



Subjective happiness and autobiographical memory: Differences in the ratio of positive events and transmission as emotional expression



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the relationship between subjective happiness and autobiographical memories having a controlled emotional state from three aspects: high ratio of positive emotional memories; intensity of positive emotions; and differences in expression or transmission of the experienced events. The participants were 186 Japanese undergraduates who were administered the Japanese version of the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) after which emotion induction was conducted and the emotional state was assessed to control participant's emotional state as a neutral. The participants were then given five minutes to recall the events that they experienced over the past five years. Results showed that (1) the ratio of remembering positive emotional events increased with an increase in subjective happiness; (2) the ratio of communicating with others by less happy people was significantly lower than that by individuals with medium and high levels of happiness; and (3) the intensity of emotions was not associated with differences in individual happiness. Finally, the structures of subjective happiness from the viewpoint of autobiographical memories and emotions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Happiness is one of the important themes in psychology, and the differences between happy and less happy people have been the subject of focus in various studies. For example, happy people have highly satisfying relationships with their families, romantic partners, and friends, and they generally experience more positive events and emotions in their daily lives than negative ones (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Furthermore, happiness plays an important role in building good communities and societies (Myers, 1992) in addition to having a positive effect on effective coping, mental and physical health, and longevity (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). As for the relationship with personality traits, happiness is positively predicted by extraversion, whereas it is negatively influenced by neuroticism (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Lü, Wang, Liu, & Zhang, 2014).

Why do happy people have these characteristics? Lyubomirsky and Tucker (1998) reported that happy people tend to recall both positive and negative life events favorably and adaptively. They further suggested that happy people perceive, evaluate, and think about certain events in more positive ways than unhappy people. Lyubomirsky (2001) suggested that happy and unhappy individuals

differ in their particular cognitive, judgmental, and motivational strategies. Moreover, she stated that cognitive and motivational processes mainly appear to operate automatically and without awareness.

In this paper on autobiographical memory studies, I argue that there are three possible mechanisms for understanding the differences between happy and unhappy people: (1) the high ratio of positive emotional memories; (2) the intensity of positive emotions; and (3) the differences in expression or transmission of the emotional events.

First, I discuss previous studies that have investigated the emotional valence (i.e., positive versus negative) of autobiographical memories. Some studies have shown that our recollections of the past often tend to be positively biased. For instance, studies of emotional memory (Anisfeld & Lambert, 1966; Stagner, 1933) have shown a predilection for the positive/pleasant over the negative/unpleasant. Other studies (Berntsen, 1996; Berntsen & Hall, 2004) reported that involuntary autobiographical memories in daily life are more often about positive than about negative events. On the other hand, in specific situations such as recollections of traumatic experiences, negative biases have been found (McNally, Litz, Prassas, Shin, & Weathers, 1994; Tromp, Koss, Figueredo, & Tharan, 1995). Individuals in a negative emotional state are characterized by an increased focus on negative autobiographical memories and less positive emotion; this result has been found in

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cases of depression (Werner-Seidler & Moulds, 2012) and social anxiety (Moscovitch, Gavric, Merrifield, Bielak, & Moscovitch, 2011). Accordingly, individuals who have experienced trauma or negative emotional states are more likely to display high levels of negative emotion in their responses to memory recollection.

In contrast, Seidlitz and Diener (1993) indicated that happy people recall a greater number of positive events and fewer negative events compared with unhappy people. Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, and Evans (1992) investigated whether happy people believe that good weather is more likely than bad weather, and reported that happy people interpret their life circumstances more positively than less happy people. Thus, such findings suggest that the differences in the ratio of emotional memories are due to individual happiness, and that happy people have high ratios of positive emotions in autobiographical memories. Accordingly, what is the breakdown of these ratios? And how high are these ratios of positive emotions in autobiographical memories of happy people? According to previous studies on autobiographical memories, the ratio of positive emotions was generally high compared to negative ones, although the conclusions do not specifically mention it. For example, when recalling an event that occurred over a 30-day period, Flügel (1925) showed that the ratio of emotional memories was 50.1% for positive emotions, 22.2% for negative emotions, and 27.8% for neutral emotions. Furthermore, Waldfoegel (1948) reported that, when recalling past events, the ratio of emotional memories was approximately 50% for positive events, roughly 30% for negative events, and 20% for neutral events. However, these results are not entirely consistent, and there have been limited studies on the ratio of emotions in autobiographical memories and how this ratio differs from individual happiness. Thus, as one aspect regarding the differences between happy and unhappy people, this study focuses on the ratio of emotions.

However, previous studies only compared people with high and low levels of subjective happiness. Therefore, in the present study I also consider people in the medium range, classifying participants into three groups: happy people (high-happiness group), those whose degree of happiness is average (medium-happiness group), and unhappy people (low-happiness group), based on their subjective happiness scores. Furthermore, I hypothesized that this method, by identifying individual differences in greater detail through the delineating of three groups, would show a gradual change in the ratio of positive to negative emotional memories, correlated with levels of subjective happiness.

Moreover, significant research exists on mood-congruent recall. In other words, it is relatively easy to recall autobiographical memories with emotional valence, which is the same for current emotion (Blaney, 1986; Bower & Forgas, 2001). Levine (1997) reported that the recall of emotional events depends on the present state of the individual. Therefore, to exclude the influence of the emotional state immediately before recollection, this study investigates the autobiographical memories after establishing neutral emotions in the participants.

Second, concerning the intensity of positive emotions, previous studies have examined the relationship between emotional intensity and autobiographical memories. Holmes (1970) investigated this relationship using emotional balance (pleasant and unpleasant experiences) and emotional intensity and suggested that unpleasant experiences were generally recalled with less intensity than pleasant experiences. Bower (1981) showed that emotional intensity ratings were predictive of recall; that is, the mood-congruity effect stems from the influence of emotional intensity on memory. Talarico, LaBar, and Rubin (2004) indicated that intensity was a more consistent predictor of autographical memory properties than either valence or the age of the memory. They suggested that the effects of emotion on autobiographical memory properties are primarily due to these differences in emotional intensity between

memories. Seidlitz, Wyer, and Diener (1997) investigated the relationship between happiness and the cognitive processing of affective life events balance, and they reported that relatively more intense and enduring reactions to positive versus negative events were associated with higher levels of happiness. In turn, they further suggested that these differing reactions to events contributed to happiness, and more intense and enduring reactions to events were associated with a better recall of the events. These results indicate that the differences between happy and unhappy people suggest the differences in the perceived intensity and duration of emotional memory reactions. Thus, regarding autobiographical memories in life events, it can be stated that a happy person possesses a high degree of emotional intensity for positive memories, whereas an unhappy person possesses a high level of emotional intensity for negative memories. However, there have been no empirical studies on these differences and perspectives in autobiographical memories, particularly with regard to the differences in individual happiness.

Third, differences in expression or transmission of the emotional events is expected; that is, the differences with regard to whether or not people talk about experienced events and share their emotions with others. Considering the previous findings that happy people generally have good relationships with others, it can be suggested that such people enjoy talking about their experienced emotional events. In other words, happy people tend to share their emotions and talk about emotional events with others more than those who are unhappy; this may be one factor for such happiness in happy people. Even if people do not verbally describe their experienced events, writing about such events as a means of emotional expression can differ between happy and less happy people. For example, Pennebaker (1997) showed that writing about previous traumatic events, such as emotions, thoughts, and memories, has many positive effects on health and well-being. Harris (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of expressive writing on health and reported that writing about stressful experiences reduced healthcare utilization in healthy people but not in those who had medical diagnoses, psychological factors, or exposure to stress. Based on the aforementioned studies, it can be suggested that the effects of expressive writing can differ according to an individual's state of health. However, to date, no studies have investigated the relationship between such a method of emotional expression and individual happiness.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the relationship between subjective happiness and autobiographical memories from three aspects: high ratio of positive emotional memories; intensity of positive emotions; and differences in expression or transmission of the experienced events. This study is also distinguished, as noted earlier, by the analysis of three separate groups according to levels of subjective happiness: high, medium, and low. The study design permits assessment of the impact on autobiographical memories of gradations of change in subjective happiness. Three hypotheses are proposed. As subjective happiness increases, individuals are expected to (1) have higher ratios of positive emotions for autobiographical memories, (2) have a higher degree of emotional intensity regarding positive memories, and (3) discuss experienced events and share their emotions with others more readily.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 186 (85 males and 101 females) Japanese undergraduates (M age = 19.2 years and SD = 1.14) who were asked to complete self-reported questionnaires administered in their psychology classes in exchange for a course credit. Before

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