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Do illusionary positive memories cast a shadow on current happiness? Evaluations of the present and the past in relation to subjective well-being

Abstract

Studies on Subjective Well-being (SWB) show that the the Republic of Macedonia and other ex-communist developing countries are at the bottom of lists measuring this variable. One possible determinant is how the evaluation of present living conditions compared to socialism era 20 years ago, is related to the way people evaluate their current SWB. We hypothesize that the higher the difference in evaluation of the past compared to the evaluation of the present, the lower the subjective well-being will be. Participants were 443 adults, all 50 to 65 years of age. SWB was measured using Satisfaction with Life Scale and PANAS. Appropriate questionnaires were developed to measure evaluation of the present and past self, as well as present and past societal conditions, focusing on perceived opportunities, uncertainty and hopelessness. The results support our assumptions that the higher the difference between the evaluations of past and present self, the lower the SWB is. This difference is included in a regression analysis as a significant predictor of SWB, but present self and past social conditions are the strongest factors. The model explains 37.5% of the variance. It could be interpreted that this specific "shadow" of the past thwarts people to see and benefit from present opportunities. This additionally worsens their present living conditions and present SWB.

Keywords: evaluation of the past, present and past selves, evaluation of the societal conditions, life satisfaction, subjective well-being.

Czy pozytywne, acz iluzoryczne wspomnienia rzucają cień na obecne poczucie szczęścia? Ocena terażniejszości i przeszłości w relacji do subiektywnego dobrostanu

Streszczenie

Badania nad subiektywnym dobrostanem, prowadzone w Republice Macedonii i w innych rozwijających się krajach postkomunistycznych, wskazują na jego niską pozycję w rankingu. Jednym z możliwych uwarunkowań jest rozbieżność wynikająca z porównania aktualnego poczucia dobrostanu z tym sprzed 20 lat. Sformułowaliśmy hipotezę, że im wyższa różnica w ocenie aktualnego dobrostanu w porównaniu z dobrostanem w przeszłości, tym niższy będzie subiektywny dobrostan obecnie. Przebadano 443 osoby w wieku 50–65 lat. Do pomiaru

subiektywnego dobrostanu wykorzystano skalę Satysfakcji z Życia E. Dienera i wsp. oraz PANAS D. Watsona i L. A. Clarka. Skonstruowano też odpowiednie kwestionariusze do oceny obecnego i przeszłego Ja oraz do oceny obecnych i przeszłych warunków społecznych, odnoszące się do spostrzeganych możliwości, niepewności i bezradności. Wyniki potwierdzają nasze przypuszczenia, że im wyższa różnica między oceną przeszłego i obecnego Ja, tym niższy subiektywny dobrostan. Nie dotyczy to jednak oceny warunków społecznych. Wprawdzie analiza regresji wskazuje, że różnica ta jest istotnym predyktorem subiektywnego dobrostanu, lecz najsilniejszymi predyktorami okazały się obecne Ja oraz warunki społeczne w przeszłości. Model wyjaśnia 37,5% wariancji. Można to interpretować w ten sposób, że specyficzny „cień” przeszłości utrudnia ludziom dostrzeganie i korzystanie z obecnych możliwości, co w konsekwencji niekorzystnie wpływa na ich obecne życie i subiektywny dobrostan.

Słowa kluczowe: ocena przeszłości, aktualne i przeszłe Ja, ocena warunków społecznych, satysfakcja z życia, subiektywny dobrostan

Introduction

International studies on life satisfaction and subjective well-being (SWB) show that Republic of Macedonia is at the bottom of the lists. The results are also similar for several other ex-communist developing countries in transition. Besides well established explanations for genetic, motivational and socio-economic factors of SWB, we tested an additional one: people's past-to-present comparison evaluations of their selves and societal conditions. We believe that poor current living conditions in the present generate illusionary perception of the past as more positive. Such perception could create belief in people, that they are not successful and fulfilled as they would have been if they lived in circumstances like in the past. This kind of perception could further have negative comparison-feedback-effect on the evaluation of their present selves, and finally, on the current subjective well-being.

There is lack of research in transitional countries focusing on SWB and self-concept in context of time-related phenomenology and temporal evaluations. We have explored the process of comparing the present living to that of the past times before the societal transition from socialistic (or "communist") system to democracy. More precisely, our interest is the effect of this comparison on the way how people evaluate their current SWB. One possible perspective about this relation is that people in the today's transitional societies enjoy the democracy that replaced totalitarian regime. The other perspective, on contrary, might be that poor living conditions due to devastating transition in some countries make people sympathize the past times, when they think they experienced fewer disparities (or they were just not so obvious to them). This research is focused on the relation between the people's evaluation of past and present selves, and subjective well-being.

Understanding the main concepts

Subjective well-being is understood as optimal psychological functioning, manifested through positive feeling toward oneself and our own life. Subjective well-being is a personal experience resulting from self-evaluation of the life in general. It

is significantly based on the evaluation how satisfied our needs and goals are, what makes our life fulfilled and pleasant. Hence, subjective well-being is operationally defined as frequent experience of satisfaction with life and pleasant emotions, and only rarely unpleasant emotions (Inglehart, Klingemann, 2000; Diener et al., 1997; Diener & Lucas, 2000; Oishi & Diener, 2001).

Recent research in the field of subjective well-being (SWB) emphasized the importance of genetic, motivational, and **societal** factors. Prevailing data regarding the genetic influence suggests that approximately 50% of the variance of SWB could be considered as inherited (Larsen & Eid, 2008). Regarding motivational factors, there is a well established model suggesting that subjective well-being is a direct function of basic psychological needs satisfaction (Baumeister, 1999; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), what is generally determined by the realization of the intrinsic and extrinsic life goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Schmuck, Sheldon, 2001; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001; Sheldon, Kasser, 1995, 1998, 2001).

With regard to the role of the extrinsic life goals in relation to SWB, data coming from various socio-economic backgrounds is not concordant. According to the model from the developed countries, the realization of the intrinsic life goals is beneficial to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, but pursuing extrinsic life goals thwarts their satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Such role of extrinsic life goals *was not* confirmed in Macedonia and few other transition countries, where the studies have shown that moderate pursue of extrinsic goals is also positively related to SWB (Frost and Frost, 2000; Brdar, 2006; Spasovski, 2013, 2011). Possible explanation is that pursuing and realization of external goals probably have compensatory effects on satisfaction of basic psychological needs in poor socio-economic conditions (as could be the case with Macedonia). Macedonia is an ex-communist developing country with poor economic parameters. Through many decades in the communist past, social stratification was less manifest. Most people when compared themselves to others did not perceive salient social disparities. These processes could have been interpreted as that such society successfully has provided security and well-being to all.

European Fund for the Balkans (EFB, 2012), an EU-supported foundation, made a comprehensive study in the Balkan countries, exploring how young people evaluate today's societal conditions comparing to the conditions in times when their parents lived. The report shows that majority of the participants on age 20–40 in Macedonia believe that their parents lived better than they live today. This result goes along the idea that people could imagine themselves in the past as more satisfied and fulfilled than they presently are. This past-to-present comparison could influence the process how people evaluate how successful or fulfilled they are in the present, or how they globally evaluate their *selves*. In the same time, evaluation of the self is strongly related to the evaluation of the social conditions, the self was developed within. So, closely related is our next question: how people evaluate past and present social circumstances. These past-to-present comparisons and

evaluations are probably significantly related to SWB in societies like Macedonian, where people experienced severe societal changes in relatively short time. People in such transitional societies had high expectations from the new democracy. And, the level of democracy and freedom is closely related to SWB. In a context of societal conditions, Veenhoven relates SWB to personal feeling of freedom and freedom of choice (Veenhoven, 2000). He understands the concept of freedom as a *possibility for choice*, what implies two things: The first one is the *opportunity to choose* what depends on the surrounding conditions and existence of alternatives to choose (and, at the same time the choice not to be obstructed). The second one is the *capability to choose* – as an individual property. Hence, people expected from the democratic society to provide more *opportunities* for personal realization, less *uncertainty* and less *hopelessness*. In such society people expected to be more fulfilled and happier.

And finally, how happy and fulfilled are the people in the Macedonian society? Several international studies include Macedonia, and the country is always in the bottom of the lists. The UN Survey “World Happiness Report” from April 2012¹, shows that Macedonia has a rank of 127 alongside Yemen, Sudan, Senegal, Uganda, Afghanistan, and Rwanda. Another survey is the “World Database of Happiness” (Veenhoven, 2009), measuring average happiness in 149 nations for the period from 2000 to 2009. On 11-point scale (0 to 10), people were asked how much they enjoyed their life as a whole. Results show that Macedonia is ranked 121, behind Palestina, Uganda, Iraq, and Lebanon.

More important is that in these surveys, the average score of life satisfaction is below the mid-point of the scale. Knowing from the SWB literature about people’s tendency to evaluate their lives and happiness above the neutral point (Diener & Lucas, 2000), this finding causes concerns, and raises many questions. Namely, the main societal parameters in the country as infrastructure, education, health care, and level of democracy are not worse than those witnessed in many of the countries which are above Macedonia on the lists. Furthermore, according to the adaptation theory of SWB, people tend to return to the baseline of SWB after significant life events, regardless of the fact whether they were good or bad. The level of SWB of Macedonian citizens, however, has not increased in the past 20 years (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997).

All of those findings suggest that along the low economic parameters and low living standard, some other factors might have additional negative impact on the SWB in Macedonian citizens. And, as EFB (2012) study show, majority of Macedonian participants think that the quality of life was higher in the past. Such evaluation probably influences the current sense of satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and further life satisfaction and SWB. Hence, this study is mainly focused on the way how people evaluate their past selves compared to the present ones, as well on the related evaluations of societal conditions. Temporal evaluations are becoming important factor in studying well-being in people, and

¹ <http://earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/Sachs%20Writing/2012/World%20Happiness%20Report.pdf>

there is solid body of knowledge in the field in the last decades (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999; Boniwell and Zimbardo, 2004). One important starting point here is that self-evaluation of the SWB is heavily based on the individual memory, mostly on the memory of the “memorizing self” (Kahneman, 1999, 2011). Memorizing self memorizes contextually, in respect to time and place. Herein, cultural specifics and societal changes have significant influence on the evaluation of the past time zones.

Considering all these processes, we suppose that past-to-present comparison has additional lowering effect on SWB measures in Macedonian citizens. Following the previous research in the field (Kim et al., 2012), under temporal evaluations of the past and present, we are primarily focused on evaluation of the past and present selves, what is most often manifested through evaluation how successful, fulfilled, and satisfied people perceive themselves. As closely related to this evaluation, we also consider the evaluation of the past and present societal conditions.

Evaluation of the present self we defined through self-evaluated measure of how successful, fulfilled and satisfied participants in the present are, while *evaluation of the past* is how successful, fulfilled and satisfied they think they were 20 years ago.

In a similar manner are defined the societal temporal evaluations: *evaluation of the present societal conditions*, as well *evaluation of the past societal conditions* regarding what they think the societal conditions were 20 years ago. Closely to the Veenhoven’s (2000) concept, evaluation of societal conditions is based on perceived opportunities, uncertainty and hopelessness.

To summarize, the *research problem of this study* is to explore whether the evaluations of the present selves and societal conditions compared to those in the past times of the socialist era 20 years ago, is related to the way people evaluate their current SWB. Firstly, based on the results of the EFB (2012) study, we hypothesize that *the past is evaluated as more positive than the present*. Such supposed past-to-present comparison evaluation could have negative-feed-back-effect on present SWB. Following this idea, we hypothesize that *the higher the difference in evaluation of the past compared to the evaluation of the present, the lower the subjective well-being will be*.

Method

The participants were 443 adults ($F = 218$), 266 of them employed, 103 unemployed, and 74 retired. Precondition was participants to have personal experiences from the time before transition, or to be around 30 in the beginning of the 90-ties of the previous century. Hence, all of the participants were on age 50 to 65 ($M = 55.6$). To obtain diversity with regard to relevant variables, potential participants were randomly approached on public places in various cities countrywide. Selected were those who satisfied the defined conditions. This approach of sampling was chosen to obtain satisfactory control of relevant variables, such the socio-economic status of the subjects now and 20 years ago, education, their place of residence. However, it is clear that full control can’t be warranted.

Instruments. SWB was measured by implementing a frequently used procedure of combining scores (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001; Reis et al., 2000) from *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985) and *Positive and Negative Affective Schedule* (PANAS, Watson & Clark, 1994).

For temporal evaluations of the past and present selves and the societal conditions, appropriate questionnaires were developed by the authors of the study. Four different measures were obtained: evaluations of *present self* and *past self*, and evaluations of *present societal conditions* and *past societal conditions*. Given that the methods and instruments are not common knowledge and have not been used in former research, they will be described in details. In all of the four scales, participants answered on a 7-point Likert type scale. In all of the scales and sub-scales, proportionally, inverse formulation was used in the items. After reversing these scores, total scores for all scales and sub-scales were obtained by summing the measures. Higher scores represent higher positive temporal evaluations of selves and social conditions.

Present self is scored by using a five-item scale through self-evaluation of how successful, fulfilled and satisfied the participants are in the present. Respectively, similar questionnaire is used for evaluation of past self, appropriately temporally adopted. Full questionnaires are given in the Appendixes 1 and 2.

Questionnaires for evaluation of the societal conditions were developed following the idea that among most salient psychological dimensions of evaluation of the societal conditions are those related to the uncertainty, hopelessness, and (lack of) opportunities. Both scales, for past and present, consist of three sub-scales for these three "dimensions", all of them with three items. Scores from the items with negative formulation were reversed, and then the measure is obtained by summing all. Higher scores represent more positive evaluation of the societal conditions. On both scales (present and past societal condition), items 1 to 3 measure perceived opportunities, items 4 to 6 – perceived uncertainty, and items 7 to 9 – perceived hopelessness. Full questionnaires are given in the Appendixes 3 and 4.

Reliability (Cronbach alpha) of the instruments was tested on data from this study, and measures are as follows: Present Self: $\alpha = 0.85$; Past Self: $\alpha = 0.88$; Present Societal Conditions: $\alpha = 0.90$; Past Societal Conditions: $\alpha = 0.91$; PANAS = .87, SWLS = .91

Results

In the Table 1 shown are the descriptive statistics for all the variables.

To test the hypothesis that the past is evaluated more positively than the present, we compare the means of present and past evaluations. We got significant results with regard to the evaluation of past and present *selves* $t(442) = -2.66, p = .008$, and this result is concordant with our hypothesis. That was not a case with regard to the evaluation of social conditions, where we got results in opposite direction $t(442) = 10.22, p = .001$.

To test the hypothesis that the comparison between the past and the present is related to SWB, appropriate indices were calculated. Namely, the score for “*Past self minus present self*” was calculated by subtracting the score for the evaluation for the present by the evaluation for the past self. In similar manner was calculated the index for the “*Past minus present social conditions*”. These two indices were further included in correlation and regression analyses, together with the evaluation of past and present evaluation of selves and social conditions.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for SWB, temporal evaluations of self and social conditions, and calculated differences between temporal evaluations

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SWB	443	-6.50	5.71	.00	2.33
Present self	443	1	7	5.10	1.33
Past self	443	1	7	5.34	1.43
Past <i>minus</i> present self	443	-6.00	6.00	.24	1.89
Present social conditions	443	1	7	4.75	1.46
Past social conditions	443	1	7	3.54	1.58
Past <i>minus</i> present social conditions	443	-6.00	6.00	-1.23	2.52

Table 2 shows the results from the correlation analysis regarding the relation between subjective well-being and temporal evaluations for present and past selves, as well as global evaluations of present and past societal conditions. We get significant negative correlation between the SWB and the score for the difference between the evaluation of the past and present self ($-.12, p < .05$). This result supports the hypothesis that, the higher the difference between the evaluations of

Table 2. Matrix of correlations between subjective well-being and temporal evaluations for present and past selves, and present and past societal conditions

	SWB	Past self <i>minus</i> present self	Past <i>minus</i> present social conditions	Present self	Past self	Present social conditions	Past social conditions
SWB		-.12*	.20**	.43***	.24***	.10*	.40***
Past <i>minus</i> present self			.09	-.65***	.71***	-.06	.09
Past <i>minus</i> present social conditions				-.08	.04	-.81**	.84**
Present self					.08	.24***	.10*
Past self						.14**	.20***
Present social conditions							-.37***
Past social conditions							

*** – Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level

** – Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* – Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

past and present selves, the lower the subjective well-being will be, but we need to notice that the correlation coefficient was very small. Regarding the difference of evaluations of societal conditions, correlation is also significant, but in opposite direction from the hypothesized.

Next, multiple regression analysis was used to test if the temporal evaluations significantly predict participants' SWB. Six potential predictors were entered: the past and present evaluations of selves, global evaluations of past and present societal condition, and the two indices of differences in evaluations. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of *regression analysis* predicting subjective well-being from evaluations of selves and global evaluations of societal conditions

Model	R ²	Beta	Sig.
Present self	.355	.43	.001
Past minus present self		.13	.019
Past social conditions		.42	.001
Present social conditions		.16	.001

Criterion variable: subjective well-being

The model shows that significant predictors of SWB are *present self*, the index of difference *past minus present self*, *past social conditions* and *present social conditions*, together explaining 35.5% of the variance. The index of difference in evaluations of the past and present social conditions, as well the past self evaluation, were not significant predictors.

In another regression model, we entered all the measures from the sub-scales of social conditions: past and present opportunities, uncertainty and hopelessness. All of these six predictors were significant, where excluded were global evaluations of past and present social conditions. This regression model explained 37.5% of the variance.

Discussion

The study results go along the idea that the higher the difference in the evaluations of the past and present, the lower subjective well-being, although, this correlation was very small. Results didn't support such hypothesis with regard to the evaluations of the social conditions. This finding emphasises the complexity of the relation of temporal evaluations, especially in societal conditions like the ones in the Republic of Macedonia.

Regression analysis includes the *past-to-present evaluation of the self* among the significant predictors of SWB, although the strongest predictors were the evaluations of the *present self* and *past societal condition* (Table 3).

Our finding that SWB decrease when the temporal evaluations of the present and past are in discrepancy, are congruent with the concept of *balanced time perspective*,

suggested by Boniwell and Zimbardo (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004). In poor societal conditions, when feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness are increased and opportunities are less, we could expect decrease of life satisfaction and subjective well-being. It is very likely that we could also expect a natural tendency in people to compare their experiences in the present to those in the past. These psychological processes might be followed by comparison of their selves and life circumstances in the present to those in the past times. The referent point in the past time is usually some personal or societal change, or salient event, like the societal transition in ex-communistic countries.

Evaluation of current SWB is influenced by such comparing evaluation of our self as perceived now, with the one we believe we have had in the past. Finally, having this kind of sentimental and biased memories, people could find that living in the past was better, and could create a kind of illusion that: "if the society is fairer presently, as it was in the past, I will achieve more, and I will be happier". We consider this mechanism is an additional factor why citizens of Republic of Macedonia have such low scores on the international surveys of life satisfaction and well-being. This specific evaluation of the past, or "shadow" of the past, thwarts people to see and benefit from the present opportunities, which additionally worsen their present living and present SWB.

In a way, the experience of the present is pressed in-between the biased experiences of the past and of the future. On one hand, there is the experience of the past – which is biased due to the memorizing self. On the other hand, there is the experience of the future biased due to the huge expectancies from the changes towards democracy.

These findings about the evaluation of the past at some points differ from the ones mentioned in related literature. Namely, it is found that the past self is often perceived to be of little direct relevance to one's current life in the European cultural heritages in North America. Even more, a person's past is often disconnected from the present, as Briley (2009) and Ji with colleagues (2009) found (in Kim et al., 2012). Indulging in the past for European Americans is often associated with personal weakness, whereas focusing on the present along with looking toward the future as a personal strength.

Our results are intriguing in a sense that although the difference between the evaluations of past and present selves was related to the SWB as hypothesised, we didn't get similar confirmation with regard to the evaluations of societal conditions. One explanation could be that although people don't perceive themselves as satisfactory realized and fulfilled in the present, they don't connect personal responsibility with the societal conditions. Next, the result where past social conditions aren't more positively evaluated than the present ones is maybe due to the "reading" and perceiving the statements by the participants from a political discourse. Namely, although the EFB study shows that majority of the participants thought that their parents lived better (in the past time approximately 30 years ago), it is a common attitude toward the past system as a totalitarian regime, what

might influence the participants to evaluate the present social conditions as more positive. Maybe, to evaluate past societal circumstances is socially undesirable.

For sure, more attention should be paid to definition what is meant under societal conditions and their dimensions, and to make these findings and ideas more clear, further research is needed.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Evaluation of present self

Instruction: The following questions are about how you see your current self. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each sentence below:

1. I think that I am succeeding in realizing my important life goals.
2. I think that I'm reaching objectives I have set for my life
3. I often think that I am not achieving my life goals
4. On the whole, I do not consider myself fulfilled
5. All things considered, I think that I'm accomplishing my important goals

Items 2 and 3 are inverted.

Appendix 2: Evaluation of past self

Instruction: The following questions are about how you see your past self about 20 years ago. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each sentence below:

1. I think that twenty years ago, I was succeeding in the realization of my important life goals.
2. I think that twenty years ago, I was reaching objectives I had set for my life
3. I think that twenty years ago, I was not achieving my life goals.
4. I don't consider that I was fulfilled twenty years ago.
5. I think that, twenty years ago, I was accomplishing my important goals.

Items 2 and 3 are inverted.

Appendix 3: Evaluation of *present societal conditions*:

1. In my opinion, the current societal conditions in Macedonia limit me from realizing my life goals
2. I think that living in Macedonia, everyone has equal opportunities to fulfill their potential
3. In my opinion, Macedonian society is not providing equal chances to everyone to fulfill their life goals
4. Due to the current social conditions in Macedonia, I feel uncertain as to whether I can realize my important life goals
5. Due to the current social conditions in Macedonia, I don't find myself worried about whether I can fulfill my potential.
6. Due to the current social conditions in Macedonia, I don't feel confident that I have enough opportunities to achieve my life goals

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7. Given the current social circumstances in Macedonia, I believe that there is little that I can do to significantly change my living conditions
8. Because of the possibilities provided by Macedonian society, I feel motivated to pursue the goals that are important to me
9. Considering the current societal conditions in the U.S in Macedonia, whatever I do to improve my living conditions, my effort doesn't matter

Inversely formulated items were: 2, 5, 8.

Appendix 4: Evaluation of *past societal conditions*

Instruction: "Now, please think about how you see your-self in the past and indicate the extent to which you agree with each sentence below":

1. In my opinion now, societal conditions in Macedonia twenty years ago limited me from realizing my life goals.
2. I think that living in the Macedonian society as it was twenty years ago, everyone had equal opportunities to fulfill their potential
3. In my opinion, twenty years ago, Macedonian society was not providing equal chances to everyone for fulfilling of their goals
4. Twenty years ago, due to the social conditions in Macedonia, I felt uncertain as to whether I could realize my important life goals
5. Due to the social conditions in Macedonia twenty years ago, I was not worried about whether I could fulfill my potential
6. Twenty years ago, due to the social conditions in Macedonia, I did not feel confident that I had enough opportunities to achieve my life goals
7. I believe that given the social circumstances in Macedonia twenty years ago, there was little I could do to significantly change my living conditions
8. Because of the possibilities provided by Macedonian society twenty years ago, I felt motivated to pursue the goals that were important to me
9. Considering the Macedonian society as it was twenty years ago, whatever I did to improve my living conditions then, my effort would not have mattered

Inversely formulated items were: 2, 5, 8.