FlashReport

Today's misery and yesterday's happiness: Differential effects of current life-events on perceptions of past wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Negative events – such as romantic disappointment, social rejection or academic failure – influence how we feel and what we think. Either component can influence evaluations of our past life, but in opposite ways: when sad feelings serve as a source of information, they give rise to negative evaluations; when current events serve as a standard of comparison, they give rise to positive evaluations. Because comparison requires applicability of the standard, its benefits should be limited to the domain of the event. Consistent with this rationale, three experiments showed a robust paradoxical effect: people who experienced romantic disappointment (Experiment 1), social exclusion (Experiment 2) or academic failure (Experiment 3) were *more* satisfied with their past romantic, social, or academic life, but *less* satisfied with all other domains of their past. The negative influence in unrelated domains was mediated by mood, whereas the positive influence in the event domain was not. Thus, last year's social life looks good compared to today's social rejection, but all other aspects of last year's life suffer.

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Introduction

How good was your love life last year? If you were dumped back then, you might say "not great." But what if you were dumped this morning? Would you see last year differently?

Of course, nothing about last year is *actually* altered by today's circumstances. But a large literature suggests that perceptions of the past often diverge from reality, particularly perceptions of past feelings (e.g., Wilson, Meyers, & Gilbert, 2003; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). This presumably reflects our inability to re-experience affective states once they dissipate (Robinson & Clore, 2002), creating an imperfect reconstruction process that is influenced by present events (Ross, 1989; Schwarz, Kahneman, & Xu, 2009).

However, today's negative events may influence perceptions of the past in different ways. On the one hand, negative events influence how we feel. They put us in negative moods (e.g., heartache), which can influence a broad range of judgments, from perceptions of our lives to perceptions of the stock market (for a review, see Schwarz & Clore, 2007). Hence, having been dumped may lead us to see our past in a generally negative light. On the other hand, negative events also influence what is on our minds and increase the accessibility of related information (e.g., thoughts about relationship partners: for

a review, see Higgins, 1996). If these accessible thoughts are used in constructing a standard against which we evaluate the past, the past may look better by comparison (e.g., Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985). Thus, last year's boring relationship may seem attractive in light of today's relationship disaster.

Unfortunately, the low comparison standard afforded by negative events does not benefit all perceptions of the past. To elicit a contrast effect, the standard needs to be applicable to the target of judgment (see Biernat, 2005; Bless & Schwarz, 2010), suggesting that its impact is limited to the same life domain. Similarly unfortunate, the negative influence of sad moods is less constrained and generalizes across domains (for a review, see Schwarz, 2012). These considerations predict a paradoxical effect: A current negative event may decrease satisfaction with many aspects of the past through its affective influence, but increase satisfaction with closely related aspects through its comparative influence. If so, being dumped may undermine your satisfaction with last year's academic success, while brightening your perception of last year's love life.

To test these predictions, we examined the influence of experimentally induced romantic pain (Experiment 1) and social rejection (Experiment 2) or naturally occurring academic failure (Experiment 3) on perceptions of past satisfaction across different life domains. We predicted that people who had a bad experience would report lower past satisfaction in unrelated domains, but higher past satisfaction in the same domain as the current negative event. We further predicted that participants' mood at the time of judgment would mediate the influence of events on reports of past satisfaction in unrelated domains, but not in the event's domain.

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Experiment 1: Lonely hearts used to be loved

Participants were recruited on Valentine's Day and were reminded of the holiday at the beginning or end of participation. None was in a relationship, so the reminder highlighted a negative event.

Method

Participants

130 people were recruited individually in public campus areas. After the experiment, we asked whether they were in a relationship; only those who were not were included ($N = 95$: 58.9% female, 61.1% Caucasian, $M_{age} = 20.30$).

Procedure

On Valentine's Day 2011, participants completed a survey on past experiences ostensibly to help with a class project. The questionnaire included a calendar as the first page (*Primed* condition) or last page (*Unprimed* condition), with Valentine's Day and Groundhog Day labeled. Participants were asked: "Please circle today's date so we have a record of when you participated." Valentine's Day was labeled to serve as the reminder; Groundhog Day was labeled to reduce suspicion.

The survey questions read: "On the whole, last year how satisfied were you with your…" *Social Life*, *General Health*, *Personal Life at Home*, *Everyday Decisions*, *Academic Performance*, *Quality of Life Overall*, and *Love Life*. Love Life is directly related to Valentine's Day, whereas the other six domains are not. Items were presented one-by-one in 3 random orders. Participants responded by drawing a slash on unlabeled 116-mm lines anchored at "Not at all" to "Extremely" satisfied, rated their current mood on the same scale ("Extremely negative" to "Extremely positive"), and provided demographic information. Finally, participants were funnel-debriefed (none indicated suspicion).

In this and all studies, mood was assessed *after* life satisfaction judgments because prior research suggests that drawing attention to mood can attenuate its influence on subsequent measures (Schwarz & Clore, 1983; see also Ellsworth & Gonzalez, 2003).

Results and discussion

In all experiments, responses were measured by distance (mm) from leftmost anchors; higher numbers indicate more positive responses. Neither demographic variables nor order influenced the results; they are not discussed.

Mood and satisfaction

Participants who were subtly reminded of Valentine's Day reported worse mood ($M = 62.71$) than those who were not ($M = 73.23$), $t(93) = 2.41$, $p = .018$, $d = 0.50$. As expected, they also reported lower past satisfaction in the 6 unrelated domains ($M = 69.63$ for the composite; all $rs > .31$) than participants not reminded of Valentine's Day ($M = 80.75$), $t(98) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.64$ (see Fig. 1, Panel A), replicating standard mood effects. The observed pattern was significant for each domain individually, $ts \geq 2.13$, $ps \leq .036$, $ds \geq 0.44$, except Academic Performance[1] ($p = .16$).

The *opposite* pattern was observed in the domain of the event: participants who were reminded of Valentine's Day reported *greater* satisfaction with their past Love Life ($M = 60.17$) than those who were not ($M = 47.02$), $t(93) = 2.47$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.51$. These diverging effects are reflected in a significant interaction, $F(1, 93) = 13.94$, $p < .001$, and main effects of the prime ($p < .03$) and related versus unrelated life-domain variable ($p < .001$).

Mediation

Regression-based mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986) of participants' satisfaction reports in the unrelated domains show that event independently predicts both satisfaction ($\beta = -.31$) and mood ($\beta = -.24$); as expected, the mood effect remains when controlling for event ($\beta = .72$), whereas the event effect is reduced to nonsignificance when controlling for mood ($\beta = -.13$; Sobel $= -2.36$, $p < .01$). This is *not* the case for participants' satisfaction in the event domain. Here, event again predicts satisfaction ($\beta = .25$) and mood ($\beta = -.24$); as expected, however, mood does not predict satisfaction when controlling for event ($\beta = -.17$), whereas event predicts satisfaction when controlling for mood ($\beta = .21$; Sobel $= 1.62$, $p = .05$).

In sum, reminding single people that it was Valentine's Day put them in worse moods, leading to more negative evaluations of past domains that were unrelated to the holiday. However, they reported *greater* satisfaction with their past love life, presumably because it seemed better by comparison.

Experiment 2: Outcasts used to be popular

In Experiment 2, participants were randomly assigned to feel socially excluded. We predicted that this sad experience would increase satisfaction with their past social life, but reduce satisfaction with other aspects of their past.

Method

Participants

In exchange for course credit, 126 undergraduates (49.2% female, 72.2% Caucasian, $M_{age} = 18.99$) participated in a laboratory study allegedly about imagination and self-perception.

Procedure

Participants first played the computer game Cyberball with three partners who were ostensibly in other rooms. All partners were actually computerized. In Cyberball, they tossed a ball to other players who either returned it regularly (*Included* condition) or ignored the participant after a few moves (*Excluded* condition). This is a well-validated manipulation of social exclusion (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000).

Next, participants completed the questions from Experiment 1 and 4 manipulation checks (from Eisenberg, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003): to what extent the game made them feel liked, rejected, invisible, and powerful, from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Finally, they were funnel-debriefed. One participant who was familiar with Cyberball was dropped ($N = 125$).

Results and discussion

Mood and satisfaction

Excluded participants felt less liked, more rejected, more invisible, and less powerful ($ps < .001$), and were in worse moods ($M = 62.95$) than Included participants ($M = 73.95$), $t(123) = 3.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$.

In turn, this sad experience influenced their perception of the past (see Fig. 1, Panel B). Excluded participants reported lower past satisfaction in the 6 unrelated domains ($M = 66.80$ for the composite; all $rs > .29$) than Included participants ($M = 76.46$), $t(123) = 3.36$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.60$, replicating standard mood effects. This pattern was significant for each domain individually, $ts > 2.24$, $ps < .03$, $ds > 0.40$, except the somewhat related domain Love Life ($p = .25$).

As expected, the *opposite* pattern was observed for the event domain: Excluded participants reported *greater* satisfaction with their past Social Life ($M = 86.69$) than Included participants ($M = 73.19$), $t(123) = -3.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$. These diverging effects are

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[1] "*Performance*" may have implied specific grades, leading participants to think of definite markers of satisfaction, thereby diminishing mood effects. We used the more ambiguous "Academic Life" in Experiments 2–3.