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Affective forecasting bias in preschool children



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ABSTRACT

Adults are capable of predicting their emotional reactions to possible future events. Nevertheless, they systematically overestimate the intensity of their future emotional reactions relative to how they feel when these events actually occur. The developmental origin of this “intensity bias” has not yet been examined. Two studies were conducted to test the intensity bias in preschool children. In the first study, 5-year-olds ($N = 30$) predicted how they would feel if they won or lost various games. Comparisons with subsequent self-reported feelings indicated that participants overestimated how sad they would feel to lose the games but did not overestimate their happiness from winning. The second study replicated this effect in another sample of 5-year-olds ($n = 34$) and also found evidence of an intensity bias in 4-year-olds ($n = 30$). These findings provide the first evidence of a negative intensity bias in affective forecasting among young children.

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Introduction

The ability to mentally travel through time and imagine possible future events allows people to anticipate the future hedonic consequences of decisions made in the here and now (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Suddendorf & Busby, 2005). A large body of research on *affective forecasting* has found that healthy adults tend to overestimate the intensity of their future emotional reactions (Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005, 2013). For example, when predicting emotional distress at ending a relationship, people accurately predict that they will feel sad; however, they also tend to pre-

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dict that they will feel much worse than they actually report feeling (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998).

This so-called *intensity bias* has been implicated in a wide range of psychological processes, including decision making, psychopathology, and motivation (Halpern & Arnold, 2008; Hoerger, Quirk, Chapman, & Duberstein, 2012; Hoerger, Scherer, & Fagerlin, 2016; Levine, Lench, Kaplan, & Safer, 2013; Marroquín, Boyle, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Stanton, 2016; Morewedge & Buechel, 2013). To date, the development of this important cognitive bias during childhood remains unexamined, and therefore it remains unclear when foresight becomes biased in human development (Miloyan & Suddendorf, 2015).

Forecasting an emotional reaction to a future possibility presupposes a capacity to mentally simulate situations. Young children gradually acquire a capacity to imagine future events approximately between the ages of 3 and 5 years (Atance & Jackson, 2009; Atance & Meltzoff, 2005; McCormack & Atance, 2011; Redshaw & Suddendorf, 2013; Suddendorf & Moore, 2011). Although the capacity continues to mature over subsequent years, it is at the end of the preschool years that children undergo important developments in a range of domains, such as self-awareness and reasoning about mental states, which assist future-oriented thinking (Payne, Taylor, Hayne, & Scarf, 2015; Suddendorf & Redshaw, 2013). For affective forecasting, a general understanding of emotions is particularly important, and again significant developments occur at around age 5 years such as an appreciation that one's current emotions can be shaped by recollection of the past or anticipation of the future (Lagattuta, 2014; Lagattuta, Wellman, & Flavell, 1997). Although we do not directly measure foresight in the current studies, we chose to examine the presence of an intensity bias in 4- and 5-year-olds because of these developments in foresight and emotional understanding.

Although the intensity bias has yet to be examined in children, other foresight biases have been studied in adults and children (Atance & Meltzoff, 2006; Mahy, 2016; Mahy, Grass, Wagner, & Kliegel, 2014; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). For example, both have been found to be influenced by their current physiological state, such as hunger, when predicting future physiological needs (Mahy, 2016; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). One such study showed that children who had just eaten pretzels were more likely to predict that they would choose water over pretzels the next day (Mahy et al., 2014). However, when the same children quenched their thirst with water, they were more likely to predict that they would prefer pretzels the next day. Although predictions regarding physiological needs may differ from predictions regarding emotional states, this research shows that there are foresight biases that are shared between children and adults.

We were also interested in examining one common explanation of the intensity bias in preschool children. One theory in the adult literature is that when making predictions about future emotion, we neglect to take into account our future coping abilities or “psychological immune system” (Gilbert et al., 1998; Hoerger, 2012; Hoerger, Quirk, Lucas, & Carr, 2009; Pauketat, Moons, Chen, Mackie, & Sherman, 2016). In other words, we overestimate the intensity of future negative emotions because we underestimate how effective our future coping mechanisms are. The current research included measures of coping and effortful control (an ability to inhibit behavior) (Study 1) and emotion regulation (Study 2) to assess whether coping and coping-related abilities would be linked to the intensity bias in children. Children with superior emotion regulation abilities might be more able to regulate both excitement and disappointment when reacting to an event. However, they might not realize that they have these emotional regulation abilities and, therefore, might still make both exaggerated negative and positive predictions.

We adapted a design that is common in the adult affective forecasting literature (Gilbert et al., 1998; Van Dijk, 2009). Children were asked to predict their emotional reactions to winning and losing simple games and then reported their actual experienced emotions after the games were completed. In the first study we assessed whether an intensity bias was evident in 5-year-olds, and in the second study we attempted to replicate the findings of Study 1 and examine responses of younger children as well. There were two competing predictions. First, young children may exhibit an intensity bias for reasons similar to those of adults, particularly if this bias functions to motivate goal-directed behavior (Miloyan & Suddendorf, 2015; Morewedge & Buechel, 2013); such a functional component of foresight would likely be present as soon as children begin exhibiting foresight capacities. Alternatively, young children might not exhibit an intensity bias if foresight capacities only become biased later in devel-

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