



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



Brief Report

Regret and adaptive decision making in young children



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 September 2014

Revised 4 March 2015

Available online 3 April 2015

Keywords:

Experienced regret

Anticipated regret

Decision making

Development

Choice switching

Responsibility

ABSTRACT

In line with the claim that regret plays a role in decision making, O'Connor, McCormack, and Feeney (*Child Development*, 85 (2014) 1995–2010) found that children who reported feeling sadder on discovering they had made a non-optimal choice were more likely to make a different choice the next time around. We examined two issues of interpretation regarding this finding: whether the emotion measured was indeed regret and whether it was the experience of this emotion, rather than the ability to anticipate it, that affected decision making. To address the first issue, we varied the degree to which children aged 6 or 7 years were responsible for an outcome, assuming that responsibility is a necessary condition for regret. The second issue was addressed by examining whether children could accurately anticipate that they would feel worse on discovering they had made a non-optimal choice. Children were more likely to feel sad if they were responsible for the outcome; however, even if they were not responsible, children were more likely than chance to report feeling sadder. Moreover, across all conditions, feeling sadder was associated with making a better subsequent choice. In a separate task, we demonstrated that children of this age cannot accurately anticipate feeling sadder on discovering that they had not made the best choice. These findings suggest that although children may feel regret following a non-optimal choice, even if they were not responsible for an outcome, they may experience another negative emotion such as frustration. Experiencing either of these emotions seems to be sufficient to support better decision making.

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Introduction

Regret is an aversive emotion that we experience when we believe that we would have obtained a better outcome had we chosen differently (Epstude & Roese, 2008). Although regret is aversive, it appears to be a functional emotion in the sense that it assists in decision making (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Experiencing regret following a poor choice is likely to lead us to change our behavior (Ku, 2008). Moreover, when deciding how to act, we often try to anticipate and thus minimize the regret that might arise from our decisions (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Recently, the developmental psychology of regret has received considerable attention (Burns, Riggs, & Beck, 2012; O'Connor, McCormack, & Feeney, 2012, 2014; Rafetseder & Perner, 2012; van Duijvenvoorde, Huizenga, & Jansen, 2014; Weisberg & Beck, 2010; Weisberg & Beck, 2012). In a typical study, O'Connor and colleagues (2012) presented children with a choice between two boxes. In regret trials the prize in the chosen box was always less attractive than that in the non-chosen box, whereas in the baseline trial the prizes were equally attractive. Children selected a box for a prize and then rated on a 5-point scale how they felt about choosing their prize. The alternative prize was revealed, and children indicated, using a three-pronged arrow, whether they now felt happier, sadder, or the same about choosing their prize. By 6 or 7 years of age, children indicated feeling sadder on regret trials but not on the baseline trial, which was interpreted as evidence that children experience regret from this age.

If regret is a functional emotion, then its emergence should have implications for children's decision making. O'Connor and colleagues (2014) gave children the box choice task (Day 1) and then returned the next day (Day 2) to present children with the same choices. They hypothesized that if the experience of regret affects decision making, children who experience regret on Day 1 should be more likely to make a different choice in regret trials on Day 2 than those who do not experience regret. To control for a general preference to switch choices, adaptive decision makers were defined as those who were willing to pay a small cost to switch in regret trials on Day 2 but were not willing to pay this cost to switch in baseline trials. O'Connor and colleagues found that participants who experienced regret on Day 1 were significantly more likely to switch on Day 2, and this result held when controlling for age and verbal ability. O'Connor and colleagues established that this association was not due to children who experienced regret having better memory for the contents of the boxes by assessing memory in a separate study. They argued that the experience of regret leads to better decision making in this task, possibly by increasing the likelihood that, when faced with the same choice again, children spontaneously bring to mind and evaluate choice options (see O'Connor et al., 2014, for discussion).

There are at least two issues of interpretation with these findings. The first is whether children's decisions on Day 2 in O'Connor and colleagues' (2014) study were really a result of experiencing regret on Day 1 rather than a consequence of some other negative emotion such as frustration (Rafetseder & Perner, 2012). Weisberg and Beck (2012) argued that if the emotion measured in this type of study is indeed regret, it should be affected by the level of responsibility one has regarding the outcome because, at least among psychologists, responsibility for an outcome is usually considered to be a necessary condition for regret (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, & Manstead, 2000). In a study of regret using a similar box choice task, Weisberg and Beck (2012) manipulated the extent to which children perceived themselves to be responsible for the choice; the outcome was determined by the child's choice or the roll of a die. In that study, 6- and 7-year-olds felt sadder when they had chosen the box compared with conditions involving a die, suggesting that the negative emotion that they reported was regret. However, unlike O'Connor and colleagues (2014), Weisberg and Beck (2012) did not examine the impact of children's negative emotions on decision making, and it remains possible that, rather than regret having a distinctive effect on children's choices, other negative emotions would show the same relation with decision making.

A further difficulty with interpreting an association between the reported experience of regret and adaptive decision making hinges on the important distinction between experienced and anticipated

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