

Positive and Under Appreciated Effects of Reading Own—and Others’—Memories

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Abstract

This article investigates unappreciated benefits of reading memories, including memories of anonymous peers rather than one's own, for improving happiness and relieving loneliness. In Study 1, college seniors wrote down memories from college and looked back on those memories, or the memories of another anonymous senior, one month later. The students under-predicted how happy reading the memories would make them, and this under-appreciation occurred regardless of whether the memories were one's own or a peer's. Study 2 replicated Study 1 with senior citizens in assisted-care living. The senior citizens felt happier and less lonely after reading their own or other's memories from across the lifespan, and they too showed an affective forecasting error in predicting how happy the experience would make them. Results combined across the studies suggest that individuals are more likely to under-predict the happiness boost of reading others' memories than their own.

Keywords: reminiscence; vicarious memories; wellbeing

Positive and Under Appreciated Effects of Reading Own—and Others’—Memories

Loneliness is a dismal state. Some view it as an “epidemic” that is on the rise due to features of modern life, such as increased use of social media and the breakdown of collective social structures. Others view it as a constant nagging social and psychological ill fundamentally linked to human drives and biological imperatives. Regardless, the problem of loneliness is real and serious (e.g., Cacioppo, 2009; Klinenberg, 2018; Murthy, 2017). Reminiscence, which involves the positive experience of recalling past events in one’s life, may offer some help. The present research examines the hypothesis that individuals may experience increased happiness, and decreased loneliness, from reading (and writing) their own memories. We expect these positive effects to occur even when individuals read peers’ memories rather than their own. Importantly, we expect that individuals will under-predict the positive effects of reading memories, especially (but not only) when those memories have been recorded by a peer rather than themselves.

Recording and Recalling Memories

Past research shows some indications that remembering one’s past experiences may have positive consequences for happiness and loneliness. A number of studies have shown positive effects, when the nature of those memories has been controlled experimentally. For example, research on nostalgia has found that, in response to instructions to recall past events that conjure nostalgic feelings, people experience increased positive affect, increased meaning, and decreased loneliness (e.g., Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006; Routledge et al., 2011). However, other work suggests this may be specific to recalling nostalgic experiences, as research (Strack, Schwarz & Gschneidinger, 1985) allowing individuals to recall either positive or negative

memories has found mixed results, indicating that assimilation and congruence effects may moderate the impact of recalling past events (for example, if one recalls feeling happier in the past than one feels now, sadness may result).

A large body of work initiated by Pennebaker (e.g., 1997) suggests that a range of positive effects may occur when individuals take the time to *write in detail* about past emotional experiences. That work has shown positive effects of writing about emotional experiences on a range of outcomes including distress, success (e.g., GPA, re-employment after unemployment), physiological markers, and frequency of doctor visits (Pennebaker, 1997).

Collectively, the above work suggests there may be positive effects of recalling past experiences – but that these effects may be limited to recalling nostalgic experiences, or to recalling under the right emotional circumstances, or to writing in detail about emotionally impactful experiences. The present research examines whether recalling past experiences without further instruction as to the nature of those experiences may reap some of these positive benefits for happiness and loneliness. Moreover, we examine whether these benefits can occur even when looking back and *reading*, rather than writing or recalling, what one wrote in the past. Notably, writing about past experiences or recalling their details are likely to be higher-effort tasks than reading about those experiences. As described below, we seek to examine another low-effort alternative to writing memories: i.e., reading *others'* memories, and whether that experience may also be sufficient for increasing feelings of happiness and decreasing feelings of loneliness.

Vicarious Memories and Stories

Research concerning the psychological effects of remembering the past has generally focused on autobiographical memories—that is, memories of one’s own past experiences. But what about the experience of being exposed to others’ memories? The experiments described here investigate not only effects of looking back on one’s own memories of past experiences, but also effects of looking back on peers’ memories. That is, we also investigate effects of “vicarious memories” (Pillemer, Steiner, Kuwabara, Thomsen & Svob, 2015), and of whether similar psychological benefits can issue from reminiscing with the aid of these vicarious memories rather than one’s own memories.

In a previous study with college students looking back on either their own memories or the memories of parents and friends, results revealed that vicarious memories were similar to autobiographical memories, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree, on numerous key dimensions including the emotional intensity that they engender, the physical reactions that they bring forth, and the vividness with which they are pictured (Pillemer et al., 2015).

While we know of no prior literature examining vicarious memories that belong to non-close others, research about the effects of fiction and stories could highlight some potential effects of unknown others’ stories on the self. For example, poems read to nursing home residents acted as catalysts to self-reflect and share narratives that were important to the residents (Healey, Hopkins, McClimens & Peplow, 2017). Another study found that high school students experienced positive, negative, and mixed emotions as well as reminiscence of related memories from their own lives when they read fictional short stories that they reported liking (Biaison, 1995).

Affective Forecasting: Predicting the Impact of Reading Memories

If remembering the past increases happiness, will people realize that this is the case? A significant body of literature concerning affective forecasting suggests that people are not always very good at predicting their future emotional states (e.g., Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). We expected people to under-appreciate the happiness effect of reading their own memories. After all, in the present experiments, these memories were written only a week to a month earlier and thus one might expect that reading them would be a less than novel or enlightening experience. We expected this under-prediction effect to be even stronger when reading others' memories. In the abstract, one might not be able to anticipate the commonalities with one's own experiences, or the humor or meaning in others' memories. Moreover, past research has found that people fail to appreciate the enjoyment they will get from hearing others' stories that are not especially novel (Cooney, Gilbert & Wilson, 2017).

Goals and Hypotheses of the Current Research

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the psychological impact of reading one's own and unknown others' memories. Study 1 investigated effects on happiness (and predicted effects on happiness), and effects on feelings of social connection, for Princeton University seniors. These students wrote down memories from college and placed them in a jar, and they then returned a month later to read either their own or another (yoked) anonymous senior's jar. Study 2 sought to replicate and extend Study 1 by using a population of senior citizens in assisted living care.

Across the two studies, we expect similar effects. We predict that reading memories, regardless of whether they are autobiographical (written by oneself) or

vicarious (written by a peer about him or herself), will exert beneficial effects on positive affect and feelings of social connection. Due to an error in affective forecasting, we expect the positive effects of reading memories to be underappreciated (i.e., under-predicted in advance), and we expect this error to be especially pronounced in the case of vicarious memories (which people are unlikely to have previously thought of as a potential source of positive feeling). Finally, although our primary hypotheses concern the positive effects of *reading* memories (and whether those effects are underappreciated, and whether they differ for autobiographical versus vicarious memories), it is worth noting that we expect the experience of *writing* these memories to exert similar positive effects.

Study 1: Princeton University Seniors

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the self and social effects of reading memories that belonged to the self or an anonymous classmate, and to see whether these effects are similar and whether they are fully appreciated beforehand.

Method

Participants. A total of 120 Princeton University undergraduate seniors (69.5% female, 28.5% male, 1% no gender information provided; Median age = 21.00, age range = 20 to 28; 44.76% Caucasian, 36.19% Asian or Asian American, 3.80% African American, 9.52% that identified otherwise, and 5.73% no race information provided) participated in exchange for \$10. All participants made memory jars at Time 1. Of these 120 participants, 104 participants (86.67%) returned at Time 2, one month later. Our target sample size, based on previous experiments concerning differences in perception of self and others, was a sample of 100 members of Princeton University's senior class (i.e.,

50 participants per condition). To achieve this target, we recruited 120 students with the expectation that this would yield approximately 100 participants (ie, individuals who completed both phases of the study).

Procedure and Questionnaire. After providing informed consent, participants responded to one question assessing their baseline feeling of happiness: “How are you feeling right now?” (1 = *extremely sad*, 7 = *extremely happy*). They then responded to two questions (Cronbach’s alpha = .75) assessing their baseline feelings of connectedness with their college community: “How connected do you feel to Princeton University?” (1 = *extremely disconnected*, 7 = *extremely connected*); “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: ‘I feel a sense of belonging in Princeton’s Class of 2018’?” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Participants then were instructed to write down 7 memories of their choosing from their time in college. They wrote each memory on a blank white card, folded each card, and then placed the 7 cards inside a glass jar. After closing their “memory jar,” participants answered the same happiness and social connectedness measures as before, and then made predictions for how reading their own and other Princeton seniors’ jars would make them feel at a later date. Prediction questions were adapted from Wilson, Meyers, and Gilbert (2003). These questions were: “How happy would reading the memories you wrote make you a month from now?” (1 = *extremely sad*, 7 = *extremely happy*) and “How would reading the memories the other senior wrote make you feel a month from now?” (1 = *extremely sad*, 7 = *extremely happy*).

When participants returned for Part 2 of the experiment, one month later, they were randomly assigned to read either their own memories or another senior’s memories.

For those assigned to read another senior's memories, these were randomly chosen with the caveat that no jar was read by more than one participant. Before receiving the memory jar that they would read, participants first responded to the same mood and social connection measures that were used at Time 1. After reading the jar, participants answered the same questions again regarding mood and social connection, as well as exploratory items (not analyzed for this report) probing for memory valence, meaningfulness, representativeness, as well as overall impressions of the memory jar.

Results

Writing Memories. Participants reported greater happiness after writing memories ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.24$) than before writing those memories ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(119) = 2.85$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.26$. From before to after writing college memories, participants did not report different feelings of connectedness with their college community ($M_{\text{after}} = 5.50$, $M_{\text{before}} = 5.43$; $SDs = 1.17, 1.20$); $t[119] = 0.93$, $p = .357$).

Happiness and Reading Memories. To examine the affective impact of reading memories, a two-way ANOVA (before vs. after reading X own vs. other's memories) with regard to participants' affect was conducted. As predicted, there was a main effect of reading memories such that participants reported feeling happier after reading memories ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.04$) than they were before they read them ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.19$); $F(1, 103) = 4.86$, $p = .03$. This affective impact did not vary significantly based on whether participants read their own versus another senior's memories, as indicated by the relevant interaction test, $F(1, 103) = 2.71$, $p = .10$.

However, it may be worth noting that although the interaction was not significant, the cell

means are perhaps suggestive that the autobiographical memory condition may have been more impactful on happiness than the vicarious memory condition (see Table 1).

Connectedness and Reading Memories. A two-way ANOVA (before vs. after reading X own vs. other's memories) with regard to participants' feelings of connectedness revealed no main effect of reading memories on perceived belonging to the college community ($M_{\text{after}} = 5.42$, $M_{\text{before}} = 5.26$; $SDs = 1.03, 1.05$), $F(1, 103) = 0.85$, $p = .36$. The interaction effect was also non-significant, $F(1, 103) = 0.02$, $p = .88$.

A summary of the effects of reading the memory jars are as shown in *Table 1*.

Effects of Reading Memories			
Happiness			
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	5.09 (1.26)	5.70 (0.96)	0.60 (1.18)
<i>Other</i>	5.26 (1.13)	5.35 (1.10)	0.09 (1.12)
<i>Combined (Self and Other)</i>	5.18 (1.19)	5.52 (1.04)	0.34* (1.17)
Social Connection			
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	5.33 (1.07)	5.57 (0.99)	0.24 (0.52)
<i>Other</i>	5.19 (1.04)	5.27 (1.83)	0.08 (1.72)
<i>Combined (Self and Other)</i>	5.26 (1.05)	5.42 (1.03)	0.16 (0.65)

* $p < 0.05$, Δ indicates difference between before and after values, SDs in parentheses

Table 1. Effects of Reading Memory Jars for College Seniors.

Affective Forecasting. We next tested the predicted error in affective forecasting, whereby participants were expected to under-appreciate the happiness they would

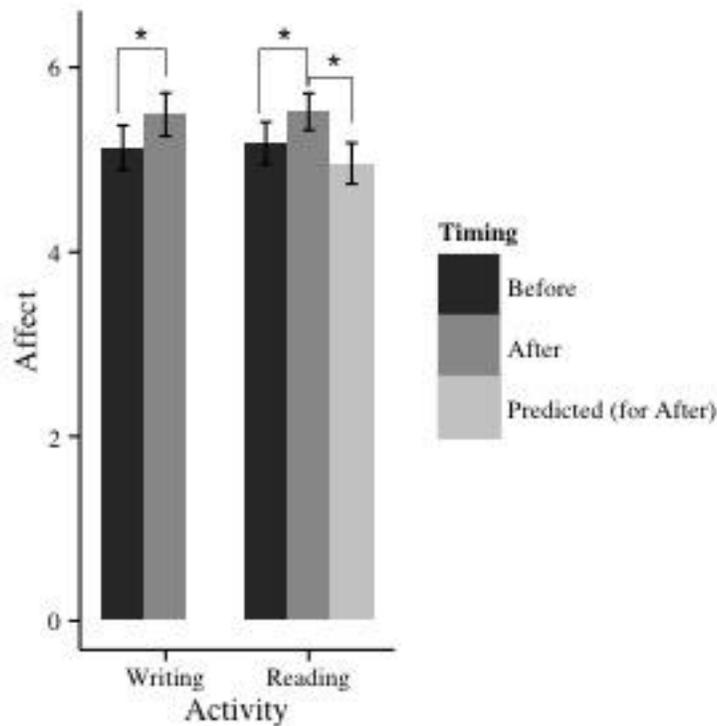
experience from reading memories. This hypothesis was tested using a two-way ANOVA (predicted happiness vs. reported happiness X own memories vs. others' memories). The predicted main effect emerged: participants reported feeling happier after reading memories ($M = 5.52, SD = 1.04$) than they initially predicted they would feel ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 103) = 4.80, p = .03$. This prediction error did not vary significantly based on whether participants read their own versus another senior's memories, although the interaction effect approached significance, $F(1, 103) = 3.71, p = .057$. The pattern of means (see Table 2) suggests that participants may have felt less of an appreciation for the affective benefits of vicarious memories as compared to autobiographical memories.

Affective Forecasting Error			
	<i>Predicted</i>	<i>Actual</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	5.52 (0.86)	5.70 (0.96)	0.17 (0.98)
<i>Other</i>	4.37 (1.12)	5.35 (1.10)	1.05 (1.61)
<i>Combined (Self and Other)</i>	4.89 (1.15)	5.52 (1.04)	0.61* (1.40)

* $p < 0.05$, Δ indicates difference between predicted and actual affect, SDs in parentheses

Table 2. Affective Forecasting Errors of Reading Memory Jars for College Seniors.

Since the affective impact of the jars was the primary variable of interest, a summary of the affective impact of reading and writing the memories, along with whether its effect is appreciated, is as shown in *Figure 1*.



Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals [$\pm 1.96 \times SEM$]

Figure 1. Predicted and actual affect before and after reading and writing memories for college seniors.

Discussion

In this experiment, writing and reading memories about college had the effect of making college seniors feel happier. However, writing and reading memories did not make them feel more socially connected with their college community. These results provide partial support for Neisser's functions of reminiscence (1988), in that the self-function (of increased positive affect) was served, but not the social function (of increased social connection). Notably, the effect on happiness of reading memories appeared to occur irrespective of whether participants read their own or an anonymous classmate's memories, suggesting that some of the benefits of reminiscence can be

reaped by “vicariously” accessing others’ memories. Finally, as predicted, participants under-predicted how happy reading the jars would make them. An effect of marginal significance ($p = .057$) suggested that this forecasting error may have been especially pronounced for those who read others’ memories rather than their own.

Our next experiment sought to replicate the findings of Study 1 while augmenting our investigation in a number of ways. Our participant sample in Study 2 was drawn from senior citizens living in assisted living facilities. This sample was selected both in order to test the generalizability of the observed effects beyond a college sample, and also to investigate possible beneficial effects for individuals who might be particularly prone to feelings of loneliness and lack of social connection (e.g., Hicks, 2000; Victor & Yang, 2012).

We replaced the measures of social connectedness from Study 1 with items from existing scales for measuring loneliness (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978) and well-being (Ryff, 1989). In order to further investigate the generalizability of the memory-reading experience, participants were asked to write memories from anytime in their lifetime, and not just from their most recent year (as in Study 1). We also broadened the definition of “peer” in the vicarious memory condition. While participants in the vicarious memories condition in Study 1 read memories of an anonymous classmate at their own college, participants in the vicarious memories condition in Study 2 read memories of an anonymous senior citizen who resided in a different assisted living community than the participant’s own.

In this experiment, we predicted that individuals in assisted living facilities would feel happier, and less lonely, after reading memory jars. We further predicted that these

effects would occur regardless of whether the memories they read were their own or those of an anonymous other who resided in a different assisted living facility. Due to an error in affective forecasting, we expected individuals to under-appreciate the benefits of reading memories, perhaps especially when those memories belonged to another person. Finally, we expected that writing the memories for these jars would be a positive rather than negative experience.

Study 2: Assisted Living Residents

Method

Participants. A total of 105 senior citizens from 11 assisted living facilities in Central New Jersey served as participants (88% women, 11% men, 1% gender unknown; Median age = 87.00, age range = 51 to 101; 95% Caucasian, 2% Asian or Asian American, 2% African American, 1% no race provided). All participants made memory jars at Time 1. Of the 105 participants, 100 participants (95.24%) completed the study at Time 2, one week later, at which point they were randomly assigned to read the contents of either their own jar or that of another (yoked) participant who resided at a different assisted living facility. The sample size was determined based on our approaching every assisted living residence in a 35 mile radius of Princeton. This resulted in the inclusion of 11 assisted living facilities, from which we recruited into the experiment every individual who would consent to participate. We stopped recruiting once we had asked every individual to participate.

Procedure and Measures. The procedure and measures were identical to Study 1, except for the differing time interval between Times 1 and 2 (one week rather than one month), and the addition of brief versions of established measures of well-being and

loneliness, in place of the prior items measuring social connectedness. The loneliness measure was a single item taken from the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978): i.e., “I feel completely alone” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The well-being measure was a 6-item version of Ryff’s (1989) 84-item Scale of Psychological Well Being, which we shortened by randomly selecting one item from each of the six subscales (for autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, self acceptance). Items included: “The past had its ups and downs, but in general, I wouldn’t want to change it”; “I currently feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

Writing Memories. Participants were happier after writing down memories than they were before writing down those memories ($M_{\text{after}} = 5.58$, $M_{\text{before}} = 4.70$; $SDs = 1.19$, 1.26), $t(104) = 4.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$. Participants also felt significantly less lonely after ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.60$) writing down memories than they did before writing them ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.96$), $t(104) = 4.61$, $p = .0001$, $d = 0.26$. Finally, participants reported greater well-being after versus before writing the memories ($M_{\text{after}} = 5.01$, $M_{\text{before}} = 4.58$; $SDs = 1.38$, 1.27), $t(104) = 2.692$, $p = .010$, $d = 0.324$.

Happiness and Reading Memories. To examine the affective impact of reading memories, a two-way ANOVA (before reading vs. after reading X own memories vs. others’ memories) with regard to participants’ affect was conducted. As predicted, there was a main effect of reading memories such that participants reported feeling happier after reading memories ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.43$) than they were before they read them ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 99) = 13.07$, $p = .0004$. Notably, this affective impact did not vary

significantly based on whether participants read their own versus another resident's memories, as indicated by the relevant non-significant interaction, $F(1, 99) = 0.044, p = .835$.

Loneliness and Reading Memories. A two-way ANOVA (before reading vs. after reading x own memories vs. others' memories) revealed that participants felt significantly less lonely after ($M = 2.77, SD = 1.87$) reading the memories than they did before ($M = 3.68, SD = 2.08$), $F(1, 99) = 7.846, p = .006$. This impact on loneliness did not vary significantly based on whether participants read their own versus another resident's memories, as indicated by the relevant non-significant interaction, $F(1, 99) = 0.012, p = .913$.

Psychological Well Being and Reading Memories. A two-way ANOVA (before reading vs. after reading X own memories vs. others' memories) revealed that participants reported greater well-being after reading memories ($M = 4.84, SD = 0.77$) than before reading them ($M = 4.37, SD = 0.83$), $F(1, 99) = 13.02, p = .0004$. This effect on well-being did not vary significantly based on whether participants read their own versus another person's memories, as indicated by the relevant non-significant interaction, $F(1, 99) = 0.665, p = .416$.

A summary of the effects of reading the memory jars is shown in *Table 3*.

Effects of Reading Memories			
Happiness			
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	4.41 (1.46)	5.31 (1.47)	0.89 (1.28)
<i>Other</i>	4.90 (1.48)	5.69 (1.37)	0.79 (1.73)
<i>Combined (Self and Other)</i>	4.63 (1.48)	5.48 (1.43)	0.85*** (1.49)
Loneliness			
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	3.84 (2.12)	2.90 (1.91)	-0.92 (1.61)
<i>Other</i>	3.49 (2.03)	2.62 (1.83)	-0.87 (1.72)
<i>Combined (Self and Other)</i>	3.68 (2.08)	2.77 (1.87)	-0.89** (1.65)
Psychological Well Being			
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	4.27 (0.81)	4.83 (0.79)	0.56 (0.78)
<i>Other</i>	4.50 (0.84)	4.85 (0.75)	0.35 (0.77)
<i>Combined (Self and Other)</i>	4.37 (0.83)	4.84 (0.77)	0.47*** (0.78)

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, Δ = difference between before and after values, SDs in parentheses

Table 3. Effects of Reading Memory Jars for Senior Citizens.

Affective Forecasting. To examine affective forecasting errors in predictions about the impact of reading memories, a two-way ANOVA was conducted (predicted

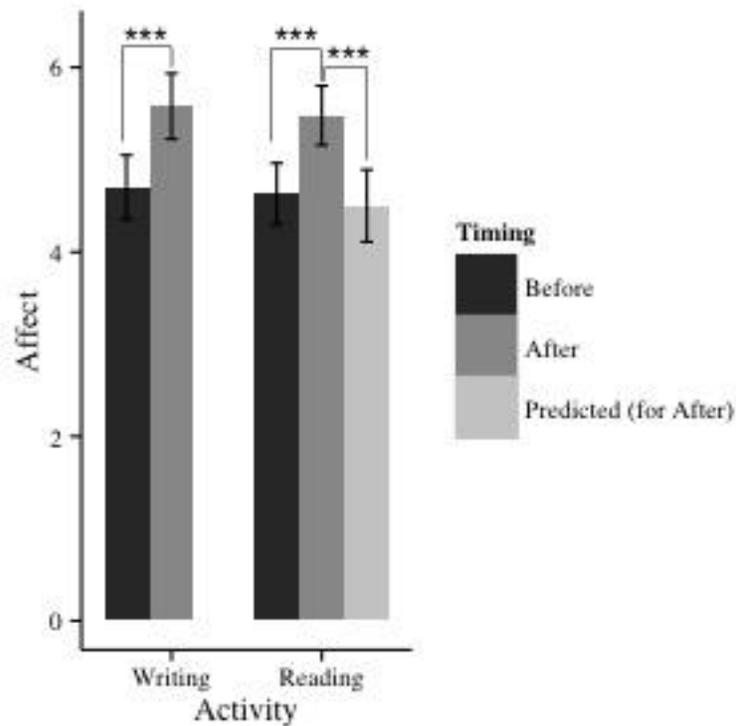
happiness vs. reported happiness X reading own memories vs. reading others' memories). The predicted error in affective forecasting was observed: participants reported feeling happier after reading memories ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.43$) than they initially predicted they would feel after reading them ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 99) = 13.56$, $p = .0004$. This prediction error did not vary significantly based on whether participants read their own memories versus those of another assisted living facility resident, although the interaction effect approached significance, $F(1, 99) = 2.99$, $p = .087$. The pattern of means (see Table 4) suggests that participants may have felt less of an appreciation for the affective benefits of vicarious memories as compared to autobiographical memories.

Affective Forecasting			
	<i>Predicted</i>	<i>Actual</i>	Δ
<i>Self</i>	4.74 (1.36)	5.31 (1.47)	0.93 (1.62)
<i>Other</i>	4.19 (1.13)	5.69 (1.37)	1.39 (1.87)
	4.50 (1.28)	5.48 (1.43)	1.10** (1.73)

** $p < 0.01$, Δ indicates difference between predicted and actual affect, SDs in parentheses

Table 4. Predicted and Actual Affect from Reading Memory Jars for Senior Citizens.

Similar to Study 1, a summary of the affective impact of reading and writing the memories, along with whether its effect is appreciated, is as shown in Figure 2.



Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals [$\pm 1.96 \times SEM$]

Figure 2. Predicted and actual affect before and after reading and writing memories for Senior Citizens.

Discussion and Meta-Analysis

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 with residents of an assisted living facility, rather than college seniors. As in Study 1, reading memories, whether those recorded by the self or a peer, made people happier. Moreover, the addition of two new measures that were not employed in Study 1 revealed that reading memories also decreased participants' feelings of loneliness and increased their sense of well-being.

As in Study 1, participants showed an affective forecasting error. They under-predicted how happy reading memories would make them. In Study 2, as in Study 1,

participants showed a marginal tendency to under-predict the impact of reading others' memories even more than reading their own memories ($p = .057$ in Study 1, $p = .087$ in Study 2). In order to examine whether this effect might be significant when combined across the two studies, we used Fisher's method for meta analysis (Fisher, 1932 as cited in Westberg, 1985; Rosenthal, 1978). Our Fisher's combined probability tests, conducted using the `metap` package in R (Dewey, 2018), revealed that across the two studies, the affective forecasting error for reading others' memories was significantly larger than the affective forecasting error for reading own memories ($\chi^2(4, N = 205) = 10.57, p = .030$).

General Discussion

Both creating and reading memory jars were associated with participants feeling significantly happier, as shown in studies with both college seniors looking back on their time in college (Study 1) and with senior citizens looking back on their lives more generally (Study 2). In Study 2, participants also reported less loneliness and greater well-being in response to writing and reading the memories. The positive effect of reading memories emerged regardless of whether participants read their own memories or those of an anonymous (yoked) peer. Furthermore, consistent with individuals' proneness to errors in affective forecasting, participants in both studies underappreciated the happiness boost they would gain from reading memories.

The finding of unknown others' memories having effects similar to one's own has important implications, particularly for those seeking to alleviate feelings of loneliness or to improve happiness, or for those seeking to help others achieve that goal. For example, people grieving the loss of loved ones, who may not all be able to actively bring up memories they need in order to end their bereavement (Cohen-Louck & Saka, 2016),

can potentially read other similarly grieving peoples' memories in order to bring up their own memories. These findings highlight the importance of sharing memories beyond self-preservation by showing the benefits of sharing memories. They also highlight the potential benefits of reading autobiographical narratives of others, and potentially of reading realistic fiction.

Future work could benefit from exploring these results further. For example, is it important for memories to be placed into or read from a physical jar, or would a "virtual jar" work equally well? Do the benefits of reading memories extend beyond reading memories of others who are in a similar situation to one's own (such as fellow college students or senior citizens)? What are the long-term effects of reading memories—are the acute effects something that can extend over time if reading is continued over that period?

Together, these studies show that writing and reading memories belonging to both oneself and unknown others results in similar, often under-appreciated, benefits—increased happiness, reduced feelings of loneliness, an increased sense of well-being. It is interesting that these memories were recorded and read in the form of "memory jars." Humans have created things like "time capsules" for as long as history can detect. Perhaps these capsules are not just a window into the past but also a way for those who create and look back on them to gain feelings of joy and social connection.

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