



Planning for the near and distant future: How does temporal distance affect task completion predictions?

Johanna Peetz*, Roger Buehler, Anne Wilson

Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 April 2009

Revised 23 February 2010

Available online 19 March 2010

Keywords:

Temporal distance

Prediction

Planning fallacy

Construal level

ABSTRACT

In everyday life people estimate completion times for projects in the near and distant future. How might the temporal proximity of a project influence prediction? Given that closer events elicit more concrete construals, we proposed that temporal proximity could enhance two kinds of concrete cognitions pertinent to task completion predictions: step-by-step plans and potential obstacles. Although these cognitions have opposite implications for prediction, and thus could cancel each other out, we hypothesized that temporal proximity would have a greater impact on cognitions that were relatively focal. Thus contextual factors that alter the relative focus on plans vs. obstacles should determine whether and how temporal proximity affects prediction. Six studies supported this reasoning. In contexts that elicited a focus on planning, individuals predicted earlier completion times for close than distant projects. In contexts that prompted a focus on obstacles, individuals predicted later completion times for close than distant projects.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

People often underestimate how long it will take to finish an upcoming task or project. Although researchers have examined numerous causes and consequences of this optimistic bias in prediction, they have not yet systematically explored the role of temporal distance to the upcoming project. This neglect is surprising because in everyday life people must generate task completion predictions at various points in time, sometimes weeks or months before starting a task and sometimes when a deadline is nearly upon them. Given that temporal distance influences judgments and predictions in many other domains (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007) it could reasonably be expected to influence task completion predictions. The current research examines whether, and how, the temporal distance to a future project influences people's predictions of when it will be finished.

Optimistic bias in planning and prediction

Research on task completion predictions indicates that people frequently underestimate how long it will take them to finish tasks. Much of this previous research documents a phenomenon that Kahneman and Tversky (1979) called the planning fallacy, a form of optimistic bias wherein people underestimate the time it

will take to complete an upcoming task even though they realize that similar tasks have taken longer in the past (for a review see Buehler, Griffin, & Peetz, in press; Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 2002). The basic tendency to underestimate task completion times has been observed for a wide range of personal, academic, and work-related tasks (e.g., Buehler & Griffin, 2003; Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Kruger & Evans, 2004; Roy, Christenfeld, & McKenzie, 2005).

There are many possible reasons why people underestimate task completion times. According to cognitive accounts, the bias stems from the kinds of information that people focus on when generating predictions. Individuals often focus narrowly on planning out the steps that they will take to complete a project at the desired time, and thus neglect other useful information such as previous completion times, potential obstacles, and competing demands for their time (Buehler et al., 2002; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). People are also prone to bias when they base predictions on faulty memories of previous completion times (Roy et al., 2005) or when they fail to consider all the sub-components of a multi-component task (Kruger & Evans, 2004). A strong motivation to finish tasks early can also contribute to bias (Buehler, Griffin, & MacDonald, 1997; Byram, 1997).

We focus specifically on two cognitive processes that are highly pertinent when people attempt to estimate a task completion time: thoughts about a plan of action and thoughts about potential obstacles. As noted above, people are likely to make unrealistically optimistic predictions when they focus narrowly on a specific, concrete plan that will allow them to finish a task at the desired time (Buehler & Griffin, 2003; Buehler et al., 1994, 2002; Kahneman &

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 3C5.

E-mail address: johanna.peetz@gmail.com (J. Peetz).

Tversky, 1979). Concrete planning results in unrealistic optimism because events do not usually unfold exactly as planned. Given the vast number of potential impediments, there is a great likelihood that people will encounter unexpected problems, delays, and interruptions. In addition to developing a plan, people do sometimes consider potential obstacles (interruptions, competing demands, task difficulties, etc.) to prompt task completion. If people incorporate such thoughts into their predictions, they are likely to generate more conservative forecasts (Buehler et al., 1994; Newby-Clark, Ross, Buehler, Koehler, & Griffin, 2000). Note, then, that these two cognitive processes – a focus on plans and a focus on obstacles – have directly opposite implications for prediction optimism. Nonetheless, an intriguing aspect of these cognitions is that they could both be emphasized to a greater degree when a task is closer in time.

Effects of temporal distance

According to temporal construal theory (TCT) (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003), any future event can be construed at different levels of abstraction. High-level or abstract construals contain information about the central and abstract features of the event; they are schematic and decontextualized. Low-level or concrete construals contain more concrete, contextualized representations of the specific case at hand; they are rich in detail, including information about incidental or peripheral features of the event. TCT further proposes that people tend to focus on abstract construals of distant future events and concrete construals of near future events (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). For example, when contemplating goal related events (e.g., deciding whether to attend a lecture) people focus more on concrete features like feasibility (e.g., whether the location is convenient) rather than on abstract features like desirability (e.g., whether the topic is interesting) as the event draws closer in time (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Predictions concerning distant future events tend to be based on a few schematic features whereas predictions concerning near future events are based on more concrete and contextualized details (Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2006).

In the realm of planning and prediction, then, one type of cognition that should be enhanced by temporal closeness is people's thoughts about specific obstacles they might encounter (e.g., task difficulties, competing time demands, etc.). Because obstacles represent incidental or peripheral features of a task rather than central defining features, people should be more likely to consider them when engaged in concrete, low-level thinking. Indeed, Liberman and Trope (1998) have proposed, more generally, that concerns about feasibility involve low-level, concrete construal. Thus people's representations of an upcoming task should be more likely to include potential obstacles when the task is close at hand, and thoughts about obstacles should lead to relatively longer completion time predictions.

There is additional, related evidence to support the idea that people may become more concerned with potential obstacles as a task becomes closer in time. Research on predictions in other domains indicates that people become less optimistic and less confident in their predictions about an event as it draws near (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004; Gilovich, Kerr, & Medvec, 1993; Savitsky, Medvec, Charlton, & Gilovich, 1998) or is made to seem closer in time (Sanna, Parks, Chang, & Carter, 2005). Although several processes can contribute to these temporal proximity effects (for a review see Carroll, Sweeny, & Shepperd, 2006) a plausible account for several of the findings is that potential obstacles become more salient as an event approaches. Gilovich et al. (1993) found that students estimating their performance on several short experimental tasks (e.g., recalling nonsense syllables)

were less confident, and listed more possible reasons for failure, when told they would complete the tasks immediately rather than later in the semester. Along similar lines, people are more cognizant of the competing demands on their time in the near future than in the distant future (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Zauberman & Lynch, 2005) and are more prevention-focused for the near than distant future (Pennington & Roesse, 2003). These findings provide further support for the idea that people will focus more on obstacles to task completion when thinking about a task that is closer in time.

Although temporal proximity should heighten people's focus on potential obstacles, it should *also* increase their tendency to focus on a specific, concrete plan for successful task completion. Such plans, by definition, involve a concrete, low-level construal of task completion. Plans are concrete in that they spell out the specific steps that will be taken to carry out the upcoming task; they require that people move beyond an abstract, decontextualized representation of an event, to consider features unique to the case at hand (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Although past research has not varied the temporal distance of future tasks, it has demonstrated that individuals instructed to develop a concrete, step-by-step plan for carrying out an upcoming task make more optimistic predictions than those who are not (Buehler & Griffin, 2003). Given that temporal proximity elicits concrete, low-level representations, it should increase people's tendency to generate a concrete plan for how they would like to complete the task, thereby increasing the optimism of their predictions.

Contextual moderators

According to the above theorizing, temporal closeness should heighten two very different forms of concrete thinking, with directly opposite implications for prediction optimism. Because the two underlying cognitions (focusing on plans and on obstacles) may work in opposition and cancel each other out, one might expect that temporal closeness would have relatively little overall impact on the optimism of people's task completion forecasts. Another intriguing possibility, however, is that there are contextual factors that determine which of the two underlying processes prevails in a given situation, and thus determine the size, and even the direction, of temporal proximity effects on prediction.

We propose that temporal proximity will heighten whichever type of concrete cognition is focal at the time of prediction. That is, across circumstances there might be differences in the extent to which one type of concrete thought (potential obstacles) or the other (a specific plan) is focal, and temporal proximity will have its greatest impact on the cognitions that happen to be at the forefront of people's minds – increasing the focus on these thoughts. This pattern of effects is expected because it should be easier to strengthen or amplify a particular type of concrete thought if people are already attuned to that type of thinking. The hypothesis is novel in that previous research has not typically compared the relative impact of temporal proximity on different types of low-level thoughts, but has instead presented scenarios that place low-level factors (e.g., feasibility) and high-level factors (e.g., desirability) in opposition (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Nevertheless there is considerable evidence in other domains that cognitive processes are more likely to be amplified by a factor to the extent that these processes are already accessible (e.g., Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Sherman, Cialdini, Schwartzman, & Reynolds, 1985) and thus we expect that temporal proximity will increase people's focus on concrete cognitions that are salient as they generate predictions.

To test this reasoning we sought to identify a contextual factor that would alter a predictor's relative focus on plans vs. obstacles – and previous research suggests this could be influenced by

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/948645>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/948645>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)