



How do you feel now? On the perceptual distortion of extremely recent changes in anger



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine affect-based retrospective biases for extremely recent events.
- We show that people show systematic biases in assessment of recent changes in anger.
- We provide insight into revenge and its relation to in-group dynamics.

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on retrospective biases in emotion has been largely concerned with mistakes that are made when people are asked to recall temporally distant affective experiences (e.g. those that occurred weeks or months ago). However, far less is known about people's abilities to accurately track extremely recent shifts in affective experience. Across three experiments, we show that people consistently distort perception of a very recent change in anger after being reminded of a historical act of revenge (i.e. the assassination of Osama bin Laden). Consistent with the implications of the "revenge paradox" (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008) these reminders made participants more angry. However, participants *believed* that this act of revenge had made them *less* angry—the exact opposite of what happened—provided that their psychological allegiance to the ingroup had been primed. We discuss the implications of our findings in previous research on the interconnections between emotional experience and social categorization processes (Mackie, Maimor, & Smith, 2009), as well as the role of revenge in protecting the interests of the ingroup (Fehr & Gächter, 2002).

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Introduction

Research and theory on affective forecasting (Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axson, 2000) have shown that people commit a multitude of errors when they are asked to predict their own emotions. In a study reported by Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, and Wheatley (1998), for example, researchers asked participants to predict how they would feel in the aftermath of a romantic breakup. Although participants correctly predicted that the breakup would have a negative impact, their actual reactions were neither as intense, nor as long lasting, as anticipated.

Interestingly, people often make these and other types of errors in relatively familiar domains, in which they have a great deal of personal experience. Consider the aforementioned study on romantic breakups by Gilbert et al. (1998). In that study, many participants (who were in their late teens or early twenties) were likely to have already experienced the pain of a romantic breakup. Intuitively, one might imagine

that such experience might lead people to realize that their mental models about emotional breakups were wrong, thus allowing them to make more accurate predictions in the future. However, even if participants had gained such experience, the data provided little indication that they had been able to learn from it. Ayton, Pott, and Elwakili (2007) provided more direct evidence of people's failure to learn from personal experience, when they asked participants to imagine how they would feel after failing a future driving test. Results showed that "experienced" individuals (i.e. those who had previously failed a driving test) were no more accurate in their predictions than those who had never experienced this event.

The affective forecasting literature thus suggests that people make the same types of mistakes over and over again. This state of affairs calls to mind the perspective of Marcus Cicero, who wrote, "Any man can make mistakes, but only an idiot persists in his error." With all due respect to Mr. Cicero, we would not go so far to suggest that persistent error in affective forecasting represents a lack of intelligence per se. Rather, such mistakes can often reflect foundational limitations in human information processing (cf. Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Moreover, people can sometimes be accurate in their affective forecasts (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) and there are some conditions in which people can

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learn from their own previous emotional history (Brown & McConnell, 2011). Nevertheless, given that people often make the same mistakes (even in familiar domains), this raises an important question: what makes it so hard to learn from personal experience?

Currently, the most popular explanation is that such errors are attributable to long-term memory biases. In particular, just as people often manifest errors when they attempt to reconstruct the past (Schacter, 2001) this penchant for error has been shown to extend to cases in which people recall their own emotional histories (for reviews, see Levine, Lench, & Safer, 2009; Robinson & Clore, 2002). For example, suppose that people *were*, in fact, capable of correctly recalling that the pain of their romantic breakups was much shorter than originally anticipated. If so, they could use these accurate memories as a learning experience, increasing the chance that they would make better predictions in the future. However, given that we often distort memories of our own past, this could perpetuate errors when we attempt to forecast the future. Stated another way, people are, in a sense, “learning from the past”. However, the problem lies in the fact that *they are remembering the wrong past*, one that reflects a memory-based distortion of what really happened.

On the assessment of extremely recent changes in mood

In nearly all of the research on retrospective memories of emotion, there is considerable delay between (a) when the event originally occurred and (b) when retrospective retrieval occurs, often on the order of days, weeks, or even months (cf. Levine et al., 2009). Given the well-known limitations of long-term memory (see above), it is not surprising to see that errors in emotional memories are so common. However, is it possible that people might show greater accuracy under shorter time frames?

Few studies have examined short-term biases in affective retrospection, but Van Boven and Robinson (2012) represents one notable exception. When male and female participants were asked to recall the intensity of a very recent affective experience (i.e. that happened twenty minutes earlier), researchers observed stereotypic biases in the judged intensity of affect, such that (a) men, compared to women, judged their *anger* as more intense, and (b) women, compared to men, judged their *sadness* as more intense. Notably, these biases were only evident when, at the time of recall, participants were placed under cognitive load, or when the gender stereotype had been experimentally primed.

Given the short time period involved in the Van Boven and Robinson (2012) paradigm, it seems unlikely that the observed errors were due to biases in long term memory. Rather, it seems more likely that their results reflected a bias in how participants *interpreted* their own emotional experience. In particular, given that emotional experience is often somewhat ambiguous (cf. Bem, 1972), inferences about previous emotional change may involve some degree of social construction (Martin & Tesser, 1992), in which people rely on the implications of any relevant mental constructs that might be accessible at the time of judgment (cf. Wyer & Srull, 1989). The plausibility of this explanation is bolstered further by the fact that these biases emerged when resources were scarce, or when the relevant (gender-based) expectations had recently been primed, which are precisely the kinds of conditions under which heuristic, accessibility-driven processing is most likely to occur (Higgins & Bargh, 1987).

On the possibility of extremely short term biases in emotional valence

Although Van Boven and Robinson's (2012) findings are important, they demonstrated these biases in the realm of intensity: “how much” of a given emotion participants had felt. Precise recollection of how much emotion one felt in the past (e.g. “exactly how sad were you after watching that movie?”) may require cognitive effort, something that people may not have the ability/motivation to exert (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Relevant, too, is the fact that many of the affective

forecasting errors demonstrated in the literature bear on people's inabilities to predict emotional intensity (cf. Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). In general, then, accurate appraisal of emotional intensity may simply be a relatively difficult thing to do.

However, what about valence? Suppose that a recent event put you in a bad mood. When reflecting upon this event, would you be accurate in assessing this change in affect? Intuition suggests that, at least for the basic issue of valence—did X make you feel better, or worse?—recollection should be accurate. Moreover, such ability should be especially good if the event in question had happened just moments ago. In this article, we offer a counterintuitive prediction, in that people can make a mistake of valence, even for extremely recent events. To our knowledge, ours is the first program of research to address this kind of error. The goal of this article was to demonstrate the existence of these biases as well as provide some insight into the mechanisms by which they occur.

The present research

Our curiosity in these matters was stimulated by a line of research by Carlsmith, Wilson, and Gilbert (2008). As these researchers demonstrate, people expect that revenge feels good (“revenge is sweet”). However, this is a domain in which people make a blatant affective forecasting error. In particular, revenge actually makes people feel *worse*, not better. According to Carlsmith et al. (2008), this is because retribution against the transgressor can trigger thoughts about the misdeeds for which that person is being punished in the first place. This, in turn, can make people feel even worse than they otherwise would. In other words, “revenge can prolong peoples' hedonic reactions to a transgression because punishing others can cause people to continue to think about (rather than to forget) those whom they have punished” (Carlsmith et al., 2008, p. 1324). It is important to emphasize, however, that the Carlsmith et al. (2008) model stipulates that such negative affect is stimulated by the thoughts about the original transgression, not by the act of revenge itself.

In this article, we were interested in an issue that was not addressed by Carlsmith et al. (2008): would people recognize that a revenge-related event had just made them feel worse? Aside from the intuitive sense that people are able to figure this out, research suggests that people often notice when expectations have been violated (Roese & Sherman, 2007). Hence, people might be able to ascertain that revenge had made them angry, precisely *because* this change was unexpected. However, such optimism might be tempered by a long line of research showing that self introspection is more complex, and more prone to error, than one might imagine (Bem, 1972; Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981; Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & van Baaren, 2006; Salancik & Conway, 1975; Stanovich, 2013; Wilson & Schooler, 2008; Wilson & Stone, 1985). Hence, although one could make a case for optimism in terms of retrospective accuracy in our paradigm, this literature led us to take a more pessimistic position. We predicted that participants, despite the seemingly “optimal” conditions for accuracy, would mistakenly conclude that exposure to an act of revenge made them feel better, even though they actually felt worse.

On the relevance of anger to the revenge paradox

In the introduction of their paper, Carlsmith et al. (2008) place considerable emphasis on cultural expectations as to the cathartic potential of revenge, especially as it pertains to anger. In particular, they suggest that “there is widespread acceptance of the notion that aggression, either directed against the target of one's ire or displaced to some other object, relieves the tension, and thus the anger, that had been pent up inside” (Carlsmith et al., 2008, p. 1316). Hence, even though Carlsmith et al. (2008) sometimes frame the revenge paradox in global terms (e.g. as a general expectation to “feel better”), these considerations suggests that these expectations are rooted in an expected reduction

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