



Need satisfaction in episodic memories impacts mood at retrieval and well-being over time



Iliane Houle*, & Frederick L. Philippe

University of Quebec at Montreal, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 July 2016

Received in revised form 26 September 2016

Accepted 30 September 2016

Available online 3 October 2016

Keywords:

Episodic memories

Mood

Well-being

Need satisfaction

Self-determination theory

ABSTRACT

Recalling important episodic memories influences mood, notably through their level of need satisfaction. Moreover, as those memories are repeatedly recalled, their repetitive impact on mood should lead to changes in well-being over time. Thus, need satisfaction in memories with the greatest impact on mood when recalled should have the greatest impact on well-being over time. Participants rated their mood and general well-being, and were assigned to describe a positive or negative memory. They rated their memory valence and need satisfaction, and reevaluated their mood. Three months later, participants reassessed their well-being. In both conditions, memory need satisfaction predicted an increase in positive mood after the memory description and an increase in well-being over time. However, the greater the increase in positive mood upon the recall, the more need satisfaction led to increases in well-being. When mood decreased, need satisfaction did not predict increases in well-being. These results suggest that need satisfaction in memories that lead to significant increases in mood when recalled facilitates well-being.

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1. Introduction

Important episodic memories are mostly about significant and emotionally charged past events (Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, Lecours, and Lekes, 2012; Tulving, 2002). In addition, whenever they are recalled, they lead to a re-experience in the here and now of their associated experiential components (i.e., emotional charge, motivational properties) (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; LeDoux, 1992; Schwartz, Weinberger, and Singer, 1981). Past research has shown that this re-experience can affect situational well-being and current mood (Josephson, Singer, and Salovey, 1996; Philippe et al., 2012). Furthermore, episodic memories have been found to influence people's stable sense of well-being over time (Milyavskaya, Philippe, and Koestner, 2013; Philippe et al., 2012; Sutin and Robins, 2005). A growing amount of studies have been reported on how memories can influence people's mood, but little has been done in regard to the processes through which memories can influence well-being over time. The purpose of the present research was to investigate if memories that have the greatest impact on mood upon recall are the ones that affect the most well-being over time.

1.1. Episodic memories and mood

Episodic memories can be activated and recalled in everyday life through different processes. They can be consciously and deliberately recalled: for example, a person can intentionally decide to remember a specific memory and describe it to someone. However, episodic memories are also often activated by external cues in the environment. This occurs when certain characteristics of the environment match the memory of an event presenting similar characteristics, such as a same location or a same person (e.g., Ferguson and Bargh, 2004). When a memory is activated by external cues, it does not necessarily lead to an experience of conscious reminiscence (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Memory activation can be automatic and unconscious, but it will nevertheless influence the person in the situation that triggered that memory.

The deliberate recall of an episodic memory, as well as its unconscious activation, have been found to alter mood. A well-known memory component that can greatly influence mood upon memory recollection is the valence of the memory. Indeed, past research has shown that positive memories can be recalled, deliberately or automatically, as a way to repair negative mood (Josephson et al., 1996; Joormann, Siemer, and Gotlib, 2007; Parrott and Sabini, 1990). Gillihan, Kessler, and Farah (2007) showed that participants ($n = 326$) who were randomly assigned to recall positive episodic memories reported a significantly greater mood after memory recollection than participants who were randomly assigned to recall negative memories. In another study (Baker and Guttfreund, 1993), 80 community college students rated their negative mood, were randomly assigned to think

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Quebec at Montreal, P.O. Box 8888, Station Centre-Ville, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3C 3P8
E-mail address: houle.iliane@courrier.uqam.ca (I. Houle).

of two positive or two negative memories, and finally rated their negative mood again. Participants who recalled negative memories reported an increase in their negative mood after the recall, whereas participants who recalled positive memories reported a negative mood decrease. Thus, the recall of a memory can lead individuals to experience a change in their mood, as a function of the valence characterizing this memory.

1.2. Need satisfaction in episodic memories

Past research (e.g., Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier & Lecours, 2011b) has also found that another important basic experiential component of episodic memories, that is also triggered when the memory is activated, is the level of psychological need satisfaction experienced during the initial event of the memory. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) posits that people continually seek to fulfill three basic psychological needs in their everyday life, which are needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the need to feel free and authentic in one's choices and actions, competence is the need to feel efficient and effective, and relatedness is the need to feel connected and to care for others, as well as being cared for by others. Many studies have confirmed the fundamental nature of these three needs across diverse domains and cultures (Deci et al., 2001; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, and Kasser, 2001; Tay and Diener, 2011). Moreover, the satisfaction of the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in life is positively associated with diverse dimensions of well-being, such as psychological growth, life satisfaction, and purpose in life (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis, 1996; Tay and Diener, 2011).

Because of its fundamental importance, the level of need satisfaction characterizing a memory should affect, upon its activation, people's mood and well-being accordingly (Philippe et al., 2011b; Philippe, Koestner, Lecours, Beaulieu-Pelletier, and Bois, 2011a; Philippe et al., 2012). Indeed, the recall of a need-satisfying memory should signal possibilities for psychological growth and opportunities to build and expand the self (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Hodgins and Knee, 2002), and thus should lead to greater positive mood and well-being. Conversely, the recall of a need-thwarting memory should signal a potential threat to the person's self and integrity (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Hodgins and Knee, 2002), which should be conducive to a lower positive mood and lower well-being.

However, one could argue that the level of need satisfaction characterizing an episodic memory and the valence of this memory represent basically the same memory component, and that a negative memory should be characterized by need thwarting, whereas a positive memory should be characterized by need satisfaction. In this regard, investigating the impact of memory need satisfaction on mood would be the same as investigating the impact of memory valence. However, past research has refuted this assumption and has shown that need satisfaction and valence are relatively independent aspects of memories. Indeed, a certain level of need satisfaction can be experienced in a negative memory (Philippe et al., 2011b, 2011a; Philippe et al., 2012). For example, someone can report the memory of a negative event, in which he/she felt supported by another person after having failed at an important task. In this generally negative situation, this person's need of relatedness would have been satisfied, whereas his/her need of competence would have been thwarted. Thus, in negative memories as well as in positive ones, the level of need satisfaction experienced can be variable and affect the person accordingly, over and above the effect of the general memory valence.

Empirical evidence also supports this assertion. In a study (Philippe et al., 2012, Study 3), 151 undergraduates described a significant memory and were implicitly primed with this memory two weeks later. Results showed that priming memories characterized by need satisfaction led to an immediate increase in participants' positive mood, whereas priming need-thwarting memories led to a decrease in positive mood. In addition, these results held after controlling for memory valence.

Need satisfaction in memories thus seems to be a predictor of mood that is independent of the valence of memories.

1.3. Episodic memories and well-being over time

It has been recently shown that need satisfaction in episodic memories can not only affect people's mood upon recall, but that it can also induce enduring changes in well-being over time. Indeed, the level of need satisfaction characterizing an important memory has been found to predict increases in well-being over a 1-month period (Milyavskaya et al., 2013, Study 3), as well as over a 1-year period (Philippe et al., 2012, Study 4). In a recent study, Philippe and Bernard-Desrosiers (in press, Study 2) contacted 275 university students before the Winter holiday period and measured their well-being. Participants were contacted again after the holidays: their well-being was measured again and they were asked to describe the memory of an event that happened during their holidays. Subsequently, participants' well-being was measured each month, for three months. Results showed that the need satisfaction in the holiday memory predicted increases in well-being directly after the holiday period, and continued to predict further increases over the next two months, thus having a cumulative impact on well-being over time. In sum, there is empirical evidence supporting the idea that memories' need satisfaction can influence people's well-being over time. However, the underlying processes through which this occurs remain unclear.

One theoretical explanation for this phenomenon is that episodic memories are frequently and repetitively activated across diverse situations, through conscious recalls, as well as through automatic activation by external cues. As the activation of a significant memory can lead to changes in mood, we can expect that frequent activations of this memory over time will lead to repetitive changes in mood, and thus to consolidations and stable changes in well-being over time. For instance, the frequent activations of a need-satisfying memory should lead to repeated situational increases in positive mood, and over these repeated activations, this need-satisfying memory should positively affect one's stable sense of well-being (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, and Houle, 2016; Philippe et al., 2012). Following this reasoning, memories characterized by the greatest level of need satisfaction should lead to the greatest immediate increase in positive mood upon recall. In addition, supposedly through their frequent activations over time, need satisfaction in memories with the greatest impact on mood upon recall should predict the greatest increases in well-being over time.

1.4. Purpose of the present study

The purpose of the present research was to assess the impact of need satisfaction in a frequently activated memory on situational mood and well-being over time. Moreover, we investigated if the prospective relationship between need satisfaction and well-being was function of the strength of the effect of the memory on situational mood.

In this study, participants rated their current positive mood and completed a measure of general well-being. Next, they were randomly assigned to describe a positive or a negative self-defining memory. Self-defining memories represent an especially important and frequently recalled type of episodic memory (Singer and Salovey, 1993). Participants rated their memory valence and need satisfaction, and reevaluated their positive mood. Three months later, they responded to the same measure of general well-being again.

In line with past findings (e.g., Baker and Guttfreund, 1993), it was hypothesized that describing a positive memory would lead to an increase in positive mood right after the memory description, whereas describing a negative memory would lead to a decrease in positive mood (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, we hypothesized that need satisfaction characterizing the memory would predict mood change in both conditions (positive or negative memory description), such that greater need satisfaction would predict increases in positive mood, whereas

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