Self-Serving Memories: When the Good Outweighs the Bad

By Cindi May and Michael Scullin


Whether it’s a parking ticket, a disagreement with a coworker, or a low score on an evaluation, negative events can leave a sting, and in some cases it seems as if the bad is stronger than the good (Tierney & Baumeister, 2019). The good news, according to Constantine Sedikides and John Skowronski (2020), is that over time our memories for positive events can be stronger than memories for negative events, particularly when those events have direct personal relevance.

Sedikides and Skowronski argue that self-regulatory mechanisms influence cognition in a way that protects and enhances the self. Consequently, we remember the good things about ourselves and our life events more than the bad. For example, when people recall personal experiences involving pride or shame, they remember the prideful moments in greater detail than the shameful ones (D’Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008). Similarly, when people hear feedback statements (e.g., “You are the kind of
person who cheats on tests”) and consider whether the statements apply to themselves, recall is strong for positive statements about central traits and relatively weak for statements that are self-threatening (Sedikides, Green, Saunders, Skowronski, & Zengel, 2016). This is especially true when the statement targets traits that are relatively unmodifiable (e.g., whether someone is perceived as trustworthy), thus magnifying the threat to self.

People also show a positivity bias in their memories for autobiographical information and events. For example, they misremember their cholesterol scores (Croyle et al., 2006) or course grades (Bahrick, Hall, & Berger, 1996) as being better than they actually were. Furthermore, when recalling disputes with another person, individuals are more likely to place the blame on the other than on themselves (Wilson, Smith, Ross, & Ross, 2004). Even the emotion associated with positive personal memories can endure longer than that associated with negative memories, a finding known as the fading affect bias (Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1997). When individuals review old diary entries, for example, the affect associated with those memories fades over time, but more so for negative than positive entries.

Data from D’Argembeau and Van Der Linden (2008) suggests your students’ results may look something like this.

It is important to note that there are exceptions to the positivity bias; the good does not always outweigh the bad. For example, there are individual differences in the fading affect bias. It is stronger among people with favorable self-images and relatively diminished in those with less favorable self-views, including those with anxiety (Walker, Yancu, & Skowronski, 2014), with symptoms reflecting an eating disorder (Ritchie, Kitsch, Dromey, & Skowronski, 2019), and with narcissism (Ritchie, Walker, Marsh, Hart, & Skowronski, 2014). Furthermore, people show a positivity bias for events that happened in their
own lives but not for events that happened in the lives of others (Skowronska, Betz, Thompson, & Shannon, 1991). Nonetheless, there is robust evidence demonstrating a positivity bias in personal memories.

To bring these findings to life in the classroom, and to help students understand how researchers investigate autobiographical memory, ask students to complete the following activity: tinyurl.com/tlu7kzh. The activity involves recollection of four personal memories and can be completed in one session of 10 to 12 minutes, although some teachers may prefer to split it into two sessions.

Have students first recall two positive events (feeling proud of oneself and feeling admiration for someone else). They will write a brief description of each event and then rate their memories of each event on several dimensions, including visual and sensory details as well as memory for thoughts and actions during the event. Have students use a scale of 1 to 7 (higher scores reflect more detailed, vivid memories). Be sure to have them save their ratings for each event. Then have students recall two negative events (feeling ashamed of oneself and feeling contempt for someone else). As with the first session, students will write a brief description of each event and rate their memories on several dimensions.

After you complete the activity, ask students to calculate an average rating for each of the four events. Then have them compare the average score for their “proud” memory with the average score for their “shame” memory. Have them raise their hands if their proud scores are higher than their shame scores. Because these are personal memories, it is likely that most students will have higher scores for their proud memories than for their ashamed memories.

Then ask students to compare scores for their memories of admiration with their scores for the memories of contempt. Because these are memories for feelings about others, it is likely that scores will be similar for these memories.

As a follow up, point out to students that the focus here is not on the accuracy of the autobiographical memories but on the perceived quality of those memories as rated by the retriever. Because it can be difficult to determine the accuracy of autobiographical memories, many researchers have focused instead on understanding other qualities of those memories. In some cases like this one, methodological limitations force researchers to be innovative with their measures, and our understanding of the nature of human memory is enriched as a result.

So the next time you get a parking ticket, negative evaluation, or experience a disagreement with a coworker, take heart! What you remember in the future will likely be more positive than how things feel in the moment.

References


Is There a Bright Side to Stress?

By C. Nathan DeWall


Regina and Katie are adventurous souls. For their honeymoon, they plan to visit the Sahara Desert, where they will ride camels, hike in the baking sun, and sleep in traditional tents. To make sure they’re safe,
Regina and Katie will hire a guide. They want someone who is adept at detecting snakes and other threats. More than that, Regina and Katie need someone who swiftly senses their fears and addresses them.

Katie, a psychological scientist, adds an odd twist to their honeymoon planning. “We need to hire someone who experienced childhood stress,” she says. “The more our guide experienced stress as a child, the better that guide will keep us safe.” According to Willem Frankenhuis and Carolina de Weerth (2013), this reasoning is solid.

Frankenhuis and de Weerth propose that early-life stress shapes, rather than impairs, adult cognition. *Shaping* occurs when experiences shift people’s psychology to become better adapted to their environment. When toddlers experience famine, their cognition toward food changes. When children experience physical abuse, their cognition toward interpersonal safety changes. Such cognitive shifts help these children survive and reproduce. In effect, stress can increase fitness to one’s environment.

To say that early-life stress shapes cognition is provocative. Rather than focus on shaping, researchers have often emphasized how children who experience early-life stress show cognitive impairments. Children who experience prolonged maltreatment, for example, demonstrate deficient cognitive performance and emotional reasoning (Gould, Clarke, Helm, Harvey, et al., 2012; Pears & Fisher, 2005). Frankenhuis and de Weerth acknowledge these deficits while also demonstrating that adults who experienced high levels of childhood stress show faster detection of threatening stimuli and fearful faces (Davis et al., 2011; Pollak, 2008). Nonhuman animals that experience early-life trauma have similar advantages in detecting environmental threats (Sullivan & Holman, 2010). Our experiences shape our thoughts—and childhood stress is no exception.

To bring this provocative research into the classroom, instructors can ask students to complete the following two activities. The first activity introduces students to the concept of shaping. The second activity encourages students to engage in perspective-taking with people who have experienced early-life stress.

**Activity #1**

Ask students to list the most unusual activities a person could complete every day for one year. Be creative. Perhaps it is walking across campus backwards? Typing emails with your eyes closed? Picking up laundry with your toes? Have students share their ideas with a partner. Instructors can then call on students to share their ideas. Next, have students describe how these activities might have drawbacks, besides other people thinking you’re goofy. More seriously, ask students how engaging in those unusual activities would change their thinking after a year. How might those activities affect you if you completed them repeatedly for 5 years? What if those 5 years were during the period in your life when your brain is most adaptive, such as early childhood? How might the activity make you more adapted to your current environment?

**Activity #2**

Ask students to read the following scenario and consider how they would respond.
You own a hang gliding company. The largest part of your business is tandem flying, in which a guest pays to complete a flight with an expert-level flyer. You need to hire one new expert-level flyer. The job’s two main requirements are to quickly detect potential safety threats and to ensure that guests don’t experience overwhelming fear. You’ve narrowed the field to two finalists. Below are their credentials and personal information. Select the candidate you would like to hire.

**Candidate A:** 16 years of tandem flight experience; 3,146 hours flight time; important personal fact: lived in an orphanage first five years of life, in which the candidate experienced tremendous stress and abuse.

**Candidate B:** 17 years of tandem flight experience; 2,853 hours flight time; important personal fact: third-generation graduate of renowned New Hampshire college preparatory school.

Have students share who they would want to hire and why. What made their candidate more qualified than the other candidate? Instructors can then review the Frankenhuis and de Weerth article, which suggests that Candidate A may outperform Candidate B at quickly identifying environmental threat and fear expressions. How many students would like to change their hiring decision? Why or why not?

No child should ever experience abuse, neglect, or other maltreatment. But for those who do, all is not lost. Out of their pain is formed an alloy of strength and awareness that alerts them and others to potential threats. If there is a bright side to stress, it is having a cognitive edge in ensuring that you remain out of harm’s way in the future.

**References**


