

Regulatory mode effects on counterfactual thinking and regret

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Received 23 May 2006; revised 6 June 2007

Available online 26 June 2007

Abstract

The present studies examined the influence of two regulatory mode concerns—a locomotion concern with movement from state to state and an assessment concern with making comparisons [see Higgins, E. T., Kruglanski, A. W., & Pierro, A. (2003). Regulatory mode: Locomotion and assessment as distinct orientations. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 35, pp. 293–344). New York: Academic Press]—on engaging in counterfactual thinking and experiencing post-decisional regret. When contemplating a decision with a negative outcome, it was predicted that high (vs. low) locomotion would induce less counterfactual thinking and less regret, whereas the opposite would be true for high (vs. low) assessment. Locomotion and assessment orientations were measured as chronic individual differences in Study 1 and 2, and were induced experimentally in Study 3. In Study 1 and 3 a purchase scenario with a negative outcome was used to elicit counterfactuals and regret, while in Study 2 participants were asked to recall one of their own personal purchases that had a negative outcome. The results supported our predictions. We discuss the implications of these findings for the nature of counterfactual thinking and regret from the perspective of their relation to regulatory mode.

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Keywords: Regulatory mode; Regret; Counterfactual thinking

Introduction

There is increasing recognition of the importance of counterfactual thinking and the experience of regret in economic decisions (e.g., Inman & Zeelenberg, 2002; Landman & Petty, 2000; Tsiros & Mittal, 2000; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). The process of thinking about “what might have been” is known as counterfactual thinking. Because of its relation to counterfactual thinking, regret has been categorized as a “counterfactual emotion,” along with disappointment and relief (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Roese & Olson, 1995; see also Zeelenberg, 1999). There are some indications in the literature that there may be individual differences in counterfactual thinking and the experience

of regret. Landman, for example, hypothesizes that an individual’s worldview “could shape the nature and intensity of counterfactuals and emotion” (1995, p. 254; see also Landman, 1993).

Generally speaking, it is individual differences in the *type of counterfactual thinking* that have received the most attention, such as whether individuals use upward or downward comparisons (e.g., Sanna, 1996; Sanna, 2000), or engage in additive or subtractive counterfactual thinking (e.g., Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999). In contrast, there is little evidence that individuals differ in their general propensity to engage in counterfactual thinking; i.e., individual differences in the *amount of counterfactual thinking*. With respect to regret, most attention has been paid to the conditions under which people show more regret, such as whether the negative outcome of a decision results from an action or an inaction (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky,

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1982; Landman, 1987; Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002), whether it implies switching from or staying with the status quo (e.g., Inman & Zeelenberg, 2002; Tsiros & Mittal, 2000), and whether there is decision justifiability (e.g., Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, & Manstead, 2000a). Less attention has been paid to the potential role in regret of a decision maker's self-regulatory orientation (cf. Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003). The major purpose of our research was to examine the role of people's *regulatory mode* orientation—their chronic or situationally induced *locomotion* or *assessment* concerns—in their general propensity to engage in counterfactual thinking and experience regret.

Assessment concerns and locomotion concerns

Most deliberate human behaviors comprise activities in two essential regulatory modes: a mode of assessment and a mode of locomotion. Assessment “constitutes the comparative aspect of self-regulation concerned with critically evaluating entities or states, such as goals or means in relation to alternatives in order to judge relative quality” (Kruglanski et al., 2000, p. 794). “What are my options?” “Are there any other possibilities worth considering?” “Which alternative is best?” “What should I do in the future?” “How did I do in the past?” Individuals strong in assessment mode are preoccupied with these kinds of critical evaluations (see Higgins, Kruglanski, & Pierro, 2003). By contrast, the locomotion mode “is the self-regulatory aspect concerned with movement from state to state and with committing the psychological resources that will initiate and maintain goal-directed progress in a straightforward manner, without undue distractions or delays” (Kruglanski et al., 2000, p. 794). In the locomotion mode, individuals emphasize “doing,” “getting on with it,” “making something happen” (see Higgins et al., 2003) rather than critical evaluation. Indeed, individuals strong in locomotion mode might refrain from critical evaluation if such “stopping to reflect” halted steady movement from state to state.

Whereas classic control theory (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1990; Gollwitzer, 1990; Higgins, 1989; Kuhl, 1985; Mischel, 1974, 1981) conceives of assessment and locomotion as inseparable and interdependent components of any action, Higgins, Kruglanski, and their colleagues (Higgins et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2000) have proposed that these functions are independent and that each can be differentially emphasized by individuals, either chronically as a personality disposition or momentarily as situationally induced. To measure chronic individual differences in assessment and locomotion, Kruglanski et al. (2000) developed two separate scales. In a comprehensive series of studies, these authors demonstrated the unidimensionality, internal consistency, and temporal stability of each scale. They found that locomotion and assessment tendencies are essentially uncorrelated with each other, that each con-

tributes to self-regulatory success, and that each relates to a distinct task orientation and motivational emphasis. In generating means to goal attainment, assessment relates to generating a greater number of means to be compared, whereas locomotion relates to generating means quickly. In decision making, locomotion relates to a willingness to choose any activity to work on rather than waiting to begin, whereas assessment relates to a willingness to wait in order to investigate and compare the alternative choices. Individuals with a strong assessment orientation want to critically evaluate different options and relate past and future actions to critical standards. Individuals with a strong locomotion orientation want to quickly initiate action and then maintain it without disruption (see Higgins et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2000).

Situations can also induce momentary individual differences in assessment and locomotion orientation states. Avnet and Higgins (2003), for example, had participants give examples from their personal lives of when they behaved in a manner exemplifying either three high locomotion items (taken from the Kruglanski et al., 2000), thereby inducing a locomotion orientation, or three high assessment items, thereby inducing an assessment orientation. Participants were then given a decision-making task in which they chose among different brands of reading lights. They were assigned either a “full evaluation” strategy where they compared all of the alternatives on all of the attribute values, or a “progressive elimination” strategy where they progressively eliminated whichever brand was worst on the first attribute, and then the second attribute, and so on. Avnet and Higgins (2003) reasoned that the “progressive elimination” strategy would provide participants a stronger sense of “movement” than the “full evaluation” strategy and fit participants in the locomotion condition, whereas the latter would provide more opportunity to make comparisons and fit those in the assessment condition. As predicted, fit effects on increasing the value of the chosen light were found.

Regulatory mode and amount of counterfactual thinking and regret

Individuals are assumed to engage spontaneously in counterfactual thinking after negative events or outcomes (Gleicher et al., 1990; Landman, 1987). The experience of regret is considered to be one of the possible emotional consequences of counterfactual thinking. A relation between counterfactual thinking and regret is postulated in various models (e.g., Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Roese, 1997) and there is some evidence to support it (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000; Zeelenberg et al., 1998). There is also research distinguishing regret from other negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction or disappointment (e.g., Van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2002; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000b). We return to this distinction in the General Discussion. Here we simply begin with the assumption that a greater amount of counterfactual thinking is associated

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