



## Full Length Article

Examining the effect of affect on life satisfaction judgments: A within-person perspective <sup>☆</sup>Eranda Jayawickreme <sup>a,\*,1</sup>, Eli Tsukayama <sup>b,1</sup>, Todd B. Kashdan <sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Wake Forest University, United States<sup>b</sup> University of Hawaii-West Oahu, United States<sup>c</sup> George Mason University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

While extant studies have examined between-person relationships between life satisfaction and current affect, the nature of this relationship is fundamentally a within-person question. We define this effect of affect on life satisfaction as the proportion of total variance in life satisfaction explained by changes in affect over time. In a study of life satisfaction judgments ( $N = 92$  with 353 assessments), we found that the effect of current affect on life satisfaction was relatively inconsequential.

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## 1. Introduction

Well-being is a widely popular and important topic of research (e.g., Harward, 2016; Seligman, 2011; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). Most psychologists studying well-being employ both affective (positive and negative emotional states) and cognitive (evaluation of one's satisfaction with life) measures as overall indicators of the subjective quality of an individual's life (subjective well-being [SWB]; Busseri & Sadava, 2011; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). While much well-being research had measured SWB with one of or all of these composite indicators, affective and cognitive well-being are distinct constructs that have different predictors and consequences (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010).

For example, the more widely used assessment of cognitive well-being is life satisfaction, which captures how our lives are progressing (Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman, 2012). Life

circumstances such as income, job status, or recent life events tend to have stronger effects on life satisfaction than on affect measures (Diener et al., 2010; Schimmack, Schupp, & Wagner, 2008). Moreover, high levels of life satisfaction have been shown to be prospectively associated with greater workplace success, increased lifespan, better health, and more positive work and family life events over a five-year period (Diener & Chan, 2011; Luhmann, Lucas, Eid, & Diener, 2013). In addition, a meta-analysis of forty-four studies found an average correlation of 0.42 between self-reports and informant reports of life satisfaction (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009), and this relationship between self and informant reports was found to increase when more informants were utilized (Zou, Schimmack, & Gere, 2012); this correlation between self- and informant reports is substantially higher than comparable effects when the focus is affect or mood.

While most researchers see SWB as a necessarily multi-faceted concept (Busseri & Sadava, 2011; Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2003), Veenvhoven (2002) has argued that general life satisfaction represents the best proxy for the conceptualization and measurement of quality of life distinct from affect (i.e., the gold standard measure of well-being; Layard, 2010). In the World Happiness Database (<http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness>; Veenvhoven, 2008), including over 5300 empirical studies on the topic of happiness, life satisfaction is measured in a number of different ways. Participants may be asked to rate their overall life satisfaction on a 10-point Likert

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“ladder” scale, answer a single-item question, or be first asked to assign the worst possible life they could imagine a 0 and the best possible life a 10 before designating a number to reflect their life satisfaction. Following Layard’s (2005, 2006) utilitarian perspective of fostering the greatest happiness for the greatest number, Veenhoven (2004) has argued that increasing overall life satisfaction should be a primary aim of governments. Layard (2011) has similarly argued that governments should consider utilizing life satisfaction as a single indicator of well-being for evaluating policy.

However, one concern raised about the validity of life satisfaction measures is that when people make judgments about their lives as a whole (which typically involve circumstances that do not change very quickly), they do not always think carefully about all the relevant information, but instead rely on current affect as a heuristic (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). In an influential review, Schwarz and Strack (1999) for example presented evidence that situational conditions such as mood can strongly influence self-reports of life satisfaction. They argued that individuals use their current mood as a parsimonious indicator of their well-being, unless the informational value of their affective state is questioned, and predicted that this effect should be stronger for global reports of life satisfaction than for reports of satisfaction with specific life-domains, given the specificity with which life domains are defined. To provide one example, one experimental study found that participants reported lower levels of life satisfaction on rainy days compared to sunny days, as the weather had influenced their mood (Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

One response to this “contamination” effect of affect has been to examine the strength of the between-person relationship between life satisfaction and current affect; in other words, researchers have examined this effect as the proportion of overlapping variance between affect and life satisfaction at the between-person level (e.g. Diener, Fulita, Tay, & Biswas-Diener, 2012; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). However, a limitation of between-person analyses is that once a relationship among two variables is identified at the global (between-person) level, it is often inferred that the relationship holds true at the momentary (within-person) level. This is known as the ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950). However, within-person approaches may reveal different answers from what between-person approaches reveal, since the causes for why variables may vary across people may be different from why they vary within a person across situations (e.g., fixed neurological structures at the trait level; Fleeson, 2007). For instance, exercise and blood pressure may have different relationships at the between- and within-person levels. At the between-person level, there might be a negative relationship: people who exercise have lower blood pressure than people who don’t exercise because people who exercise have better cardiac health. At the within-person level, there might be a positive relationship: when exercising, one’s blood pressure increases because of aerobic demands. In general, the direction and magnitude of any effect will vary depending on the level of analysis; there are very specific (relatively rare) situations where the between- and within-effects will be the same (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009).

In one particularly sophisticated study, Eid and Diener (2004) used latent state-trait models to partition the variance in life satisfaction at the state and trait level and found that the (“trait”) consistency variance (about 80–90% of the variance) was higher than the occasion-specific variance (about 10–20% of the variance).<sup>2</sup>

This study addressed similar questions to the current investigation. Specifically, both Eid and Diener and the current investigation partition the total variance into “trait” (i.e., stable between-individual differences) and “state” (i.e., deviations from an individual’s average) components. A relatively large proportion of trait (vs. state) variance suggests that life satisfaction is relatively stable and not susceptible to occasion-specific influences, including affect. Eid and Diener also examined the between-person relationship between mood and life satisfaction at the occasion-specific and trait levels and found that the trait-level relationship ( $r = 0.74$ ) was larger than the occasion-specific relationships ( $r_s = 0.13–0.55$ ). These results suggest that there is a relatively large relationship between trait life satisfaction and mood, but relatively small relationships at specific occasions. In turn, this suggests that mood has a relatively small effect on life satisfaction at specific occasions (if we assume the correlations reflect causal relationships).

However, the question of whether reports of life satisfaction are “contaminated” by mood is fundamentally a within-person question. That is, do changes in affect impact changes in life satisfaction for a particular person? For example, if an individual’s current positive affect increases, will her life satisfaction rating also increase? Eid and Diener’s (2004) residual-based approach addresses the ecological fallacy discussed above by removing overall between-individual variance from the occasion-specific effects, but their models examined effects across individuals within occasions (e.g., does a person with a relatively large occasion-specific residual of life satisfaction also have a relatively large occasion-specific residual of mood relative to other individuals?). While this approach resolves multilevel statistical issues (e.g., the ecological fallacy and correlated errors), it is complicated conceptually. A conceptually more straightforward/direct test of the effect of affect would examine variance *within individuals across occasions*. In other words, Eid and Diener’s (2004) models examined variance across individuals within occasions, whereas a conceptually more direct test of the effect of affect would examine variance within individuals across occasions. To be clear, Eid and Diener’s approach and the current approach address similar questions, but the current approach is a conceptually more straightforward way of testing the within-person effect of affect across occasions.

Conceptualizing the “contamination” effect of current affect on life satisfaction in terms of the proportion of total variance in life satisfaction explained by changes in affect over time has the advantage of reconciling disparate stances in the fields of personality and well-being. For example, while the effect of changes in affect on changes in life satisfaction might be large, the actual impact in relation to the total variance could be relatively small. In other words, the effect of affect might largely explain most of the overlapping variance between affect and life satisfaction at the within-person level, yet still be relatively inconsequential overall. This could explain both research showing evidence that life satisfaction is a meaningful and relatively stable individual difference (e.g. research showing prospective effects of life satisfaction, Luhmann et al., 2013), as well as arguments that life satisfaction are sensitive to changes in affect (e.g. Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011; Huppert & So, 2009; Seligman, 2011). Changes in affect could completely explain changes in life satisfaction over relatively short time periods (e.g., a few weeks), but life satisfaction could still remain relatively stable (see Fig. 1a vs. b).

## 2. The present study

In the present study, we examine both the between- and within-person relationships between affect and life satisfaction; testing the within-person relationship directly using multilevel

<sup>2</sup> Both Eid and Diener (2004) and the current investigation used latent variables to adjust for measurement error, so technically, the total variance was partitioned into three components: trait, state, and error. Because our focus is on the trait and state components, we focus our discussion on the trait and state components for parsimony and intelligibility.

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