FlashReport

Victims versus perpetrators: Affective and empathic forecasting regarding transgressions in romantic relationships

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HIGHLIGHTS

► Affective forecasting about transgressions showed an overestimation level bias.
► However, individuals correctly forecast that perpetrators would feel worse than victims.
► Empathic forecasts also revealed an overestimation bias.
► Moreover, a role bias (victim versus perpetrator) was evident for empathic forecasts.

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ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that people frequently mispredict their own and other people's emotional responses. In a longitudinal study, both members of 104 couples predicted the degree to which they (affective forecast) and their partner (empathic forecast) would experience sadness in response to 20 relationship transgressions, in both victim and perpetrator roles. Then, every two weeks for 10 weeks, participants reported whether they or their partner had enacted each transgression and indicated how sad they felt about each transgression. Such procedures allowed for comparisons of both affective and empathic forecasts with actual experiences for both victim and perpetrator roles. Participants forecast greater sadness for themselves and their partner in both the victim and perpetrator roles than they actually experienced. Participants correctly forecast that they would be sadder in the perpetrator than the victim role, but incorrectly forecast that their partner would be sadder in the victim than the perpetrator role.

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Introduction

Our actions do not occur in a social or emotional vacuum. Therefore, it is surprising that researchers have not investigated the accuracy with which individuals predict how their actions affect *others* emotionally. Although a flurry of research has investigated how accurately individuals predict their own emotional responses to events that occur to them (affective forecasting), only one report has investigated predictions of how others will respond to those same events (empathic forecasts; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Specifically, Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) investigated affective and empathic forecasts regarding feedback on a cognitive test. Individuals overestimated the intensity of another person's affect, just as they overestimated the intensity of their own affect (impact bias; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998), and the magnitude of overestimation

was comparable for affective forecasts and empathic forecasts. Although Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) took the first step toward examining empathic forecasting, neither they nor any other scholars have investigated forecasts of others' emotional responses to one's own actions—a particularly important type of empathic forecast.

Dyadic relationships are a fertile context for exploring this type of empathic forecast and comparing empathic forecasts to affective forecasts. In intimate relationships, two roles frequently exist for such events. For example, interpersonal transgressions—a virtually inevitable byproduct of interdependence—involve a victim role and a perpetrator role. An individual could be keeping an important secret from her partner (perpetrator role), and her partner could be keeping an important secret from her (victim role). This role variable allows for a novel investigation of forecasting accuracy. Not only can we test for a *level bias* for both affective forecasts and empathic forecasts (i.e., overestimation or underestimation of one's own and one's partner's affect), as previous research has addressed, but we also can investigate the possibility of a *role bias* (i.e., differing forecasts

for multiple roles regarding the same event), which previous research has not addressed. We examine affective forecasts and empathic forecasts of both perpetration and victimization in romantic relationships, which allows us to address several previously unanswered questions not only about affective and empathic forecasting, but also about how people respond to being the victim or the perpetrator of transgressions in intimate relationships. For example, do people overestimate their own emotional response to relationship transgressions? Do they forecast that they will feel worse as the victim or as the perpetrator? What are their corresponding empathic forecasts of their partner's feelings? Do these forecasts match reality? Below, we present our hypotheses for forecasting biases regarding both the *level* (general overestimation of emotional responses) and the *role* (the victim's and the perpetrator's emotional responses) of affective and empathic forecasts regarding transgressions in romantic relationships.

The affective forecasting literature reveals that people tend to overestimate both their positive affect following positive events, such as their favored team or candidate winning a football game or election, and their negative affect following negative events, such as failing to earn tenure or the breakup of a romantic relationship (e.g., Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Gilbert et al., 1998). People overestimate their emotional responses because they focus overly on the event as a source of affect (i.e., focalism; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000), and they overestimate the impact of similar past events (i.e., retrospective impact bias; Wilson, Meyers, & Gilbert, 2003). Consistent with this research, we hypothesized that individuals would overestimate their own sadness as both a victim and a perpetrator of transgressions.

Hypothesis 1. Level bias in affective forecasts.

The accuracy of affective forecasts regarding one's role in transgressions depends on both the actual experiences of victims and perpetrators and individuals' forecasts of these experiences. Although both parties are likely to feel bad after transgressions, perpetrators may feel worse for several reasons, including being responsible for having harmed a loved one and experiencing shame and guilt (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). For example, research on unrequited love found that rejectors felt certain negative emotions (e.g., self-blame, regret) more than their would-be lovers (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Will people be attuned to the greater sadness that they are likely to experience as the perpetrator than as the victim? Although affective forecasts tend to be inaccurate in that they generally overestimate emotional responses, forecasts can be accurate in other respects. In one study, individuals overestimated the distress that they would feel following a romantic breakup, but were accurate regarding the steady decay of their distress over 10 weeks (Eastwick et al., 2008). Similarly, a recent meta-analysis of affective forecasting studies employing within-participant designs found that individuals overestimated their absolute level of affect, but were accurate regarding their relative level of affect: Those who predicted that they would feel the most distressed did indeed feel the most distressed (Mathieu & Gosling, 2012). Consequently, we hypothesized that individuals would be aware of the victim–perpetrator disparity in sadness and would correctly forecast that they will feel sadder as a perpetrator than as a victim.

Hypothesis 2. Role accuracy in affective forecasts.

Past research offers less guidance regarding empathic forecasts of a partner's emotional responses to transgressions. Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) found a level bias in empathic forecasts regarding feedback on a cognitive test: Individuals overestimated the intensity of affect another person would experience. Individuals also egocentrically project their own affect on others when making social judgments (an "empathy gap"; e.g., Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). Thus, we hypothesized that individuals would exhibit the same *level*

bias for empathic forecasts as for affective forecasts, overestimating their partner's sadness as both victim and perpetrator.

Hypothesis 3. Level bias in empathic forecasts.

Past research has not addressed whether individuals exhibit a role bias in empathic forecasts. It is possible that individuals would predict that their partner will respond in the same fashion as themselves when they switch roles. If this is the case—if there is *role projection*—then they would forecast that their partner will feel the same way that they do in each role, sadder as the perpetrator than as the victim. However, we suggest a more likely possibility is that individuals instead will focus on the transgression itself and predict that their partner's affect will covary with their own. If this is the case—if there is *event projection*—then they would forecast that their partner will be sadder when they themselves are sadder (i.e., when they are the perpetrator and their partner is the victim) and less sad when they themselves are less sad (i.e., when they are the victim and their partner is the perpetrator). Individuals may overestimate the extent to which they are the center of their partner's emotional world, assuming that their partner's affect hinges on their actions and is likely to mirror their own. Previous research on the empathy gap and coregulation of affect in dyadic relationships appears to support event projection (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Schoebi, 2008; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). That is, empathic forecasts may be anchored by the affect individuals anticipate feeling in response to an event, despite the fact that their partner is in a different role. Thus, we hypothesized that participants would anticipate that their partner will feel sadder as a victim than as a perpetrator.

Hypothesis 4. Role bias in empathic forecasts.

Method

Participants and recruitment

Both members of 104 heterosexual couples ($N = 208$) who were married or had been dating for at least six months were recruited through advertisements, emails, and Craigslist.com postings. Six participants reported that neither they nor their partner committed any transgressions during the course of the study. The final sample included 202 participants (103 women) who were 26.86 years of age on average ($SD = 7.48$); 83% were Caucasian, 9% African American, 4% Asian American, and 4% other. Thirty-four percent of participants were married ($M_{\text{MarriageDuration}} = 5.42$ years, $SD = 8.04$); 48% were dating and 17% were engaged ($M_{\text{RelationshipDuration}} = 2.27$ years, $SD = 1.81$). Participants were paid $126 if they completed all parts of the study and a prorated amount if they did not. Eighty-four percent of participants completed at least 8 of the 10 online follow-up questionnaires.

Procedure and materials

The present study was part of a larger investigation of relationship processes that included a laboratory intake questionnaire and 10 biweekly online follow-up questionnaires, each lasting 10–15 min, over the following five months. On the intake questionnaire, participants imagined that their partner committed each of 20 transgressions, encompassing domains such as deceit, infidelity, and aggressiveness (see Table 1 for the complete list as well as descriptive data on occurrences and average reported sadness for affective forecasts, empathic forecasts, and actual experiences). For each potential *partner transgression*, participants made an affective forecast about how they would feel as the victim of the transgression ("About one week afterwards, how happy would you feel about your partner's potentially hurtful behavior?"; for all items 1 = *very sad*, 7 = *very happy*) and an empathic forecast about how their partner would feel as the perpetrator of the transgression ("About one week afterwards, how happy would your partner feel about his/her own