



Comparing predicted and actual affective responses to process versus outcome: An emotion-as-feedback perspective



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ABSTRACT

One of the conjectures in affective forecasting literature is that people are advised to discount their anticipated emotions because their forecasts are often inaccurate. The present research distinguishes between emotional reactions to process versus those to outcome, and highlights an alternative view that affective misforecasts could indeed be adaptive to goal pursuit. Using an ultimatum game, Study 1 showed that people overpredicted how much they would regret and be disappointed by the amount of effort they exerted, should the outcomes turned out worse than expected; nonetheless, people could accurately predict their emotional responses to unfavorable outcomes *per se*. In a natural setting of a university examination, Study 2 demonstrated that actual regret and disappointment toward favorable outcomes were more intense than the level people expected, but this discrepancy was not observed in their emotional responses to efforts they had invested. These two distinct patterns of results substantiate the argument that the deviation between predicted and actual emotions is dependent on the referents of the emotional reactions.

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1. Introduction

Anticipated emotions are consequential in shaping decisions and behaviors (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Mellers, 2000; Zeelenberg, 1999; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). For example, people are willing to pay extra costs to reduce the risk that they would regret choosing certain actions or options in the future (Bell, 1982; Loomes & Sugden, 1982). Unfortunately, people's "predictions so often go awry" (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007, p. 1351; see also Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Kermer, Driver-Linn, Wilson,

& Gilbert, 2006; but see Levine, Lench, Kaplan, & Safer, 2012) and particularly so when they anticipate regret and disappointment (Gilbert, Morewedge, Risen, & Wilson, 2004; Sevdalis & Harvey, 2007). People overpredict how much they would be regretful and disappointed when the results of their decisions fall below their expectations (Gilbert et al., 2004; Sevdalis & Harvey, 2007, Study 1). At the same time, people underpredict their future regrets but overpredict their future rejoicing at better-than-expected outcomes (Sevdalis & Harvey, 2007, Study 2).

Given such errors in their emotional forecasts, decision makers who choose to pay to avoid the anticipated regret or disappointment may be buying "emotional insurance that they do not actually need" (Gilbert et al., 2004, p. 346). Accordingly, some researchers recommend that in decision making, people should discount their anticipated emotional responses (Sevdalis & Harvey, 2007). At the same time, researchers are eager to identify "de-biasing" strategies to improve such forecasts (e.g., Gilbert, Killingsworth, Eyre, & Wilson, 2009; Walsh & Ayton, 2009).

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By definition, errors imply deviation, and thus require correction, including errors in emotional forecasts. The present paper, nonetheless, proposes an alternative view that errors in emotional forecasts may be functional. This functional argument is rooted in the theory of emotion as a feedback system (Baumeister et al., 2007), which suggests that emotions, no matter whether anticipated or actual ones, are useful to stimulate learning and to regulate future behavior that leads to a desired end state. Levine, Lench, and Safer (2009) also proposed a similar idea for emotional remembering, arguing that the memory of past emotion is biased toward promoting goal-directed behaviors. A more refined analysis of prediction errors in our research indeed shows that emotional forecasts are often biased toward a direction that is strategic to goal pursuit in the long run.²

The following section presents the theoretical foundation of this functional argument. Then, we propose a refined analysis of emotional responses with respect to efforts versus outcomes. On this basis, we then specify how anticipated and actual emotions may diverge (i.e., resulting in prediction errors) and how this divergence can be used to regulate future behaviors.

1.1. Theoretical foundations

According to the emotion as feedback theory (Baumeister et al., 2007; see also Carver & Scheier, 1998), the ultimate function of emotional experience is to facilitate goal pursuit. As a component in a self-regulation feedback system, emotional experience focuses attention, prompts analysis and learning, and stimulates behavioral change that yields “adaptive and constructive outcomes (goal achievement)” (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 175). Anticipating emotions, as a significant part of the feedback system, guides behavioral choices from currently available options in pursuit of the anticipated outcome that people desire (e.g., choosing the least regrettable option). To be functional, anticipated emotions should be particularly strong so that they can direct and sustain the behaviors that are conducive to goal pursuit. However, as the theory argues, the actual emotion experienced need not to be as powerful as anticipated because such a case may in fact impair the process of analysis and learning derived from the current situation. Thus, “people need only have enough emotions to... extract any lessons that can be learned at that time” (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 191).

To be an effective regulatory system, this theory implies that both anticipated and actual emotional reactions should be future-oriented to aid goal pursuit in the long run. More precisely, as emotions are useful for facilitating goal attainment rather than reflecting the (true) hedonistic value of an outcome, anticipated and actual emotions are not necessarily always aligned. For them to be adaptive,

their divergence should relate to the progress of goal pursuit. This idea is consistent with the findings of Sevdalis and Harvey (2007), which showed that people are less regretful than they thought they would be when their progress falls short of expectations. In contrast, they are more regretful than they expected when their performance meets or exceeds their expectations. The key insight proposed in the present paper is that the deviation between anticipated and actual emotions would depend on the focus of emotional reactions, which may reflect different components in the pursuit of a goal.

More specifically, as emotional responses are used to stimulate analysis and learning (Baumeister et al., 2007), it will be beneficial for the emotional responses to cue the specific aspect on which the subsequent cognitive process should focus. A goal in a self-regulatory process includes the desired outcomes (including the proximal and distal end states) as well as their associated processes and means (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 1990). Outcomes and the processes differ in their focus. Therefore, an ideal feedback system is the one in which emotions are associated with a very specific referent, such as disappointment about the outcome or about the process.

Under this outcome-versus-process bifurcation, feedback on the outcome component would concern the goal aspiration level and value, and the importance of the end states (such as the potential consequences of the outcome on one's personal standing); whereas feedback on the process component would concern the concrete actions taken, and how different actions may result in different consequences. A similar distinction in terms of thought focus can also be found in literature on mental simulation, where cognitive elaboration may focus on the process and means of achieving an end (process thoughts) versus the end outcome and its impacts and values (outcome thoughts) (Pham & Taylor, 1999; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). Given that there are two distinct components in goal pursuit, which call for different thought foci, emotional inputs would result in more effective diagnostic feedback for goal pursuit if they are also differentiated by their foci, namely, on process versus on outcome.

Our idea of differentiating between emotional reactions regarding process and outcome is also similar to the proposal on separating process regret from outcome regret (Connolly & Reb, 2005; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Connolly and Reb (2005) pointed out that after obtaining a worse-than-expected outcome, a person may regret such a poor result (i.e., outcome regret), and/or the limited effort the person had devoted to that endeavor (i.e., process regret). Recent research has found empirical evidence for the distinction between outcome regret and process regret (Reb, 2008; Reb & Connolly, 2009). Unfortunately, insight into this potential differentiation has been undermined by the way through which emotions have been conceptualized and measured. Typically, emotional reactions are captured by items that ask participants to indicate how much of a specific emotion (e.g., regret or disappointment) they would feel in a given situation (Gilbert et al., 2004; Sevdalis & Harvey, 2007). Thus, without specifying the referent, these measures

² In this manuscript, we focus on situations in which committing to goal attainment is generally functional and adaptive. However, we acknowledge that sometimes this commitment may be maladaptive, such as escalating commitment to a failing course of action (Brockner, 1992; Staw, 1976). In such situations, emotions may instead contribute to disengagement from the goal (Wong, Yik, & Kwong, 2006).

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