newman & Sachs, 2022). Hence, it is possible that the nostalgic experience, the content of nostalgic memories, and the accompanying feelings can vary across instances and within individuals.

The second aim was to explore whether (or not) and in what ways autistic adults make sense of their nostalgic memories to gain insight into who they really are. In the current study, many participants recognized that reflecting on nostalgic memories was/would be helpful for gaining more self-understanding. However, individual differences in how participants looked back on their memories impacted their ability to gain insight into their true selves. Trapnell and Campbell (1999) made the distinction between two motivationally distinct dispositions: rumination (neurotic self-attentiveness) and reflectiveness/reflection (intellectual self-attentiveness). Rumination involves a focus on involuntary, negative thoughts "motivated by perceived threats, losses or injustices to the self." Self-reflection, on the other hand, refers to

an inquisitive self-focus, “motivated by curiosity or epistemic interest in the self” (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999, p. 297).

Some participants seemed reflective by nature and enjoyed using nostalgic memories as touchstones to better understand the self and who they really are. For example, nostalgic memories helped some to develop their thinking and get in touch with their true feelings in the present, their values, and their characteristics, and participants found these aspects beneficial. Importantly, nostalgic memories offered glimpses of experienced authenticity and/or inauthenticity, which helped participants to understand more about their authentic selves. These findings above align with conceptualizations of authenticity by Wood et al. (2008) and Kernis and Goldman (2006), that propose that being more aware of, having more knowledge of, or feeling more in touch with aspects of the self is beneficial for well-being. In addition, participants looked back on their nostalgic memories and saw elements of the self that were unchanging and stable over time, for example, autistic traits and personality differences such as being an introvert. Such reflections gave them a renewed sense of being that person. However, they also looked back on their nostalgic memories and saw aspects of the self that were changeable, for example, choosing to mask or not. This was important because it offered individuals possibilities for being open about who one is, and increasing well-being. This finding in relation to the notion of choice aligns with Kernis and Goldman’s (2006) conceptualization of authenticity, which in turn was highly influenced by Self Determination Theory. This theory holds that people are authentic when they are autonomous and free to choose how to behave.

In contrast, some participants tended to ruminate or avoid thinking about nostalgic memories and were less able to gain insight into the true self. Rumination is a form of repetitive thinking that is more common in autistic people (Cooper et al., 2022). Of course, tendencies towards rumination here are likely linked to depression. At least two of our participants reported a diagnosis of depression. Depressed people find it difficult to stop ruminating, tend to recall negative events more frequently than positive ones, and have difficulty regulating their emotions through positive recollection (Grace et al., 2016). Other participants tended to avoid thinking about their nostalgic memories—there was almost a sense of trepidation about their past lives. This avoidance of memories seemed to be a form of self-protection to prevent overwhelming emotional responses from the past from infecting their present experience. However, avoidance behaviors have been shown to correlate negatively with authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

The third aim was to explore whether (or not), and in what ways, autistic adults find engaging in nostalgia beneficial for well-being. Verbalizing and reflecting on fond nostalgic memories with the interviewer and/or alone provided both comfort and hope to these young autistic adults. Fond nostalgia promoted a range of benefits to well-being. For example, in line with findings from experimental research in the general population (Leunissen et al., 2021), as well as findings from research on autistic individuals (Bennett et al., 2024b), describing positive nostalgic experiences seemed to make participants feel happier at the moment. In the current study, the interviewer was able to see or hear a change in the tone of voice, and the participant was indeed happier (smiling, laughing, brighter, more energetic voice, etc.). In line with previous research in the general population (Juhl & Biskas, 2022), participants also experienced increased feelings of social connectedness through reflecting on their nostalgic memories. Social connectedness is especially important for autistic people. Despite often wanting social connections and friendships, autistic adults are less likely to experience opportunities for social connection (Umagami et al., 2022). In addition, in line with findings from Bennett, Wilmut, and Rathbone (2024), which showed that nostalgic recollection boosted self-regard, the power of nostalgic memories in the current study seemed to lie in participants’ realization that they were accepted and valued for who they are by others, promoting self-esteem—the latter which tends to be lower in autistic compared to non-autistic adults (Nguyen et al., 2020).

For some participants, self-reflection on nostalgic memories enabled a realization of overcoming difficult times. This realization highlighted possibilities for change and hope for a brighter future. This theme of overcoming difficult times is consistent with the nostalgia literature. That is, nostalgic memories often involve a redemption sequence—a way in which people make sense of their personal experiences involving a transformation from a more negative life scene to a more positive one (Wildschut et al., 2006). Redemptive narratives have been linked to increased well-being (McAdams et al., 2001).

However, two key factors come into play when describing the potential benefits of engaging in nostalgia for well-being: nostalgia as an automatic versus intentional experience and individual differences. Both will now be considered in turn. First, nostalgia as an automatic (common in daily life) versus an intentional experience (as in this study, being asked to generate a nostalgic memory). Participants in the current study described very variable everyday (often automatic) experiences of nostalgia. Some automatic everyday nostalgic experiences could be uplifting, and others were more mixed as they highlighted the loss of closeness from special relationships and changes in life. For two participants, left to their own devices, in their own thoughts, automatic everyday nostalgic experiences could potentially be overwhelming as they felt mentally unprepared to go back to certain places or feelings. In contrast, when participants were asked to describe a specific nostalgic memory to the interviewer (an intentional experience), participants overwhelmingly described fond memories. Although participants experienced nostalgia as bittersweet, it was largely experienced as positive, that is, it was typically sweeter than bitter and was pleasurable, uplifting, and comforting.

Lastly, as described above, individual differences, such as tendencies towards rumination, reflection, or avoidance of memories may play a role in the extent to which engaging in nostalgia is beneficial for well-being. Garrido (2018) found that for people who are more prone to rumination as opposed to reflection, engaging in nostalgic memories may result in more negative affect. This also seemed to be the case for the ruminators in the current study. In addition, participants who avoided thinking about their nostalgic memories may have escaped momentary feelings of sadness but may well have missed out on other well-being benefits in the process. In contrast, compared to ruminators or those who avoided memories, participants who were in control of their reflections were able to benefit from their nostalgic memories in the ways described above, that is, increased positive affect, increased insight into the true self, feelings of social connectedness, and self-esteem.

As previously mentioned, most research to date exploring the link between nostalgia and well-being has taken a quantitative/experimental approach. The qualitative approach of this study is a strength that enabled a greater diversity of nostalgic experiences to be captured. This study makes three important contributions to the literature. First, it advances our understanding of how autistic people experience the emotion of nostalgia. Second, it sheds light on *for whom* nostalgia is beneficial (Layous & Kurtz, 2022)—an important question since researchers are testing whether nostalgia can be used as a potential intervention for longer-lasting well-being (Abeyta & Pillarisetty, 2022). Findings from the current study suggest that people who can reflect on their nostalgic memories with a healthy interest in the self—those who tend to have mastery of nostalgia—are more likely to reap well-being benefits from nostalgic recollection. Findings also suggest that nostalgia supports (despite being challenging at times) the well-being of autistic people, a vulnerable group of the population. Third, findings suggest that nostalgia could be used to enhance authenticity and well-being in autistic people. For example, researchers have suggested that nostalgic reflection could be used as a positive activity in people's daily lives to enhance well-being (Layous & Kurtz, 2022; Lyubomirsky, 2008). In line with Bennett, Wilmot, and Rathbone (2024), findings from this study suggest that, depending on person-activity fit and individual differences, this may also be a valuable area of exploration for autistic individuals. However, in terms of using nostalgia to support the well-being of autistic people, more research would need to be conducted to assess this.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study. This is a small qualitative study that aimed to investigate a huge topic. In addition, this study was conducted online, meaning that participants had access and the technological skills to use the internet. Furthermore, autistic people are a very heterogeneous group (Cruz Puerto & Sandín Vázquez, 2024) with some autistic people requiring more support than others. It is likely that participants in the current study were from a narrow demographic/autistic group and, therefore, findings from this study cannot be applied to the broad range of demographic and/or autistic experiences. Addressing under-representation in research from different groups is challenging (Maye et al., 2022). One way in which autism researchers can address this problem is through community academic partnerships and participatory approaches, whereby community members and individuals are actively involved in the research process, improving inclusivity and access (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Maye et al., 2022).

We were also unable to verify the autism diagnoses of participants. Therefore, we cannot be sure that all participants were autistic and that participants' accounts were authentically autistic. Indeed, recent research has highlighted a rise of imposter participants in online qualitative autism studies (Pellicano et al., 2023). However, the experiences described by participants in the current study were consistent with typical autistic life experiences and thus left little doubt that participants were autistic. Nevertheless, Pellicano et al. (2023) provide a useful list of strategies to mitigate this issue. Examples include asking participants in advance to complete an expression of interest to participate in the interview with a brief description of themselves or conducting a pre-interview online conversation to check eligibility/diagnostic criteria.

Lastly, at times, it was difficult to know if participants were describing nostalgic memories or another type of memory. However, we felt it was important to accept the recollections given by participants as nostalgic if they chose to describe them in that way.

In sum, despite being a challenging affective experience at times, nostalgia may provide a bank of meaningful memories for autistic people from which to learn. Some participants were either not in a good place to reflect on their memories or were not inclined to do so. In contrast, for reflective participants, engaging in nostalgia brought a number of benefits: boosting mood, promoting feelings of social connectedness, self-esteem, as well as providing insight into the true self. Importantly, fond nostalgic memories provided comfort and hope for these autistic young adults. Such comforting nostalgic memories may help to counter more adverse memories or current life experiences and provide a lasting positive impact in life for autistic individuals.

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Competing interests

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Ethics approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. This study was approved by Oxford Brookes University's Research Ethics Committee on 28/02/22, no 221571.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [JB], upon reasonable request.

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