



The adaptive power of the present: Perceptions of past, present, and future life satisfaction across the life span



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ABSTRACT

Despite remarkable stability of life satisfaction across the life span, it may be adaptive to perceive change in life satisfaction. We shed new light on this topic with data from 766 individuals from three age groups and past, present, and future life satisfaction perceptions across the life span. On average, participants were most satisfied with their current life. When looking back, satisfaction increased from past to present, and when looking ahead, satisfaction decreased into the future. Trajectories were best fitted with a curvilinear growth model. Neuroticism and extraversion predicted the level of trajectories, but none of the Big Five predicted the slope. We conclude that humans have an adaptive capacity to perceive the present life as being the best possible.

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1. Introduction

To understand how individuals perceive their lives and how this perception changes when looking back and ahead across their entire life is a key to investigating the potential adaptive capacity of self-perception for human functioning. In this article, we focus on subjective perceptions of life satisfaction trajectories; that is, how individuals rate their past, present, and future life satisfaction across their entire life span. This notion of looking back to evaluate one's past and looking ahead to envision one's future entails intra-individual temporal comparisons that trace back to propositions of implicit theories to reconstruct the past as a function of the present self (Ross, 1989), temporal comparison processes (e.g., Albert, 1977; Wilson & Ross, 2001), possible (past and future) selves (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986), self-deception (Robinson & Ryff, 1999), and affective forecasting (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). The common ground of these approaches is that the self operates as a construction of the past, the present, and the future with self-evaluative processes to compare the present with the past life (i.e., perceived improvement vs. impairment) and the present with the future life (i.e., anticipated improvement vs. impairment). Such subjective perceptions lie at the core of the present study, which focused on perceived trajectories of past, present, and future life satisfaction across the life span. In doing so, we shed new light on previous studies that found life satisfaction to be generally

rated far above the neutral point (e.g., Diener, 2000) and remarkably stable across adulthood both in cross-sectional (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1998; Hamarat et al., 2002) and longitudinal studies (e.g., Baird, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2010; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005), with significant decline only in old age (e.g., Gerstorf et al., 2008). Thus, despite remarkable stability in actual trajectories of life satisfaction, subjective perceptions of life satisfaction trajectories may vary across the life span and provide the ground for a human adaptive capacity to maintain a consistent view of the self (Jones, 1973).

1.1. A life-span developmental perspective

Individuals generally have implicit theories of developmental trajectories that mirror assumptions of traditional life-span psychology with an increase in skills and competencies throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, followed by stability in adulthood, and a decrease in old age. This perspective is often portrayed with the picture of an inverted u-shaped life stairs. Contemporary life-span developmental psychology challenges this overly simplified view on human development and understands development as a dynamic process of intertwined increases and decreases, i.e., gains and losses. Thus, development is multidimensional and multidirectional as different domains of human functioning follow different developmental pathways (Baltes, 1987). At any given time across the life span human development is an expression of the relation between developmental gains and losses, and this relation is likely to undergo age-related changes across the life span: especially in the second half of life there is a shift in the proportion of the relation between gains and losses resulting in the losses outweighing the gains in late adulthood (Baltes, 1987, 1997).

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Life-span developmental perspectives propose that humans have an inherent adaptive capacity to compensate for negative outcomes and constraints across the life span (e.g., Baltes, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994; Carstensen, 1995; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). More specifically, the assumption of adaptive capacity traces back to Baltes' (1987) seminal contribution on the dynamic interplay between growth (i.e., gains) and decline (i.e., losses) as a feature of any developmental progression that takes place at any time point during the life span. The process of selective optimization with compensation has been used to refer to humans' inherent adaptive capacity to apply selective, optimizing, and compensatory resources to master difficulties or deficits throughout the life span (Baltes, 1987). As people age, there is a shift in the allocation of resources from an orientation on growth in younger adulthood to a focus on maintenance and regulation of loss in older adulthood (e.g., Baltes, 1997).

Another life-span approach—socioemotional selectivity theory—offers a framework that focuses on the individual perception of time left in life (Carstensen, 1995; Carstensen et al., 1999). According to this theory, the awareness of transience becomes more salient with increasing age and leads older people to more consciously look back on their lives in order to successfully integrate their past into their present self (see also Erikson, 1980), and to accept that further improvement in the future may be unlikely to occur. The theory suggests that people adjust their perceptions of their current life to adapt to different life goals and that life goals become more relational and emotional as people age (Carstensen, 1995). In addition, with increasing age, people show better emotion regulation (Carstensen et al., 1999) and are more likely to recall positive than negative information from their past (e.g., Charles, Mather, & Carstensen, 2003).

Thus, arguing from a life-span developmental perspective, there is a shifting focus from a rather unlimited to a more limited time perspective from young to older age (Carstensen et al., 1999). Moreover, there is a shift in resource allocation, given that childhood and young adulthood are typically perceived as a time of continued growth, adulthood as a time of maintenance, and older adulthood as a time of avoidance of age-related losses (e.g., Baltes, 1997). Together, these theories of life-span development describe processes that are highly adaptive for human functioning because individuals generally strive for self-improvement (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Wilson & Ross, 2001) and self-consistency (Jones, 1973). In addition, because these life-span approaches affect individuals' implicit theories of developmental trajectories, young, middle-aged, and older adults might report different perceptions of past, present, and future life satisfaction across the life span.

1.2. Empirical evidence on perceived trajectories of past, present, and future life satisfaction

Some previous studies embraced the challenge to analyze people's adaptive capacity in this regard. For instance, in one study young, middle-aged, and older adults were asked to rate their past, present, and future well-being (Ryff, 1991). Young and middle-aged adults perceived lower well-being in their past compared to the present, whereas well-being perceptions of older adults were stable. When looking into the future, young and middle-aged adults expected continued gains in the years ahead, whereas older adults expected a decline in their future well-being (Ryff, 1991). In a similar vein, another study investigated ratings of past (i.e., 10 years ago), present, and future (i.e., 10 years ahead) subjective well-being (Staudinger, Bluck, & Herzberg, 2003). Young adults rated past subjective well-being lower and future subjective well-being higher than present subjective well-being. Middle-aged adults showed no difference in their ratings of past and present

well-being, but expected an increase in the future. Older adults in turn, perceived past well-being to be higher than present, and present well-being higher than anticipated well-being in the future (Staudinger et al., 2003). These results were confirmed and extended in a longitudinal study where little change in actual life satisfaction trajectories over a 10-year period was found, but substantial age differences in anticipated change were found. More specifically, young adults expected an increase in their future life satisfaction, whereas older adults expected a decline (Lachman, Röcke, Rosnick, & Ryff, 2008). In another longitudinal study with a community sample of young adults, participants were asked to rate their past (i.e., 1 year ago), present, and future (i.e., 5 years ahead) life satisfaction at two measurement occasions 5 years apart. Results revealed an upward life satisfaction trajectory in young adulthood, that is life satisfaction in the past was rated lower than present, and present lower than future life satisfaction at both time points (Busseri, Choma, & Sadava, 2009). Very recently, a study used national household panel data from Germany (including perceptions of present and future life satisfaction, i.e., 5 years ahead) and found that younger adults expected life satisfaction to be higher in the future, whereas middle-aged adults and older adults expected lower future life satisfaction (Lang, Weiss, Gerstorf, & Wagner, 2013).

To sum up, theoretical propositions of life-span development and previous research suggest age-differential effects in perceived trajectories of past and future life satisfaction: Young adults generally recall improvement from the past to the present and expect further improvement in the future, middle-aged adults recall stable or increasing life satisfaction from the past to the present and expect further increase in the future, and older adults recall stable or decreasing life satisfaction from the past to the present and expect further decrease in the future. However, all of these studies focused on a limited time span of a maximum of 10 years to recall past and anticipate future life satisfaction (i.e., 1, 5, or 10 years ago for past life satisfaction, and 5 or 10 years ahead for future life satisfaction, respectively), i.e., covering, at most, a quarter of the average life span of people living nowadays. Due to this limitation, previous studies could not identify the subjectively perceived peak of the life-span trajectory and, consequently, could not test whether individuals tend to perceive the present as the best time of their life. Hence, in order to investigate humans' adaptive capacity within a life-span framework, perceptions of the past and the future should comprise the entire life span.

1.3. The present study

The present study adopts the idea of a human adaptive capacity in an attempt to reinterpret the predominantly stable high levels of subjective well-being across the adult life span. We believe that individuals possess an adaptive self-regulatory capacity to perceive oneself at the current time in life in the best psychological situation in order to maintain a self-consistent view of oneself (Jones, 1973). This is similar to what Quoidbach, Gilbert, and Wilson (2013) recently called "end of history illusion". They found that individuals of all ages have a general misconception about future changes and believe that although they have changed a lot in the past, there is not much more change to expect in the future. The authors conclude that individuals in young, middle-aged, and older adulthood think that their present self is the person they will remain for the rest of their lives (Quoidbach et al., 2013). In order to test the assumption of adaptive capacity, we conducted a cross-sectional study of past, present, and future life satisfaction perceptions covering the entire life span with participants from three age groups—young, middle-aged, and older adulthood. Since the past and future life satisfaction ratings used in the present study cover the entire life span, we substantially expand previous

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