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The contextual and systematic nature of life satisfaction judgments[☆]

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Abstract

Five studies were conducted to examine the nature of life satisfaction judgments. When the category of “excitement” was made accessible experimentally, individuals based their life satisfaction judgments more heavily on the frequency of excitement, in comparison to a “peaceful” condition in Study 1 and to both “neutral priming” and “no-priming” conditions in Study 2. A 7-day diary study (Study 3) showed that as “excitement” became naturally more accessible on weekends, the correlations between excitement and daily satisfaction also increased significantly. Study 3 thus illustrated a systematic contextual shift in the bases of life satisfaction judgments. Study 4 showed that high sensation seekers, for whom “excitement” should be chronically accessible, based their life satisfaction judgments more heavily on the frequency of excitement than did low sensation seekers. Finally, Study 5 demonstrated that the chronic accessibility of “excitement” measured at Time 1 predicted the degree to which individuals based their life satisfaction judgments on the frequency of excitement at Time 2. Altogether, these five studies highlight the contextually sensitive, yet systematic nature of life satisfaction judgments.

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When the legendary North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith announced his retirement in 1997, he explained his decision as follows: “I examine every October if I am excited about coaching, and I wasn’t this year.” As Schwarz and Clore (1996) maintain, answers to such questions as “Am I excited about this job?” and “Am I satisfied with my life?” can provide crucial information pertinent to significant life decisions (see also Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Schwarz & Strack, 1999 for review). The dependability of such judgments is questionable, however. For instance, Midwesterners may decide to move to California because they believe that the better climate would make them happier there (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998). Similarly, assistant professors may work hard because they believe that not getting tenure would be devastating (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley,

1998). But Californians are not happier than Midwesterners (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998), and faculty who fail to get tenure are not as unhappy as people might think (Gilbert et al., 1998). Midwesterners tend to overestimate the role of climate in California, and assistant professors tend to overestimate the role of tenure in their well-being. These phenomena are called the focusing illusion (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998) and focalism (Gilbert et al., 1998), because people weigh salient (focal) information disproportionately when forecasting future affective states or judging the life satisfaction of others.

A judgment model of subjective well-being (SWB)

These biases, however, are not limited to affective forecasting and life satisfaction judgments about others. Salient information has a large impact on one’s own life satisfaction judgments as well (see Schwarz & Strack, 1999 for a review). In seminal experiments, Strack, Martin, and Schwarz (1988) found that making a life domain temporarily accessible influenced global life satisfaction judgments. When respondents reported

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their life satisfaction before reporting their happiness with dating, the correlation between life satisfaction and dating was merely .16, suggesting that respondents did not base their life satisfaction judgments on their happiness with dating. But when respondents reported their happiness with dating immediately before their life satisfaction, the correlation increased to .55, suggesting that respondents in this condition did base their life satisfaction judgments on dating happiness. Schwarz, Strack, and Mai (1991b) found similar effects of another temporarily accessible domain (marital satisfaction) on global life satisfaction judgments. Accordingly, Schwarz and Strack (1999) have argued that life satisfaction judgments are often dominated by temporarily accessible information.

Schwarz and Strack (1999) speculated that people also use current affective states as bases for life satisfaction judgments. Using an ingenious misattribution manipulation, Schwarz and Clore (1983, Exp. 2) found that respondents reported being happier and more satisfied with their lives on a sunny day than on a rainy day. However, when they were reminded of the weather first, there was no difference in life satisfaction between sunny and rainy days. In other words, people based their life satisfaction judgments on their moods, unless those moods were explicitly attributed to the weather.

Based on these findings, Schwarz and Strack (1999) proposed a judgment model of SWB. That model describes two distinctive strategies for life satisfaction judgments: the current mood strategy and the comparison strategy. Unless affective states are weak, or the informational value of such states is discredited, individuals base global life satisfaction judgments on their current moods. This is the default strategy for global life satisfaction judgments. When the current mood strategy is not appropriate, a comparison strategy is used, and individuals draw on temporarily accessible information. There are a few limitations, however, to the role of temporarily accessible information. First, when a category is blatantly primed, temporarily accessible information tends to be discounted and there may be contrast effects (see Martin, 1986). Second, when the information made temporarily accessible is not relevant for evaluating a target, that information is not always used in later evaluations of the target (e.g., Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993).

Life satisfaction judgments: Are they arbitrary?

When current affective states and temporarily accessible information are determined by such factors as the weather, or the order in which people answer questions, life satisfaction judgments can seem arbitrary and unstable. But are they? Although previous research on such judgments has focused on the effects of extraneous

factors, Schwarz and Strack (1999) suggest that people often base life satisfaction judgments on chronically accessible information. As various researchers have noted (Higgins, 1996; Schwarz & Strack, 1999; Srull & Wyer, 1986), chronically accessible information reflects people's daily concerns (Klinger, 1977), life tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), needs (Bruner, 1957), and values (Oishi, Schimack, Diener, & Suh, 1998; Rokeach, 1973).

To the extent that goals and values differ across individuals (Emmons, 1989; Oishi et al., 1998) and cultures (e.g., Hahn et al., 2001), the particular information that is accessible when life satisfaction judgments are made could differ across individuals and cultures. For instance, self-esteem and freedom are more prominent values, and thus more chronically accessible concepts, in individualist nations (e.g., the US) than in collectivist nations (e.g., China, India), so these concepts should be more strongly correlated with global life satisfaction judgments in individualist nations than in collectivist nations. In fact, Diener and Diener (1995) and Oishi, Diener, Lucas, and Suh (1999a) found support for exactly this prediction. And because people's values reflect their goals, value-congruent domains should be more closely associated with global life satisfaction judgments than value-incongruent domains. Indeed, Oishi, Diener, Suh, and Lucas (1999b) found that daily life satisfaction was more strongly associated with daily achievement satisfaction among students high in achievement values than among those low in achievement values. These findings do not mean that chronically accessible information is more pervasive or stronger than temporarily accessible information, but rather that chronically accessible information is just as important as temporarily accessible information in life satisfaction judgments (cf., Bargh, 1982; Bargh & Pratto, 1986; Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982; Markus, 1977; see Higgins, 1996; Wyer & Srull, 1989).

Our research

Despite the wide range of evidence showing the effects of temporarily and chronically accessible information on life satisfaction judgments (e.g., Oishi et al., 1999a, 1999b; Schwarz et al., 1991b; Strack et al., 1988), no one has yet examined temporarily and chronically accessible information in the same studies. This lack of integration creates some ambiguity regarding the accessibility model. Demonstrating an effect of temporarily accessible information in one domain (e.g., dating, marriage), and an effect of chronically accessible information in another (e.g., the self, achievement), makes it unclear whether these effects will span domains. For instance, dating may have a temporary accessibility effect on life satisfaction judgments, but not a chronic accessibility effect. Or maybe the experimental priming of

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