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More accurate or less accurate: How does maximization orientation affect task completion predictions?

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how maximization orientation affects task completion predictions at different stages. We hypothesize that compared with satisficing, maximizing promotes the additional information focus before the task, thus attenuating optimistic predictions, but promotes the task content focus and hinders the additional information focus during the task, thereby enhancing biased predictions. As expected, maximizers generated later predictions before the task but earlier predictions during the task than satisficers (Study 1). A focus on additional information operated as a mediator before the task (Studies 2 and 4), and attention to additional information and task content played a mediation role during the task (Studies 3 and 4). When additional information was highlighted before the task (Study 5a) and during the task (Study 5b), the difference between maximizers and satisficers disappeared.

1. Introduction

Herbert Simon (1955, 1956, 1957) distinguished between maximizing and satisficing as decision-making styles. Based on Simon's work, Schwartz et al. (2002) provided evidence for individual differences in maximization orientation. Maximizers consistently identify the optimal alternative after an exhaustive search of all possibilities, whereas satisficers settle for the "good enough" option that reaches a threshold of acceptability.

Although previous researchers have primarily focused on the impact of maximization orientation on decision behaviors and subjective feelings in a range of decision settings, recent work has begun to explore the role of maximization orientation in other fields, such as time estimation. Some researchers found that maximizers underestimate the invested time in the present task (Besharat, Ladik, & Carrillat, 2014; Misuraca & Teuscher, 2013). Other researchers, however, showed that maximizers search for more alternatives before making decisions (e.g., Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006; Rim, 2017) and thus would avoid an 'inside view' toward the current assignment (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993), which contributes to an accurate time estimation (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993; Weick & Guinote, 2010). The present research addresses these potential inconsistent findings by exploring how maximization orientation affects task completion predictions at different stages.

Research on task completion predictions has termed a form of optimistic bias wherein people frequently underestimate the time it takes to accomplish tasks as the planning fallacy (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The basic tendency to underestimate task completion times has been observed in a wide range of areas, such as personal, academic, and organizational fields (e.g., Buehler & Griffin, 2003; Buehler, Griffin, & Peetz, 2010; Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994).

Why does the planning fallacy occur so often? Its root may lie in an 'inside view'. People usually adopt such view when generating forecasts. The inside view involves focusing on the specifics of the case at hand, extrapolating current trends, and even constructing optimistic scenarios of future progress (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993). Based on this, taking an internal perspective leads to a too narrow focus on the task in question and a potential disregard for additional information such as past experiences of undertaking similar tasks (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and contingencies and barriers to task completion (Buehler et al., 1994; Newby-Clark, Ross, Buehler, Koehler, & Griffin, 2000).

Less attention to such two sources of additional information induces the planning fallacy (Weick & Guinote, 2010). First, by ignoring how long previous similar tasks usually take people are unable to base their predictions on the duration distribution of similar events and thus prone to bias (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Empirical research confirmed that powerful people predict longer completion times when they take how long the past similar tasks last

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into consideration than when they do not (Weick & Guinote, 2010). Second, time predictions often resemble best-case-scenarios (e.g., Newby-Clark et al., 2000), while possible setbacks hinder the immediate task from unfolding in the best way (e.g., Griffin, Dunning, & Ross, 1990). Therefore biases in time predictions occur when people fail to consider impediments sufficiently (e.g., Buehler et al., 1994). In sum, biases in time predictions operate through attentional focus – the neglect of additional information that could make predictions more accurate. In what follows, we introduce maximization orientation influencing attentional focus at different stages of task.

At different stages, maximization orientation has opposite implications for attentional focus that may produce prediction optimism. Before the task, in pursuit of the best option, maximizers are more willing to sacrifice resources to attain a larger array of choices than satisficers (Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009; Patalano, Weizenbaum, Lolli, & Anderson, 2015; Polman, 2010). For example, maximizers show more pronounced searching when buying a Christmas gift online (Chowdhury, Ratneshwar, & Mohanty, 2009) and when looking for a romantic partner online (Yang & Chiou, 2010) than satisficers. If maximizers attempt to seek out more possibilities, then it is possible for them to obtain and rely on multiple sources of information. Indeed, Iyengar et al. (2006) found that maximizers focus more on external various sources of information than satisficers during the job-seeking process, including the services offered by the career services office, experts' ranking information and advice from their family. Given that greater focus on multi-source information suppresses an 'inside view' (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993), maximizing individuals would be less likely to construct their task from the inside before the task.

When the inside view is constrained, maximizers will incorporate additional information into their forecasts. For example, compared to satisficers, maximizers can gain the payoff distribution by drawing more samples before making a choice (Rim, 2017). It is reasonable that maximizers would create the duration distribution by recalling previous experiences of fulfilling similar tasks before the task. In addition, maximizers save more and have more savings than satisficers to deal with future financial shocks (Zhu, Dalal, & Hwang, 2017). It indicates that maximizers would preconceive threats and obstacles to fulfilling their tasks before the task. Taken together, before the task, it is possible for maximizers to pay closer attention to additional information that improves time predictions than satisficers.

The same goal to pursue maximization that restricts an inside view before the task should ironically facilitates this perspective during the task. During the task, in order to aspire after the best outcome, maximizers work on their task absorbedly. For example, maximizers not only over-perceive time pressure (Chowdhury et al., 2009), invest more time to make decisions, and make more comparisons among the choices (Iyengar et al., 2006; Luan & Li, 2017a; Ma & Roese, 2014; Misuraca & Teuscher, 2013; Nenkov, Morrin, Ward, Schwartz, & Hulland, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2002; Weaver, Daniloski, Schwarz, & Cottone, 2015), but also resist multitasking (Besharat et al., 2014), temptations (Misuraca, Teuscher, & Carmeci, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017), distractions (Besharat et al., 2014), and risky activities (Lai, 2010) that may be detrimental to task completion. From this line of research, it is obvious that maximizers only focus on task content during the task, such as what they are performing. Since greater concern about such single source of information promotes an inside view (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993), maximizers are more likely to take an inside look at their task during the task.

When the inside view is heightened, maximizers could ignore additional information. To our knowledge, although no previous empirical study supports such reasoning, past research has provided indirect evidence for the relationship between maximization orientation and time prediction. Besharat et al. (2014) found that maximizers who engross themselves in a current task underestimate the amount of the time they need to finish future tasks. It suggests that while accomplishing the current task maximizers may also underestimate the time spent on this task. Misuraca and Teuscher (2013) showed that maximizers perceive time spent performing decision tasks less than their actual time spent. It also demonstrates maximizers' tendency to underestimate actual durations during the task. These findings suggest that maximizers possibly show a greater bias in time predictions than satisficers during the task. In sum, it should be expected that maximizing individuals are less optimistic in time predictions before the task because of a thought of additional information, but more optimistic during the task due to a narrow focus on task content at hand and little care about additional information, than their satisficing counterparts.

2. The present research

The present research aims to examine how maximization orientation affects time predictions before and during the task. According to our theorizing, maximization orientation prevents an inside view and increases a focus on additional information before the task, thereby attenuating optimistic predictions, whereas boosts an inside view and raises a focus on task content during the task, with relatively little concern about additional information, thereby enhancing biased predictions. Thus we suggest that compared with satisficers, maximizers will make more accurate time estimates before starting the task but greater biased time predictions during performing the task. Furthermore, we expect the additional information focus to be a key mechanism before the task, and attention to additional information and task content to operate during the task.

We conducted six studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1 examined the relationship between maximization orientation and students' time predictions for various coursework assignments. Studies 2 and 3 explored the mediation role of attentional focus before students wrote an English essay (Study 2) and while consumers were shopping in a supermarket (Study 3). Study 4 constructively replicated our previous findings with maximization orientation and task phase manipulations in a computerized formatting task. Finally, Studies 5a and 5b directly manipulated employees' attention to additional information to further validate the role of attentional focus when employees selected the intern applicants.

3. Study 1

This study provided an initial test of whether task completion predictions of maximizers and satisficers differ at two stages – before and during the task. We predicted that maximizers exhibit less optimistic predictions before the task but greater biased predictions during the task than satisficers.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

228 students (160 females) completed an initial questionnaire, 180 (79%) of these students finished a follow-up telephone interview. Thus, the final sample included 180 participants (104 females; M_{age} = 22.61 years, SD = 2.62) who were compensated with 5 Renminbi. Participants enrolled ranged across more than ten subject areas; 78% studied at undergraduate level and 22% pursued graduate studies.

3.1.2. Procedure

Students were approached on a university campus and inquired whether they were completing (i.e., during the task) or going to perform a school assignment (i.e., before the task). If so, they reported their task stage, and were invited to take part in a study focusing on student-life perception. In order to help participants classifying their task stage, they were given the descriptions of both before the task and during the task. Before the task was described as the stage at which people do not start their assignments yet but make preparations for