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Coping with disappointing outcomes: Retroactive pessimism and motivated inhibition of counterfactuals☆

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Abstract

Having failed to achieve a desired goal, people may use retroactive pessimism as a defense mechanism, concluding that chances of success were not too good to begin with. To make this judgment, one must block counterfactual alternatives suggesting that success was, in fact, quite likely. Facing a bitter disappointment, the perceiver is highly motivated to inhibit upward counterfactuals, thus increasing the perceived inevitability of failure and finding solace in the acceptance of inescapable fate. Two experiments explored the hypothesized link between counterfactuals inhibition and retroactive pessimism. In the first experiment, it was found that participants experiencing grave disappointment, following a near miss, judged their chances of achieving their goal less favorably, compared to participants who had missed their goal by far. An analysis on participants' counterfactual judgments suggested that this effect was mediated by participants' perceptions of counterfactual events. The second experiment demonstrated that retroactive pessimism and counterfactual inhibition seem to be unique to situations in which the negative outcome resulted from uncontrollable rather than controllable events, thus corroborating the functional characterization of counterfactual thinking as well as the link between retroactive pessimism and disappointment.

Keywords: Retroactive pessimism; Counterfactual thinking; Motivated inhibition; Disappointment; Regret

Faced with painful outcomes, people often become motivated to interpret events in a way that would make these outcomes easier to accept. Strong negative emotions are likely to trigger a host of defense mechanisms and mobilize cognitive resources to help the individual cope with misfortune. The use of such means, however, often requires some distortion of the objective reality.

To deal with bitter disappointment following failure, people employ a defense tactic called "Retroactive Pessimism" (Sanna & Chang, 2003; Tykocinski, 2001; Tykocinski, Pick, & Kedmi, 2002). Having failed to achieve a desired goal, people adjust their evaluations of the probability of success in a way that allows them to conclude that their chances of success were not too good to begin with, a transformation that renders the negative outcomes they face appear more predetermined and hence easier to accept. One characteristic of these disappointment driven probability shifts that sets them apart from mere hindsight is the fact that their magnitude reflects the magnitude of the disappointment that triggered them. For example, in Tykocinski (2001), participants were asked to imagine that due to a series of unforeseen events they had failed to arrive to a store before it had closed and, consequently, had missed an opportunity to benefit

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from a discount on an item they were planning to purchase. Participants' retroactive estimates of their chances of getting to the store on time were found to be sensitive to the size of the discount that was missed. Specifically, these estimates were less optimistic if the forfeited discount was large rather than small. This pattern was absent, however, when the participants estimated the likelihood of arriving to the store on time before the outcome was known (while still on their way), or when the outcome was positive (i.e., the store was still open and the purchase was made with the expected discount). Taken as a whole, these results provided a clear indication of the link between retroactive pessimism and disappointment, and illustrated the retroactive nature of the effect.

One could argue that greater probability shifts following a greater disappointment may result from a cold process of "representative reasoning," i.e., searching for a greater cause to account for a greater loss, and having identified such a significant cause—concluding that chances of success were in fact very slim. This reasoning, however, could not account for the fact that evidence for retroactive pessimism was found in situations involving the self, but not when the unfortunate outcomes befall a friend (Tykocinski et al., 2002, Exp. 2). The "personal" nature of the effect further supported its characterization as an emotionally based defensive mechanism that is in a sense analogous to dissonance reduction (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Festinger, 1957). But whereas dissonance reduction targets the desirability of the forgone outcomes, retroactive pessimism focuses on their perceived attainability.[1]

When people estimate the likelihood of future events, they often use the simulation heuristic, relying on the ease with which they can imagine the event taking place to assess its likelihood (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Similarly, when judging whether events that did happen could have concluded in a different outcome, one often relies on counterfactual thoughts to assess the mutability of the events that led to the outcome. If we can easily come up with a host of counterfactual scenarios that would have led to better outcomes—"if only…"—the outcome that actually happened would now seem less predetermined.

Research on the generation of counterfactual thoughts has identified several factors that are likely to affect the quantity and direction of such thoughts. For example, upward counterfactual thinking is likely to be activated by the experience of negative emotions (Roese & Olson, 1997) and by close proximity to a missed goal (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1992; Roese & Olson, 1996). The content and direction of counterfactuals have been demonstrated to be affected by the normality and controllability of antecedents (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1995; Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1990; N'gbala & Branscombe, 1995), and by individual disposition (Kasimatis & Wells, 1995; Markman & Weary, 1998; Sanna, 1996). In this paper, we identify another type of factor, namely, the psychological state of the perceiver. We suggest that, having to cope with bitter disappointment, the perceiver is highly motivated to block, censor, or discount upward counterfactuals, thus increasing the perceived inevitability of failure and finding solace in accepting inescapable fate.

The goal of the current work was to examine the interplay between situational and motivational factors that affect the generation of counterfactual thoughts. In the first experiment a "near miss" scenario was used. As Kahneman and Tversky (1982) demonstrated, when a goal was just within reach, the fact that it was nevertheless missed is particularly painful. "Near miss" situations provide fertile ground for the production of alternative counterfactual scenarios that could have guaranteed success—"if only." The close proximity to the goal enhances one's ability to construct scenarios that can bridge between "what was" and "what should have been." However, the perceived distance from the goal also affects the magnitude of disappointment. Near miss situations are more painful, and with the increase in disappointment there is an increase in the need to find psychological comfort. By discarding counterfactual scenarios that could have guaranteed success, we can psychologically turn a "near miss" into a "far" one, finding comfort in the inevitability of failure.

In view of the above, it was expected that when facing disappointments that are relatively mild, retroactive evaluations of the chances of achieving the goal would reflect the objective distance from the goal. Namely, individuals experiencing a mild near miss failure will judge their chances of obtaining the goal as more favorable compared to those who had missed the goal by far. However, in the bleaker realm of grave disappointments, defense mechanisms are likely to be triggered, and estimates of the likelihood of a better outcome are no longer expected to conform to the objective reality. The higher level of psychological discomfort is expected to trigger retroactive pessimism, and judgments of counterfactual success are expected to reflect the need to find comfort, rather than the actual proximity to the goal. In fact, because near miss failures are more painful, with grave disappointments perceivers are expected to judge their retroactive chances of success as less likely in the near miss condition. Moreover, as retroactive pessimism was hypothesized to involve suppression of upward counterfactual scenarios, we also expected that in the realm of grave disappointments, the relative ease with which one can construct counterfactual alternatives to a near miss outcome will no longer be manifested.

[1] For a more extensive discussion of similarities and differences between retroactive pessimism and cognitive dissonance see Tykocinski et al. (2002).