

20.29: Predicting Present and Future Affect

Learning Objectives

- To explore the phenomenon of future anhedonia

Research conducted by

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Overview

In Aesop's fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper," an ant toils all summer to gather food for the winter while a grasshopper sunbathes and enjoys the present abundance of food without concern for the upcoming winter. Consequently when winter arrives, the grasshopper despairs that it has no food. The moral of the fable is that it is best to prepare for the days of necessity. Clearly the grasshopper failed to predict accurately how it would feel in the winter while it sunbathed with a full belly in the summer.

The authors of this study explored the intriguing phenomenon of future anhedonia and its relation to the concept of time discounting in order to understand people's predictions about how they might feel when a future event happens. Time discounting occurs when people put less value on future events than present events. Future anhedonia refers to people's mistaken belief that a future event would elicit a less intense affective reaction than if the same event happened in the present. In six experiments, the authors asked participants to predict how happy they would feel both in the present and in the future upon receiving either 20 dollars outright or 25 dollars in the form of a Starbucks coffeehouse gift card. The difference between the scores of present and future happiness is a measure of future anhedonia.

Questions to Answer

Do people expect their affective reactions to an event to be less intense in the future than in the present?

Design Issues

The monetary amount (\$20, \$25) may not have been enough to psychologically engage a large number of participants. The wide age range in **Experiment 1b** of 15 to 72 years is unusual for a psychological study. Also in **Experiment 1b**, several participants reported that they would pay \$25 for a \$25-gift card that Starbucks was considering selling at a discounted price, which might indicate that they did not fully understand the question.

Descriptions of Variables

Table 20.29.1: Description of Variables

VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION
Gender	The sex of a participant
Happiness score	A participant's estimate of his/her affective reaction to an event using a 9-point scale with endpoints 1 = "not at all happy" and 9 = "extremely happy"
diff_happy	A difference score equal to a participant's predicted present happiness score for a present event minus his/her predicted future happiness score for the same event in the future. A positive difference indicates future anhedonia.

diff_money	The difference in the maximum amount of money that a participant predicted as his/her willingness to pay in the present minus the predicted amount he/she would pay at a future time for a \$25 Starbucks coffeehouse gift card. A positive difference indicates future anhedonia.
cond	Condition: Whether an event was expected or unexpected
today	A participant's predicted present happiness score for a present event
future	A participant's predicted future happiness score for a future event

Data Files

Predicting.xls

Links

Kassam et al. article

Aesop's Fable: The Ant and the Grasshopper

Prospection: Experiencing the Future

References

- Kassam, K. S., Gilbert, D. T., Boston, A., Wilson, T. D. (2008). Future anhedonia and time discounting. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44, 1533-1537.
- Gilbert, D. T., Wilson, T. D. (2007). Prospection: Experiencing the future. Science, 317, 1351-1354

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