

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Organizational Nostalgia and Its Multi-Level Consequences: A Qualitative Study among Headquarters Staff of the Ministry of Education***Fereshteh Ghaleh Agha Babaei¹, Hossein Damghanian^{2*}

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T**Introduction**

Nostalgia, broadly defined as a sentimental longing for the past, is an emotion characterized by a blend of pleasure, yearning, and an awareness of the impossibility of recreating past experiences. This phenomenon, rooted in the selective recall of meaningful past memories, has, after centuries of limited scientific attention, recently emerged as a focal topic in psychology and organizational studies. While early perspectives pathologized nostalgia, contemporary research suggests it is predominantly adaptive, aiding individuals in understanding their experiences, regulating emotions, and maintaining a consistent sense of identity. Found in nearly all humans, this experience fosters interpersonal emotional bonds through the evocation of pleasant and valued memories. Organizational nostalgia, a specific manifestation of this sentiment, arises within the workplace through organizational narratives-accounts that are often positive yet tinged with a subtle sense of loss or yearning.

Beyond an individual experience, organizational nostalgia shapes collective emotional patterns by sharing similar memories, thereby influencing employees' attitudes, behaviors, and inclinations. This phenomenon can encompass physical spaces, rituals, shared moments, colleagues, past challenges, and achievements, with its effects holding significant implications for organizational management and policymaking. There is no singular viewpoint regarding organizational nostalgia; some consider it conservative and potentially innovation-stifling, while others posit it as a psychological resource for strengthening relationships, enhancing creativity, fostering work meaningfulness, and promoting resilience. Despite growing scientific interest, the purposeful application of nostalgia in organizations remains limited, underscoring the need for systematic exploration.

The administrative sector of the Ministry of Education, with its continuous changes in educational technologies, curricula, policies, and leadership, presents a sensitive context for the emergence of organizational nostalgia. The presence of long-serving employees amidst these ongoing transformations heightens nostalgic sensitivities, offering a lens through which to understand underlying emotions, resistances, or alignment with changes. Given the paucity of localized studies in this domain, the present research endeavors to bridge the existing theoretical and practical gap, providing evidence that facilitates the judicious utilization of organizational nostalgia while considering its diverse consequences. Consequently, the aim of this study is to examine the effects of organizational nostalgia within the administrative sector of the Ministry of Education, seeking to answer the central question: What are the effects of organizational nostalgia in the administrative sector of the Ministry of Education?

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Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature, with the primary objective of identifying the consequences of organizational nostalgia. To achieve this aim, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with knowledgeable participants. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Following an introduction to the researcher, initial rapport-building, and a clear explanation of the research objectives, general questions were posed, including: (1) Have you ever reflected nostalgically on your past work experiences within the Ministry of Education? (2) What events, individuals, or periods best evoke the concept of a “good organizational past”? (3) What emotions do these memories elicit? (4) How do these experiences influence employees’ daily behaviors? and (5) Do these recollections impact interpersonal interactions? Based on participants’ responses, follow-up probing questions were then introduced.

Participant selection was executed through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The primary inclusion criteria were: (1) possessing at least a Master’s or Doctoral degree in management, organizational, or educational studies to ensure academic competence; (2) having a minimum of ten years of professional experience in administrative roles within the Ministry of Education, across at least two different organizational units, to provide a broader historical and cultural perspective; (3) demonstrating theoretical awareness or a publication record in areas such as organizational nostalgia, organizational culture, and change management; and (4) exhibiting the capacity for reflection and narrative articulation to convey emotional-cognitive insights. A total of 19 experts were interviewed, and data saturation was achieved following the nineteenth interview, as no new codes or themes emerged.

Thematic analysis was employed, adhering to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The credibility of the findings was ensured through Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) criteria for trustworthiness, encompassing data triangulation, participant validation, meticulous documentation of coding decisions, independent review by an external expert, and rich contextual description to enhance transferability.

Reliability was assessed using both test–retest and inter-rater agreement methods. In the test–retest procedure, four interviews were re-coded after a 30-day interval, yielding a Holsti reliability coefficient of 0.83. For the inter-rater agreement, an independent researcher coded four randomly selected interviews, resulting in a Holsti coefficient of 0.80. Both values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.80, confirming a stable and consistent coding process.

Findings

The present study was conducted using thematic analysis. Initially, the theoretical framework of the research was established through a review of existing literature. During the coding process, after generating initial codes, similar codes were merged, important codes were developed, and weak, redundant, or irrelevant codes were removed. This iterative process continued, moving back and forth between theoretical concepts and interview data. To organize the themes, the “network of themes” approach by Attride-Stirling was utilized. The data were organized into 29 basic themes, 10 organizing themes, and 5 overarching themes.

1. Psychological and Occupational Well-being: Organizational nostalgia, through the selective recall of positive and successful past experiences, fosters positive emotions and an optimistic outlook toward the organization’s future. This process, by enhancing hope, promoting psychological security, and encouraging employees to voice their perspectives and accept reasonable risks (such as interactions with students and families), leads to reduced stress and anxiety, energy restoration, and prevention of occupational burnout.

2. Individual Performance: This phenomenon also enhances employee commitment, guiding them toward organizational goals even without direct supervision, and increasing their willingness to collaborate and support others. Recalling positive memories strengthens professional identity, facilitates risk-taking and the exploration of new methods, and boosts support for change. However, this phenomenon possesses a dual nature and can, in some instances, lead to excessive caution and emotional resistance to change.

3. Organizational Climate: Organizational nostalgia, by reviving shared past memories (such as the successful implementation of the electronic registration system or the coordinated management of administrative crises within the Ministry of Education), reactivates effective behavioral patterns like inter-unit coordination, task delegation, and accountability.

4. Organizational Performance: Organizational nostalgia, by revisiting past memories and

achievements, empowers employees in their daily tasks while simultaneously reinforcing intrinsic commitment and organizational productivity. The recall of accomplishments, particularly among administrative staff in the Ministry of Education, improves service quality and learning outcomes by empowering human resources, aligning efforts with objectives, and facilitating innovation in methodologies and procedures.

5. Societal Level: At the societal level, organizational nostalgia, by evoking historical images and narratives, stirs positive emotions among various stakeholders and administrative staff of the Ministry of Education. This, in turn, creates enduring emotional and cognitive bonds between them and the organizational identity. The strategic utilization of roots, traditions, and historical milestones not only enhances the organization's distinctiveness and credibility but also strengthens the sense of social belonging and collective identity among teachers, staff, and families, thereby paving the way for the organization's fulfillment of its social responsibility through ethical and collaborative engagement with surrounding communities.

Discussion & Conclusion

Organizational nostalgia mainly produces constructive outcomes. At the individual level, recalling positive memories enhances optimism, psychological safety, and reduces burnout. It also boosts commitment, collaboration, and courage to innovate, though excessive focus on the past may cause resistance. At the group level, nostalgia strengthens cohesion, empathy, and collective identity, while at the organizational level it supports meaningful work, productivity, and experience-based innovation. Societally, it reinforces social belonging and organizational responsibility. These findings highlight nostalgia as a valuable psychological and social resource, but its potential downsides require careful management.

Organizational nostalgia emerged in this study as a predominantly positive emotional experience that can enhance individual well-being, professional commitment, and proactive work behavior, while strengthening team cohesion and collective identity. Consistent with Leunissen et al. (2024), the findings support the distinction between agentic and communal dimensions of nostalgia. Themes such as professionalism, courage, responsibility, and creativity were aligned with the agentic aspect, while empathy, collaboration, and social connectedness reflected the communal one. This dual alignment suggests that organizational nostalgia simultaneously fulfills employees' needs for autonomy and belonging within the administrative sector of Iran's Ministry of Education.

Despite its constructive outcomes, nostalgia may carry potential risks-such as excessive caution toward change or selective idealization of the past-that should be managed thoughtfully. Managers can strategically utilize nostalgia alongside 360-degree feedback and short change-management programs to promote balanced decision-making. The inclusion of success stories and symbolic milestones in operational plans, reports, and internal branding may further reinforce shared culture and identity. Employees are encouraged to document and share positive work experiences to strengthen collective learning and motivation. Likewise, human-resource units can preserve meaningful organizational memories through cultural events, storytelling sessions, and nostalgic spaces in offices, integrating these practices into onboarding and staff development programs.

The study is limited by its focus on the administrative domain and reliance on interviews, which reflect subjective perceptions rather than performance-based evidence. Future research should expand sampling to various organizational contexts and adopt mixed-method and longitudinal designs to trace the enduring influence of nostalgic memories on behavior and organizational outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Nostalgia, Organizational Nostalgia, Organizational Memories and Organizational Performance.

