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‘Oops... I did it again’: Repeated focusing effects in reports of happiness

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ABSTRACT

We use an experiment (relating to a major European soccer match) to replicate previous studies that show forecasts of the impact of an event on happiness are often greatly exaggerated. In addition, by randomising respondents into one of two groups (assessing happiness before and after the event or only after), we are also able to show that previously focusing on an event can affect subsequent happiness responses. From a final sample of 309 soccer fans contacted via a social networking site, the happiness ratings of the fans of the losing team who answered before and after the soccer match is a whole point lower (on a 0–10 scale) than similar fans who rated their happiness only after the event. The potential spillover of a focusing effect from one survey to the next has important implications for how we interpret happiness responses from longitudinal surveys.

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1. Introduction

It is now pretty well established that, across a range of different contexts, we are not very good at predicting the impact of an event or changed circumstances on our happiness (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, 2005). In general, we imagine that most good and bad things (from the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ election result to being granted or denied tenure at a university) will have much more of an effect on us than turns out to be the case. Our biased forecasts of the impact of future events – which might be called ‘defective forecasting’ in contrast with the term ‘affective forecasting’ used by Wilson and Gilbert – has often been explained in terms of a focusing effect. That is, when we think about how much an event will affect us, we focus on that event as being much more important to our lives than it turns out to be (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). It has been shown that defective forecasting impacts on individual behaviour (Conlin, O’Donoghue, & Vogelsang, 2007; Loewenstein, O’Donoghue, & Rabin, 2003; Read & van Leeuwen, 1998), and helps to explain why behaviour is often based on incorrect beliefs (DellaVigna, 2009).

Much of the research on forecasting (e.g. as reported on in Loewenstein et al. (2003) and Wilson and Gilbert (2003) has used the same respondents over time, which allows us to control for individual heterogeneity. It also means, however, that respondents might use their first response as a reference point for their second response, either because they recall what

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they were asked to think about previously or because they simply recall their previous response. In other words, an earlier question acts as a focus of attention for a later one. To our knowledge, there have been no direct tests of the degree to which having been asked about something before an event affects assessments of happiness after the event. To do this, we need an experiment in which respondents are randomized to the standard 'before and after' condition or to an 'after only' condition, thus allowing the 'after' responses of the two groups to be compared with one another.

This paper reports on an experiment relating to a major European soccer game. Whilst the context may appear somewhat specific, the implications of the results are important and much more general. If there are differences in happiness between those who were asked 'before and after' the event and those asked 'after only', then continually asking people to state their happiness may induce focusing effects which would render happiness reports biased. If respondents remember the topic of the survey they completed last period or remember what happiness rating they gave previously, a survey this period could bias those happiness reports. This would thus have major ramifications for the interpretation of panel data from moment-to-moment measures of happiness (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004) to global assessments of life satisfaction (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003), and from clinical trials to large-scale surveys used across nations.

2. Methods

We used the 2008 UEFA Champions League Soccer Final as our event, and supporters of the teams in the final as our respondents. The Champions League is the biggest annual football tournament in the world and the 2008 final was the first final to be contested by two English teams, Chelsea and Manchester United. The final took place in Moscow on May 21, 2008, and was won by Manchester United. To obtain a sample of Chelsea and Manchester United supporters, we conducted a randomized field experiment on the social networking site Facebook. On the Facebook website, there are various group pages that individuals can join so that they can signal to their peers that they are fans of that group. So there are dozens of Chelsea and Manchester United groups. We used the five most popular group pages for each team. Using an internet-based survey allowed us to control the presentation of the questions to respondents e.g. we could prevent them from 'flicking through' the questions and finding out what the whole survey was about, and we could also identify the respondents (through their IP address) in order to prevent multiple responses.

We randomly assigned respondents to Group A, which completed the 'before and after' survey, and Group B, which completed the 'after only' survey. We randomized from within the top five groups for each team on Facebook. This experiment could be classed as a natural field experiment since the environment in which the subject undertakes the survey is natural and the subjects do not know that they are in an experiment and do not know that there are two groups in this experiment (Harrison & List, 2004). See Fig. 1 for a graphical illustration of our methodology and time frames used. Any difference between Group A's predicted and actual happiness after the event reflects any affective forecasting errors. The difference be-

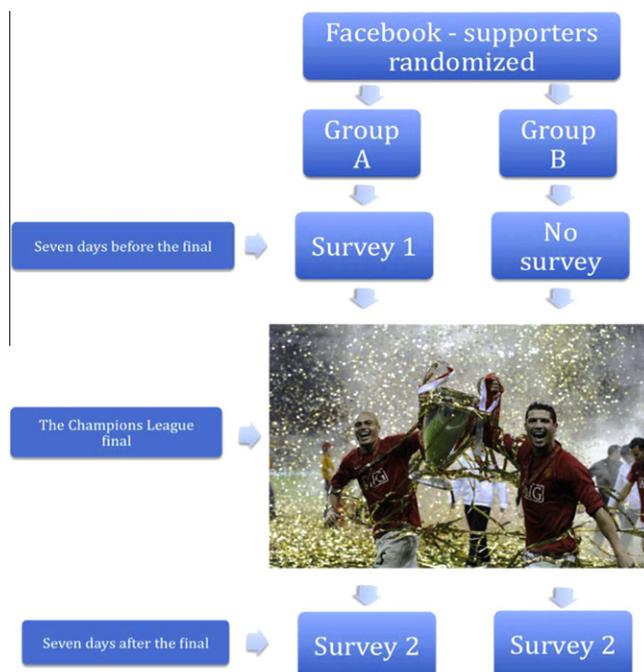


Fig. 1. Our methodology (picture courtesy of guardian.co.uk).

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