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On the relativistic nature of predicted and real physical experiences: A field experiment

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: An important yet unresolved question stemming from judgment and decision-making literature is whether individuals evaluate physical experiences in relative or absolute terms.
Design and method: The study examined 181 experienced basketball players in a 2 (type of experience: predicted versus real) × 2 (evaluation mode: separate versus joint) × 2 (type of activity: running versus shooting) experimental research design.
Results: We demonstrated that individuals who were familiar with physical tasks evaluated predicted and real physical experiences in absolute terms. In addition, we showed that relativistic modes of evaluation applied to real physical experiences but not predicted physical experiences.
Conclusions: This research contributes to the debate concerning whether prior task experience influences formation of relative evaluations, and reveals that contexts that urge for relative evaluations undermine happiness with physical tasks.

Introduction

Research within judgment and decision-making literature has highlighted that evaluations of events or life experiences proceed in two ways (Hsee, 2000). On one hand during an evaluation process individuals may employ a comparison where they contrast evaluated event or an attribute of an event (e.g., receipt of a financial reward) with analogous events or attributes experienced by others (Chatzisarantis, Kee, Thaung, & Hagger, 2012; Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, 1993; Easterlin, 1994; Heath, Larrick, & Wu, 1999; McGraw, Mellers, & Tetlock, 2005; Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003). On the other hand, individuals may evaluate event or an attribute of an event in absolute terms and on the basis of affective reactions that the event itself instigates (Storbeck & Clore, 2008). It was shown that relativistic process of evaluation largely takes place when individuals evaluate *acquisition* of monetary rewards, goods or services typically during a prediction and hypothetical scenarios where the value of evaluated attribute or an event is uncertain and the analogous attribute is required to ease the process of evaluation (Hsee & Zhang, 2004). Absolute evaluations on the other hand is more likely to operate during an actual experience of an event where the value is convincingly perceptible e.g., when individuals evaluate experiences associated with *consumption* of goods or services that are associated with satisfaction of basic psycho-biological needs (e.g., basic provisions such as milk; Hsee, Yang, Li, & Shen, 2009; Veenhoven, 1991). Importantly, studies demonstrated that relativistic and absolute evaluation modes yield distinct affective responses to evaluated attributes and events despite they involved normatively the same set of attributes (e.g., Hsee, 2000; Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999). The concept of relative and absolute evaluation has been examined across studies in organizational behavior revealing important implications for individuals' affective responses to evaluated attributes and events as well as for behavioral choices based on such evaluations (Hsee, 1996; Hsee & Zhang, 2004). Aforementioned studies typically used acquisition of goods and a consumption of goods as examples in their manipulations. One yet unresolved question is how events and attributes are evaluated in sport context which on one hand urges for comparisons due to its relative nature (Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995) however at the same time involves evaluation of

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physical tasks that bring immediate feedback and clearly unveil the value of evaluated attribute. This paper aims to fill this void in the literature by examining effects of evaluation modes on predicted experiences and effects of evaluation modes on real experiences in a sport's training context.

In judgment and decision-making literature relativistic and absolute forms of evaluation are investigated by utilizing a theoretical framework on joint and separate mode of evaluation (Hsee, 1996, 2000). Specifically, in a separate evaluation mode (absolute evaluation), individuals evaluate an attribute in isolation and in lieu of any external information (Hsee, 1996; Hsee & Zhang, 2010). In laboratory settings, the separate evaluation mode is induced by presenting evaluators with a single event or a quality and asking them to evaluate it independently (e.g., Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004; Hsee et al., 2009). Alternatively, in a joint evaluation mode, two or more events (or two values of an event) are juxtaposed and evaluators are asked to evaluate them simultaneously. As a result, the joint evaluation mode prompts a relative evaluation due to the combined presentation of two events urging evaluators to compare one event against the other during the evaluation process (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004). Given that manipulation of the two evaluation modes differ on the extent to which individuals are presented with an alternative event, it is inferred that individuals are sensitive to the alternative event or an attribute (and hence form relative evaluations) if the two modes yield predictably different evaluations. Alternatively, if individuals evaluate responses correspondingly across the two conditions it is inferred that individuals are insensible to the alternative event or an attribute and in consequence evaluate in absolute terms (Hsee et al., 1999; Kahneman, 2003).

In sport participation, affective responses are fundamental because they directly contribute to levels of athletes' motivation and psychological well-being (Deci, 1975; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Since athletes often evaluate affective responses to activities in a presence of alternative attributes such as other activities, the construct of evaluation modes is likely to carry potential practical implications. One important practical implication is enhancing players' enjoyment during the sport participation by attentively structuring training activities. For example, the evaluation of responses to training activities may substantially differ among two groups of basketball players depending on whether i) athletes together engage in the same type of activity or whether ii) they are fragmented into two groups, where one group is performing one task, e.g., running, while other is practicing different task, e.g., shooting. Typically, the shooting activity is likely to elicit more positive evaluations than running due to the shooting task being easier to monitor, having available feedback on performance that allows for evaluation of competence (Deci, 1975) and involving higher degree of social interactions (Sansone, Weir, Harpster, & Morgan, 1992). Running on the other hand is likely to elicit lower levels of positive affect than shooting since it is more monotonous and mundane activity with not available feedback on a progress or a competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). If this is indeed the case, in the separate evaluation mode shooting task is likely to be evaluated more positively than running. In the joint evaluation mode in turn, where the differences in the hedonic valence of the two tasks are highlighted, the discrepancy between the evaluations of running and shooting is likely to increase (Hsee & Zhang, 2004). The disadvantage which is not apparent during the separate evaluation, in the context of joint evaluation where more attractive activity such as shooting is perceptible, is likely to lower the evaluation of affective responses to running (Sansone, Sachau, & Weir, 1989). In contrast, shooting may elicit a more positive evaluative response in joint evaluation conditions than in separate evaluation conditions because comparisons reveal that shooting is hedonically more pleasant than running (Hsee & Zhang, 2004). At the same time however, a number of studies implied that activities which are rated as highly enjoyable and challenging are likely to be evaluated based on personal standards and less on social comparison (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Isen & Reeve, 2005). Specifically, it was proposed that when individuals engage in enjoyable activities, the focus is directed on mastery and the experience itself rather than a comparison with an external reference point (Deci, 1975).

That said, the joint evaluation mode is more likely to occur in situations in which members of a group undertake different physical tasks. In contrast, the single evaluation mode is more likely to arise in situations in which members of a group are completing the same physical tasks. Moreover, comparisons reveal task characteristics that are not realized by individuals who operate in single evaluation modes; therefore, joint modes are more likely to yield distinct evaluations to single modes because depending on a mode of evaluation the responses to evaluated tasks will vary systematically. For example, concerning previously mentioned example of basketball players in training, who would enjoy the activity better? A group of players who first run together then shoot together or the other group which is divided into two subgroups and alternate between running and shooting tasks? The differences between joint evaluations and separate evaluations has the potential to reveal whether practices, which “fragment” a group in terms of working on different tasks, actually increase or undermine human motivation and happiness (Vygotsky, 1978). In this example the joint evaluation mode is likely to undermine the evaluation process as empirical evidence suggests that comparisons are more likely to harm subjective responses to less attractive events (such as running) than benefit subjective responses to more attractive events (such as shooting; Hsee & Leclerc, 1998).

Furthermore, it was proposed that there are two types of evaluations of experiences, namely predicted evaluations and real evaluations (Hsee, 2000). Predicted evaluations describe evaluations of future events or experiences and are assessed by asking individuals to evaluate future experiences and upcoming events typically using a vignette technique. Alternatively, real evaluations describe those that are undertaken during, or after exposure to an event (Dolan & Kahneman, 2008). In consideration of evaluations related to physical tasks, during behavioral exposure, individuals are not likely to be sensitive to alternative physical tasks and to form relative evaluations. This is because the direct sensory experiences may focus attention on the attributes of the behavior as they provide individuals with some input to evaluate. In contrast, during predictive evaluations direct sensory input is often absent and the relative evaluation may emerge when alternative attribute is present. As a consequence, when external information is salient in the environment, individuals may be reliant on the external information to predict the outcome of an upcoming experience (Hsee et al., 2009). Hence, we expect that individuals will be more likely to form relative evaluations when they evaluate predicted experiences than real experiences.

In review of the research literature examining evaluations, and with the aim of extending understanding of the processes underpinning judgments related to the completion of physical tasks, the purpose of the present study was twofold. First, we examined whether experienced basketball players would correspondingly evaluate the same physical tasks (i.e., shooting vs. running) in relative and absolute terms. We hypothesized that running would elicit a less positive evaluation in joint mode conditions than in separate mode conditions due to the comparison of running alongside shooting and the enlarged discrepancy between the tasks. However, we did not expect shooting to yield more positive evaluations than running in joint mode conditions because evidence suggests that joint evaluation modes do not affect