Can people remember how happy they were?

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Abstract

Studies have shown evidence of recollection biases in a variety of situations, where some objective information is learned and subsequently forgotten or distorted in a predictable way. Yet, little is known about memory of subjective states, such as past subjective well-being. We uncover biases in recalled well-being: happy people tend to overstate the improvement in their well-being over time, and unhappy ones tend to exaggerate its worsening. It thus seems that feeling happy today implies perceiving to be happier than before, and feeling unhappy implies feeling less happy than before. These findings are based on the British Household Panel Survey, where, for a decade, over 27,000 people were asked if they were more, less, or as satisfied with life as compared with the previous year. We compare this perceived change with their yearly life satisfaction reports. Inconsistencies are widespread and follow a regular pattern, which cannot be solely explained by features of the satisfaction scale.

Keywords: life satisfaction; memory; intrapersonal comparison.

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