How to Think (and Not to Think) About Your Life:

Some Lessons from Social Judgment Research

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Every year, thousands of survey respondents around the world are asked to report on how happy and satisfied they are with their lives as a whole and with various life-domains. The answers they provide serve as "subjective social indicators," which complement "objective social indicators" like traditional measures of the standard of living (for reviews of relevant findings see Campbell, 1981; Glatzer, 1991). As Angus Campbell (1981, p. 23), one of the pioneers of subjective social indicator research, pointed out, the use of subjective social indicators "is based on the assumption that all the countless experiences people go through from day to day add to (...) global feelings of well-being, that these feelings remain relatively constant over extended periods, and that people can describe them with candor and accuracy." As this research progressed, however, it became increasingly obvious that these assumptions are highly problematic. In particular, the relationship between individuals' experiences and objective conditions of life is weak. Most objective life circumstances account for less than 5% of the variance in measures of subjective well-being and the combination of the circumstances in a dozen domains of life does not account for more than 10% (Kammann, 1982). Moreover, circumstances that are commonly assumed to make a difference in the quality of one's life often fail to do so, whereas minor events that are not assumed to make a difference do. Some examples from different domains of life include that poor people are sometimes happier than rich ones (Easterlin, 1973), that patients three years after a cancer operation were happier than a healthy control group (Irwin et al., 1982), or that paralyzed accident victims were happier with their life than one might expect on the basis of the event (Brickman, et al., 1978). On the other hand, mundane events, like finding a dime (Schwarz, 1983) or watching one's soccer team win a game (Schwarz, Kommer, Strack, & Wagner, 1987), have been found to increase respondents' satisfaction with their lives-as-a-whole.

While findings of this type have been deplored by researchers who consider subjective social indicators to reflect rather stable inner states of the respondents (e.g., Campbell, 1981), they are less of a surprise to researchers in the area of social judgment. From this perspective, reports about happiness and satisfaction with one's life are not necessarily valid read-outs of an internal state of personal well-being. Rather, they are judgments which, like other social judgments, are subject to a variety of transient influences. As Sherman and Corty (1984, p. 218) noted, judgments which researchers ask respondents to make "don't passively tap into or elicit thoughts that are already in the subject's head". Rather, "it is often the case that the judgment is developed at the time the question is asked. Whatever information is available at the time and whatever principle of
judgment happens to be employed will determine the nature of the judgment. Many judgments can thus be considered constructions to a particular question posed at a particular time", rather than reflections of underlying stable attributes of the respondent.

During recent years, we have applied this perspective to explore how individuals evaluate their subjective well-being. In this research we have not been interested in "what" makes a person happy, but rather in "how" a person determines whether he or she is happy or not. We provide a comprehensive review of this work in Schwarz and Strack (1999), where we discuss its implications for social science research and the relationship between the objective conditions of life and their subjective evaluation. In the present chapter, we focus on one aspect of this work: What is the role of life-events in judgments of happiness and life-satisfaction? As will become apparent, the same event may increase as well as decrease our happiness, depending on how we think about it. Hence, we cannot predict the impact of a given event on a person's reported life-satisfaction without taking the underlying judgmental processes into account. We review relevant experimental research and provide, tongue in cheek, some advice to readers who want to think about their lives in a way that leaves them happy and satisfied.

**Information Accessibility**

How do respondents go about it when asked, "Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, not too happy?"

Unfortunately, "taking all things together" is a difficult mental task. In fact, as an instruction to think about all aspects of one's life, it requests something impossible from the respondent. How can a person conduct a complete review of "things these days", particularly in a survey interview in which the average time to answer a question is frequently less than one minute (Groves & Kahn, 1979)? Therefore, the person will certainly not think about all aspects but probably about some of them. The question is: about which?

**What Happens to Come to Mind**

One of the central principles in social cognition research predicts that it is the most accessible information that enters into the judgment. Individuals rarely retrieve all the information that potentially bears on a judgment, but truncate the search process as soon as enough information has come to mind to form the judgment with a reasonable degree of subjective certainty (for reviews see Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1987; Higgins, 1996). Accordingly, the judgment reflects the
implications of the information that comes to mind most easily. One determinant of the accessibility of information is the frequency and recency with which it is used. Applied to judgments of subjective well-being, prior use of relevant information may increase the likelihood that this information enters into the happiness judgment.

To test this assumption, we asked participants to write down three events that were either particularly positive and pleasant or particularly negative and unpleasant (Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985, Exp. 1). This was done under the pretext of collecting life-events for a life-event inventory, and the dependent variables, among them "happiness" and "satisfaction", were said to be assessed in order to "find the best response scales" for that instrument. As predicted, participants who had been induced to think about positive aspects of their present life described themselves as happier and more satisfied with their lives-as-a-whole than participants who had been induced to think about negative aspects.

In a related study (Strack, Martin, & Schwarz, 1988), participants were led to think about a relevant life domain simply by asking a specific question before they had to report their general happiness. Generating an answer should render this specific information more accessible for subsequent use and therefore influence the judgment. Specifically, we asked American students how frequently they go out for a date and how happy they are with their lives-as-a-whole, varying the order in which the two questions were presented. When the general happiness question preceded the dating frequency question, both measures correlated $r = -.12$, a correlation that is not significantly different from zero. Based on this correlation, we would conclude that dating frequency contributes little, if anything, to students' life-satisfaction. Yet reversing the question order increased the correlation to $r = .66$. In this case, we would conclude that dating frequency is a major determinant of students' overall happiness and life-satisfaction. Similarly, we observed that marital satisfaction and general life-satisfaction correlated $r = .32$ when the life-satisfaction question preceded the marital satisfaction question, but $r = .67$ when the question order was reversed (Schwarz, Strack, & Mai, 1991). This question order effect could also be observed in respondents' mean reports. Those who were happily married reported higher general life-satisfaction when they first thought about their marriage than when they did not. Conversely, those who were unhappily married reported lower general life-satisfaction under this condition.

In combination, these and related findings indicate that judgments of life-satisfaction are not based on the myriad of positive and negative aspects that characterize one's life. Instead, they are
based on a small subset of these aspects, namely the ones that happen to come to mind at the time of judgment. Some of these aspects are "chronically" accessible and likely to come to mind under most circumstances. A person suffering from a severe illness, or currently going through a painful divorce, may consider this aspect of her life under most circumstances. Other aspects, however, are only "temporarily" accessible and may simply come to mind because our attention was recently drawn to them. In general, chronically accessible information lends some stability to our judgments, whereas temporarily accessible information is the source of context effects of the type discussed above (Schwarz & Bless, 1992). These context effects raise considerable problems for empirical research into the conditions that make for a happy life, as the above findings illustrate. In general, we will overestimate the influence of circumstances that are brought to mind by the research instrument, at the expense of circumstances that are not brought to mind (see Schwarz & Strack, 1999, for a more detailed discussion of methodological implications).

**Advice.** In light of these findings, our first piece of advice will not come as a surprise: Thinking about positive aspects of your life is good for you! But before you try to count your blessings, we urge you to read on -- or else the outcome may not be what you hope for.

**How Easily It Comes to Mind**

In the Strack et al. (1985) study, reviewed above, participants reported higher life-satisfaction after they had to recall three positive rather than three negative events that recently happened to them. Suppose, however, that we had asked them to recall twelve events. Chances are that at least some participants would have found it difficult to do so. In this case, they may have concluded that there aren't many positive (negative) events in their lives -- or else recalling them would not be so difficult.

Consistent with this conjecture, we observed in several studies that the implications of what comes to mind are qualified by how easily it can be brought to mind (for a review see Schwarz, 1998). For example, we asked American students to list either four or twelve things they like or dislike about their date. As expected, those who had to list four positive aspects subsequently reported higher relationship satisfaction than those who had to list four negative aspects. This pattern, however, reversed for participants who had to list twelve aspects. Finding it difficult to think of twelve unique positive aspects of their date, they concluded that their date isn't that wonderful after all, resulting in decreased relationship satisfaction. Conversely, those who found it
difficult to think of twelve negative aspects of their date reported very high satisfaction, despite the numerous negative aspects rendered accessible by the recall task.

As these findings illustrate, the ease or difficulty with which information can be brought to mind is informative in its own right. People assume that frequent events are easier to recall than rare events. Accordingly, ease of recall suggests that there are many similar events, whereas difficulty of recall suggests that the recalled event is relatively rare (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). As a result, our judgments are only consistent with the implications of what comes to mind when it comes to mind easily, but are opposite to the implications of recalled content when recall is experienced as difficult (for a review see Schwarz, 1998). This influence of the subjective accessibility experience is eliminated when the informational value of the experience is called into question. When participants believe, for example, that the recall task is only so difficult because they are distracted by background music played to them, they discount the experienced difficulty and rely on the recalled content, even when it is difficult to bring to mind (e.g., Schwarz, Bless, Strack, Klumpp, Rittenauer-Schatka, & Simons, 1991).

**Advice.** Thinking of a few good things is good for you -- but don't try to hard! The more blessings you try to count, the more likely it is that you'll find it difficult to come up with them, leaving you with the bleak inference that there aren't enough blessings in your life. Instead, enjoy the few you can easily think of -- there sure must be many of them if a few come to mind so easily!

Conversely, when a few bad things pop to mind, don't stop there! Are there really that many bad things? Trying to enumerate as many as you can will eventually make the task difficult, hopefully convincing you that your life isn't as bad as you may have feared.

**How is Accessible Information Used?**

**Assimilation and Contrast**

To predict how a given piece of accessible information influences a judgment, we further need to understand how it is used. In general, any evaluative judgment requires two mental representations, namely a representation of the target of judgment ("my life") and a representation of a standard, against which the target is evaluated (Schwarz & Bless, 1992). Both representations are constructed on the spot, based on the information that comes to mind at the time of judgment. When a given piece of information (say, "my wonderful vacation" or "my surgery") is included in the representation formed of the target ("my life"), it results in an assimilation effect. In this case, we
are more satisfied with our lives-as-a-whole when we think of a positive (vacation) rather than negative (surgery) aspect. Under some conditions, however, the accessible information may instead be used in constructing a standard of comparison against which we evaluate our lives in general, resulting in a contrast effect. Thus, we would be less satisfied when we evaluate our lives relative to a positive standard (vacation) rather than a negative one (surgery). As this example illustrates, the same information can have a positive or a negative influence on our judgments, depending on how it is used. We now turn to a selective review of some variables that determine information use (for a more detailed theoretical discussion see Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Schwarz & Strack, 1999).

**Temporal Distance**

In the Strack et al. (1985) studies, discussed above, we not only varied the hedonic quality of the life event that participants had to recall, but also the time perspective. Some participants had to think about a recent event, others, however, about an event that had occurred several years ago. When the event was recent, participants reported higher general life-satisfaction after recalling a positive rather than a negative event, as already seen. Not so, however, when the event was several years in the past. In this case, participants who had to recall a past positive event reported lower current life-satisfaction than participants who had to recall a past negative event.

These and related findings (see Schwarz & Strack, 1999) indicate that highly accessible information will influence the judgment in the direction of its hedonic quality, resulting in assimilation effects, if it pertains directly to one's present living conditions. If the accessible information bears on one's previous living conditions, on the other hand, it will serve as a salient standard of comparison, resulting in contrast effects. These experimental results are further supported by correlational data (Elder, 1974) that indicate for senior U.S. citizens, that the "children of the great depression" are the more likely to report high subjective well-being, the more they had to suffer under adverse economic conditions when they were adolescents. The cumulation of negative experiences during childhood and adolescence apparently established a base-line against which all subsequent events could only be seen as an improvement. Portraying the other side of the coin, Runyan (1980) found that the upwardly mobile recollected their childhood as less satisfying than did the downwardly mobile, presumably because they used their current situation in evaluating their past.

**Salient Category Boundaries**
While the above findings bear on the impact of the temporal distance of the event per se, subsequent research demonstrated that it is not temporal distance by itself that moderates the use of accessible information but rather the subjective perception of whether the event one thinks about pertains to one's current conditions of living or to a different episode of one's life. In one study (Strack & Nebel, 1987), we asked students to describe either a positive or a negative event that they expected to occur in "five years from now." For half of the sample, we emphasized a major role transition that would occur in the meantime, namely leaving university and entering the job market. Theoretically, this should increase the probability that respondents would assign the expected event to a "different" phase of their life, and would therefore use it as a standard of comparison. The results supported this reasoning. When the role transition was not emphasized, participants reported higher happiness and life-satisfaction when they had to describe positive rather than negative expectations. When the role transition was emphasized, this pattern was reversed, and participants reported higher well-being after thinking about negative rather than positive future expectations. Thus, a positive future can make us unhappy when it serves as a standard of comparison, relative to which our current life looks bleak. Conversely, a negative future may help us appreciate the current situation.

Implications

Note that findings of this type have important methodological implications: Any given positive (or negative) life-event may have a positive or a negative influence on judgments of happiness and life-satisfaction, depending on whether the event is used in constructing a mental representation of the target ("my life") or a mental representation of the standard. It is therefore not surprising that the empirical relationship between the objective occurrence of an event and individuals' subjective evaluations of their lives is weak. Knowing that an individual experienced event X does not allow us to predict the impact of X on the individual's life-satisfaction. Instead, we need to know whether the event comes to mind at the time of judgment and how the person uses the event in constructing the respective mental representations. Both of these aspects are, in part, a function of the research instrument used, giving rise to a host of complex methodological issues (see Schwarz & Strack, 1999).

Advice. As our findings illustrate, today's misery can be source of tomorrow's happiness if you play it right. Thus, when a negative life-event comes to mind, make sure you assign it to its proper place in your life. Surely, whatever happened in the past is not representative of what your
life is like now, a full week, if not more, later. And relative to this past moment of misery, life now looks pretty good, doesn't it?

Conversely, if a positive life-event comes to mind, frolic in the endless stream of life that knows no boundaries. Who says that it isn't part of your current life just because it occurred a few years in the past? It's your one-and-only life, after all, from the cradle to the grave. Seeing it any differently only turns yesterday's pleasure into today's source of misery.

The Role of Feelings

So far, we considered how information about our own lives influences our judgments of happiness and life-satisfaction. These judgments, however, are not only a function of what we think about, but also of how we feel at the time of judgment. As we are all aware, there are days when life seems just great and others when life seems rather dreadful, even though nothing of any obvious importance has changed in the meantime. Rather, it seems that minor events that may affect our moods may greatly influence how we evaluate our lives. Not surprisingly, experimental data confirm these experiences. Thus, we found that finding a dime on a copy machine greatly increased respondents' reported happiness with their lives-as-a-whole (Schwarz, 1987), as did receiving a chocolate bar (Münkel, Strack, & Schwarz, 1987), spending time in a pleasant rather than an unpleasant room (Schwarz, Strack, Kommer, & Wagner, 1987, Exp.2), or watching the German soccer team win rather than lose a championship game (Schwarz et al., 1987, Exp.1). We first address the processes underlying these mood effects and subsequently explore how the feelings elicited by recalled life-events qualify the advice we provided so far.

Mood Congruent Recall or Mood as Information?

What are the mental processes underlying the observed impact of moods on judgments of life-satisfaction? Two possible processes deserve particular attention. On the one hand, it has been shown that moods increase the accessibility of mood congruent information in memory (for reviews see Blaney, 1986; Bower, 1981; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). That is, individuals in a good mood are more likely to recall positive information from memory, whereas individuals in a bad mood are more likely to recall negative information. Thus, thinking about one's life while being in a good mood may result in a selective retrieval of positive aspects of one's life, and therefore in a more positive evaluation.
On the other hand, the impact of moods may be more direct. People may assume that their momentary well-being at the time of judgment is a reasonable and parsimonious indicator of their well-being in general. Thus, they may base their evaluation of their life as a whole on their feelings at the time of judgment and may evaluate their well-being more favorably when they feel good rather than bad. In doing so, lay people may follow the same logic as psychologists who assume that one's mood represents the global overall state of the organism (e.g., Ewert, 1983) and reflects all the countless experiences one goes through in life (e.g., Bollnow, 1956). According to this perspective, which has a long tradition in European phenomenological psychology, our moods are an integrative function of all the experiences we make. If people share this perspective, they may evaluate their life on the basis of their mood at the time of judgment, a strategy that would greatly reduce the complexity of the judgmental task.

In fact, when people are asked how they decide whether they are happy or not, most of them are likely to refer explicitly to their current affect state, saying, for example, "Well, I feel good". Accordingly, Ross, Eyman, & Kishchuk (1986) report that explicit references to one's affective state accounted for 41% to 53% of the reasons that various samples of adult Canadians provided for their reported well-being, followed by future expectations (22% to 40%), past events (5% to 20%), and social comparisons (5% to 13%).

We conducted a number of laboratory and field experiments to explore the judgmental processes that underlie the impact of respondents' current mood on reported well-being: Is the impact of moods mediated by mood congruent recall from memory or by the use of one's mood itself as an informational basis? In one of these studies (Schwarz & Clore, 1983, Exp. 2), we called respondents on sunny or rainy days and assessed their happiness and life-satisfaction in telephone interviews. As expected, respondents reported being in a better mood, and being happier and more satisfied with their lives-as-a-whole, on sunny than on rainy days.

To test the hypothesis that the impact of mood on reported well-being is due to respondents' use of their perceived mood as a piece of information, some respondents were induced to attribute their current mood to a transient external source which was irrelevant to the evaluation of one's life. If respondents attribute their current feelings to transient external factors they should be less likely to use them as an informational basis for evaluating their lives in general and the impact of participants' current mood should be greatly reduced. In the weather study, this was accomplished by directing subjects' attention to the weather. In one condition, the interviewers pretended to call
from out of town and asked, "By the way, how's the weather down there?". With this manipulation, we wanted to suggest to respondents that their mood may be due to the weather and may therefore not be diagnostic for the overall quality of their lives.

The results confirmed our predictions. Whereas good or bad weather resulted in a pronounced difference in reported life-satisfaction when the weather was not mentioned, this difference was eliminated when respondents' attention was directed to the weather as an irrelevant external source of their current mood. In addition, a measure of current mood, assessed at the end of the interview, was not affected by the attention manipulation, which indicates that the manipulation did not affect respondents' current mood itself but only their inferences based upon it. Accordingly, the mood measure was more strongly correlated with reported happiness and life-satisfaction when the weather was not mentioned than when it was mentioned.

In summary, these results and related results (see Schwarz, 1987) demonstrate that respondents use their affective state at the time of judgment as a parsimonious indicator of their well-being in general, unless the informational value of their current mood is called into question. Moreover, the attributional effects obtained in the present study, as well as in our follow-ups, rule out an alternative explanation based on mood-congruent retrieval. According to this hypothesis, respondents may recall more negative information about their life when in a bad rather than a good mood, and may therefore base their evaluation on a selective sample of data. Note, however, that the impact of a selective data base should be independent of respondents' attributions for their current mood. Attributing one's current mood to the weather does only discredit the informational value of one's current mood itself, but not the evaluative implications of any positive or negative events one may recall. Inferences based on selective recall should therefore be unaffected by salient explanations for one's current feelings. Accordingly, the present findings demonstrate that moods themselves may serve informative functions. This hypothesis has meanwhile received considerable support in different domains of judgment and has provided a coherent framework for conceptualizing the impact of affective states on cognitive processes (for a review see Schwarz & Clore, 1996).

**Advice.** As the weather experiment illustrates, you do not want to know the source of your momentary mood when you feel good. You may only find out that your upbeat feelings are merely due to the weather or to finding a coin that a benign experimenter left for you. Instead, enjoy your
good feelings and ask yourself how you feel about your life. After all, things must be going fine if you feel well.

If you feel bad, however, you're well advised to find a transient source. You surely don't want a rainy day to spoil an otherwise enjoyable life? And besides, there must be more relevant information to evaluate your life than your momentary feelings. Who wants to be at the mercy of one's mood, anyway?

Fortunately, chances are that you will do so spontaneously. As a large body of research indicates, individuals in a sad mood are likely to search for causal explanations and engage in systematic judgment strategies, with considerable attention to the details at hand. In contrast, individuals in a happy mood are likely to simplifying judgment strategies, such as the "How-do-I-feel-about-this?" heuristic (for reviews see Schwarz, in press; Schwarz & Clore, 1996).

Accordingly, people are usually more likely to look for external sources for their sad than for their happy moods, with beneficial effects for their desire to see their lives in a positive light.

**When Do People Rely On Their Mood Rather Than Other Information?**

So far, we have seen that individuals may evaluate their lives on the basis of comparison processes or on the basis of their affective state at the time of judgment. This raises the question under which conditions they will rely on one rather than the other source of information? On theoretical grounds, we may assume that people are more likely to use the simplifying strategy of consulting their affective state the more burdensome the judgment would be to make on the basis of comparison information. After all, humans have frequently been shown to be "cognitive misers" (Taylor, 1981) who prefer simple strategies to more complex ones whenever they are available. In this regard, it is important to note a basic difference between judgments of happiness and satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole vs. judgments of specific life-domains. Evaluations of general life satisfaction pose an extremely complex task that requires a large number of comparisons along many dimensions with ill-defined criteria and the subsequent integration of the results of these comparisons into one composite judgment. As noted earlier, one may evaluate one's current situation by comparing it with what one expected, with what others have, with what one had earlier, and so on. And which domains is one to select for these comparisons? Health, income, family life, the quality of your environment, and what else? And after making all these comparisons how should one integrate their results? Which weight does one want to give to each outcome?

Facing this complex task, people may rarely engage in it. Rather, they may base their judgment on
their perceived mood at that time, unless the informational value of their current mood is discredited.

Evaluations of specific life-domains, on the other hand, are often less complex. In contrast to judgments of general life-satisfaction, comparison information is usually available for judgments of specific life domains and criteria for evaluation are well defined. An attempt to compare one's income or one's "life-as-a-whole" with that of colleagues aptly illustrates the difference. Moreover, one's affective state is not considered relevant information in evaluating many domains. Therefore, judgments of domain satisfaction are more likely to be based on comparison strategies rather than on the heuristic use of one's affective state at the time of judgment. In line with this reasoning, we found that the outcome of the 1982 championship games of the German national soccer team affected respondents' general life satisfaction but not their satisfaction with work and income (Schwarz, Strack, Kommer, & Wagner, 1984, Exp. 1).

The hypothesis that judgments of general life-satisfaction are based on respondents' affective state, while judgments of domain satisfaction are based on comparison processes, raises the intriguing possibility that the same event may influence evaluations of one's life as a whole and evaluations of specific domains in opposite directions. For example, an extremely positive event in domain X may induce good mood, resulting in reports of increased general life-satisfaction. However, the same event may also increase the standard of comparison used in evaluating domain X, resulting in judgments of decreased satisfaction with this particular domain. Such a differential impact of the same objective event may in part account for the weak relationships between global and specific evaluations as well as measures of objective circumstances that have frequently concerned sociological researchers in the subjective social indicators tradition (Campbell, 1981; Glatzer, & Zapf, 1984).

We explored this possibility by testing participants in either a pleasant or an unpleasant room, namely a friendly office or a small, dirty laboratory that was overheated and noisy, with flickering lights and a bad smell (Schwarz et al., 1987, Exp. 2). As expected, participants were in a better mood, and reported higher happiness and satisfaction with their lives-as-a-whole, in the pleasant rather than the unpleasant room. This replicates the mood effects observed in other studies (Schwarz, 1987). Yet, participants' housing satisfaction did not benefit from their good mood. To the contrary, participants reported higher housing satisfaction when they were tested in the unpleasant rather than the pleasant room, indicating that the room served as a relevant standard of
comparison. After all, even a regular dorm room looked like a palace compared to our dirty laboratory.

In combination, these findings highlight that a given extreme event may have opposite effects on judgments of general life-satisfaction and judgments of domain satisfaction. If the event puts us in a good (bad) mood, it will increase (decrease) our general life-satisfaction. At the same time, however, the event may serve as a standard of comparison, resulting in contrast effects on evaluations of the life-domain to which the event is relevant. Note that these diverging influences imply that judgments of overall life-satisfaction are not simply an "average" of one's satisfaction in different domains. Instead, evaluations of one's life-as-a-whole and of specific domains are often based on different inputs and different evaluative strategies, as the present findings illustrate.

**Recalled Life-Events:**

**Content versus Feeling**

We now return to our discussion of the role of recalled life-events in judgments of life-satisfaction. In the first part of this chapter, we took a purely cognitive perspective and highlighted that our judgments depend on what comes to mind, how easily it comes to mind, and how we use the information that comes to mind. The interplay of these factors is further complicated by the fact that recalling a life-event may also change our feelings. This is particularly likely when we recall the event in vivid detail, reliving it in our mind's eye. In that case, positive events elicit a positive mood, and negative events elicit a negative mood, with important consequences for subsequent judgments.

Recall that Strack et al. (1985, Exp. 1) observed contrast effects when participants were induced to think about past positive or negative events. That is, their participants were more satisfied with their current lives when they evaluated them against a memory of past misery rather than a memory of past pleasure. Importantly, this result was obtained under conditions that discouraged the "reliving" of the past event. Specifically, we provided participants only with a couple lines on which to report the event, thus discouraging detailed elaborations. In subsequent experiments, we manipulated the extent to which the recall task was emotionally involving. In one study (Strack et al., 1985, Exp. 2), some participants were again asked to simply list an event on two lines, whereas others were asked to describe an event in considerable detail and were given a full page to do so. In a related study (Strack et al., 1985, Exp. 3), some participants were asked to
explain "why" the event occurred, whereas others were asked to relive the event in their mind's eye and to describe "how" it unfolded. As expected, detailed recall and "how" descriptions induced a temporary happy or sad mood. In contrast, merely naming the event or analyzing "why" it occurred did not affect participants' mood.

In the latter case, participants' judgments of life-satisfaction replicated the contrast effects we observed earlier. Participants who merely listed the event, or who provided pallid "why" descriptions, reported lower current life-satisfaction after thinking about a past positive rather than a past negative event. Not so, however, when describing the event in great detail, or providing a vivid "how" description, elicited a current happy or sad mood. In that case, participants who felt happy due to elaborating on a past positive event reported higher current life-satisfaction than participants who felt sad due to elaborating on a past negative event. This replicates the mood effects discussed above (for related findings see Clark & Collins, 1993; Clark, Collins, & Henry, 1994).

In combination, these results indicate that individuals draw on their current feelings as a source of information when they are in a pronounced mood state, but use other accessible information about their life in the absence of pronounced mood states. Accordingly, the impact of a past life-event on judgments of overall life-satisfaction depends crucially on whether the memory does, or does not, elicit a corresponding mood. When recalling a past event does not put us into a corresponding mood, it serves as a standard of comparison, resulting in a contrast effect. When it does elicit a corresponding mood, the affective influence overrides the otherwise observed contrast effect.

Advice. When a positive past event comes to mind, you are well advised to flesh it out in detail. Revel in the good memories and enjoy the warm feelings they elicit. Those feelings will brighten your life. But remember that the art of reminiscing requires detailed memories that allow you to "relive" the good feelings. If that positive past event stays pallid, it will only serve as a standard of comparison, relative to which your current life is likely to pale.

Conversely, when a past negative event comes to mind, by all means, keep it pallid. Reliving this event in your mind's eye will only make you feel bad, clouding your whole life. But if you can keep it pallid, your past misery makes for a great standard of comparison, relative to which you can enjoy how much better your life is now.
Conclusions

As our selective review indicates, life-events play an important role in judgments of happiness and life-satisfaction. Yet, their impact does not follow the simple assumption that good events will make us happy. Instead, the same event can increase as well as decrease life-satisfaction, depending on how we think about it. In the present chapter, we considered the role of what comes to mind, how easily it comes to mind, and how it is used, as well as the role of positive or negative feelings a memory may elicit. The underlying processes are systematic and the reviewed results reliably replicable, provided that properly controlled experimental conditions channel how people think about their lives. In the absence of controlled conditions, however, different people choose different judgment strategies, resulting in a wide variety of different outcomes. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that surveys of well-being observed only weak relationships between objective characteristics of life and their subjective evaluation, as noted in the introduction -- we can't predict a person's life-satisfaction without taking her judgmental processes into account. In fact, the actual picture is more complex than the current chapter conveys because judgments of well-being are further influenced by comparisons with others and a host of additional variables, which are beyond the scope of the present chapter (for a comprehensive review see Schwarz & Strack, 1999). In our assessment, global questions about life-satisfaction are more likely to teach us about the dynamics of human judgment than about the conditions of a happy life. To learn about the latter, it is probably more promising to assess how people feel on a moment-to-moment basis as they go through their lives (see Kahneman, 1999, for a conceptual discussion). At present, research using such a "momentary" approach is still in its infancy and the future will show whether it can uncover more systematic relationships between the objective conditions of life and subjective well-being.

In closing, let us return to the advice we provided, admittedly tongue-in-cheek. Can you really think yourself happy by following our recommendations? Yes, if a benign experimenter presents a task that structures your thought processes, as we did in the reviewed experiments. In this case, you are unlikely to become aware of the underlying processes and simply experience your thoughts and feelings as your "natural" response to what you are thinking about (see Higgins, 1998). Unfortunately, you are less likely to be successful when you are aware of what you are doing. When we ask you, for example, to list twelve terrible things about your job, you may notice with some relief that they are difficult to bring to mind, concluding that your job can't be that bad after all. Yet the same trick is less likely to work to your satisfaction when two bad aspects of your job
come to mind and you tell yourself, "Lets list another 10 to make this difficult." Similarly, finding a dime may brighten your life -- but looking for a dime to brighten it is unlikely to work. Unfortunately, the mind's benevolent magic works best when left unobserved.

By the same token, however, following our advice is likely to limit negative inferences. Knowing about the role of ease of recall may protect you against the inference that there are many negative aspects to your job, simply because two happen to come to mind easily. Similarly, knowing about the pervasive influence of moods may protect you against the inference that your whole life is lacking enjoyment simply because you feel bad on a rainy day. Thus, although you may not be able to think yourself happy, you may at least be able to limit inferences of unhappiness.

References


