



Tomorrow I could be in trouble...but the sun will come out next year: The effect of temporal distance on adolescents' judgments of life satisfaction

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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Adolescents
Construal level theory
Happiness
Life satisfaction
Temporal distance

In a series of three studies, we examined adolescents' judgments of temporal life satisfaction (LS). We based our predictions in the notion of temporal distance influence in the level of construal of near- and distant-future events. In Study 1 we found that adolescents enhance future and present LS while devaluating past LS. Manipulating temporal distance in Study 2 and 3 and examining differences between- and within-subjects, respectively, we found that adolescents expected to be more satisfied with their life in the distant- than in the near-future. Moreover, framing LS in the near-future led adolescents to expect lower LS than they reported one week earlier. In contrast, expectations for own LS in the distant-future were not higher than self-reported LS measured one week before the experiment. The authors discuss implications for theory development and implications in the study of adolescents' LS.

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Life Satisfaction (LS) is a key indicator of Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and refers to a comparison process in which individuals assess the quality of their lives on the basis of their own self-imposed standard (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In recent years the interest for adolescents' LS has increased (see Antaramian, Huebner, & Valois, 2008; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009a, 2009b; Garcia & Siddiqui, 2009a, 2009b) and findings show that adolescents that experience high levels of satisfaction with their life also show less emotional and behavioral problems (e.g., Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Moreover, research in the field of positive psychology suggests that a positive future outlook (e.g., hope, optimism) has implications in how both adults and adolescents cope with current situations, in turn, influencing judgments of LS (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Rigby & Huebner, 2005; Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Certainly, optimism is sometimes even used as a measure of happiness (e.g., The Oxford Happiness Index by Argyle, Martin, & Lu, 1995). However, despite already existing instruments to measure temporal variations of LS (e.g., Temporal Satisfaction With Life Scale, TSWLS; Pavot, Diener, & Suh, 1998) not many studies have explored LS from a temporal perspective (for some studies see Lachman, Röcke, Rosnick, & Ryff, 2008; McIntosh, 2000; Ye, 2007). In this context, Lachman and colleagues (2008) suggest that particularly among youth, beliefs about future LS are important—adolescents that predict low future LS probably make risky decisions, not worrying about an unhappy future. Conversely, a positive outlook might have repercussions on motivation and choice of goals. Furthermore, Lachman and colleagues point out a life-span developmental perspective suggesting that adolescents focus on identity formation and expect to see self-improvement over time, thus, enhancing the future while older adults enhance the past. Nevertheless, optimism about the future and theories of development probably do not explain all aspects in how temporal distance may influence judgments of future LS (for a review see Trope & Liberman, 2003).

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Construal level theory

Construal Level Theory (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 1998) posits that everyday life predictions, evaluations, and choices are influenced by how near or distant in time the event is. Temporal distance influences individuals' responses to future events by changing the way they construe those events. Specifically, near events are constructed as more concrete, complex and contextualized (i.e., low-level construals). In contrast, distant events are constructed as more abstract, simple and decontextualized (i.e., high-level construals; for more distinguishing features between construal levels see Trope & Liberman, 2003). Naturally, a wide range of information is probably used when individuals are asked to assess the subjective quality of their life (for a review see Schwartz & Strack, 1999). In this framework, a high-level construal about distant-future LS may include "having good grades"; while a low-level construal about near-future LS may include "doing well in next week's math exam". To the best of our knowledge no other studies have investigated the CLT in the context of LS. However, some findings suggest that the level of construal might influence judgments of LS as predicted by the CLT.

Strack, Schwarz, and Gschneidinger (1985; Experiment 2) found that past events are more likely to be used as a standard of comparison for subsequent judgments of LS when participants were asked to describe past events in a few words (i.e., abstract description) than when they were asked to describe past events in detail. This specific finding is in concordance with CLT, representations of distant events are abstract and receive higher value and therefore become a standard. For example, Kivetz and Tyler (2007) found that adults are idealistic under distant time perspectives but become pragmatic under near perspectives. Kivetz and Tyler (2007) concluded that the pragmatic self perhaps controls the present, thus individuals fail to make decisions and choices that reflect their main idealistic beliefs and values. Indeed, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) showed that, in contrast to focusing on paying more attention to the ordinary details in life; regularly visualizing the accomplishing of important life goals, and own best potentials influences adults' SWB in a positive direction. This is important in the context of adolescence, because whereas major life events (e.g., parent getting remarried) influence adolescents' LS, daily problems in adolescents' lives (e.g., coping with a minor social conflict) seem to be equally stressful experiences (McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000). If it is so, framing LS at different points in time probably influence the range of information adolescents might use when asked to assess the subjective quality of their life.

The present study

The present study aims to investigate if temporal distance influences the way adolescents judge their own LS and if adolescents make different judgments when LS is framed in a near- or distant-future. Three studies were conducted using the TSWLS (Study 1) and a temporal distance manipulated version of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Study 2 & 3). In a general level we expected adolescents to show a tendency to enhance the future while probably devaluing the past. If it is so and if distant-future events are more abstract representations than near-future events, we expect adolescents to evaluate distant-future LS higher than near-future LS.

Study 1: past, present, and future life satisfaction

Study 1 was based in the notion of adolescents expecting to see self-improvement over time. Hence, adolescents are expected to evaluate future LS higher than past LS. We also expect evaluations of present LS to be higher than evaluations of past LS. In other words, adolescents probably evaluate themselves as more satisfied with their life in the future and the present than they are with their past.

Method

Participants and procedure

Pupils at a high school in the county of Blekinge, Sweden, participated in the three studies ($N = 156$). One hundred pupils were randomly selected to participate in Study 1. The rest of the population ($n = 56$) was randomly assigned to either Study 2 ($n = 28$) or 3 ($n = 28$). At a parent meeting, all parents were informed of the present and other studies being conducted among adolescents at the school. The nature of the studies was explained (e.g., instruments, confidentiality) and questions addressed at the same meeting. Pupils were told that their involvement was voluntary, confidential and that the studies were about how high school pupils think about their lives. Due to sickness only 81 pupils (59 females) with an age mean of 16.65 years ($SD = .94$) participated in Study 1. In Study 1, all participants were presented with the TSWLS followed by other instruments.

Instrument

The temporal satisfaction with life scale (TSWLS; Pavot et al., 1998)

The TSWLS comprises 15-items (7-point Likert scale; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) organized in three subscales assessing past (e.g., If I had my past to live over, I would change nothing), present (e.g., I would change nothing about my current life), and future LS (e.g., There will be nothing that I will want to change about my future). The Cronbach's α in the present study were: .76 (past), .88 (present), .87 (future).

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