

In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children: Biases in Recollection of Giving Birth Experience

Eran Chajut¹, Rony Chen², Avner Caspi¹, Moshe Hod², and Dan Ariely³

¹ Open University of Israel, ² Rabin Medical Center, Israel, ³ Duke University

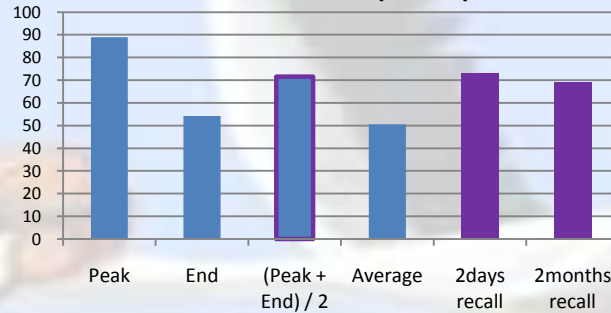
Introduction

The physical and mental efforts needed in giving birth are a fundamental theme in our culture. Like other experiences they have two temporal domains: the actual experience, and its memory. Kahneman and his associates (Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997; Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, & Redelmeier, 1993) showed that the overall evaluations of painful experience does not seem to fully take the duration of the experience into account, and instead people tend to focus on a few key characteristics of the painful experience – mostly its peak and its final intensity.

Since, for many, giving birth is a monumental experience from both personal and cultural perspectives, it is possible that the memory distortions at play might be lower than the ones for other experiences.

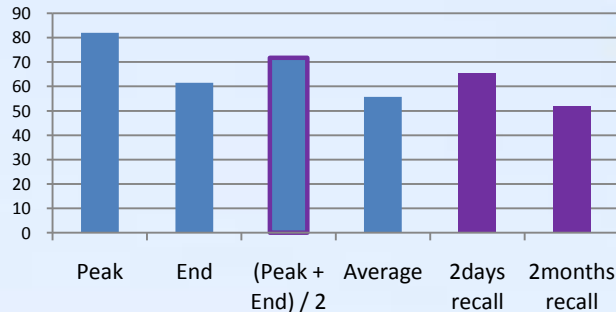
Equipped with these insights, we examined the differences between pain and stress reported continuously during giving birth and their latter recollection after two days and two months among 308 Israeli women.

Actual and recalled pain experience



Results showed that two days after birth, recall of both pain and stress were based on the peak and end events of the experience, and the duration of the experience had no effect on memory recall (peak-and-end rule, and duration neglect). However, two month later, the recollection of pain remained relatively stable, while the recollection of stress dramatically decreased.

Actual and recalled stress experience



Summary

Despite that giving birth is a unique experience involving mixed emotions of sorrow and happiness; severe pain and great joy; worry and desire, its retrospective evaluation complies with robust memory rules and predictable biases.