



The differential effect of realistic and unrealistic counterfactual thinking on regret

Nick Sevdalis^{a,*}, Flora Kokkinaki^b

^a *Department of Biosurgery and Surgical Technology, Imperial College London, 10th floor, QEQM, St. Mary's Hospital, South Wharf Road, London W2 1NY, UK*

^b *Department of Marketing and Communication, Athens University of Economics and Business, 76 Patission street, Athens 10434, Greece*

Received 9 November 2004; received in revised form 19 October 2005; accepted 19 October 2005
Available online 5 December 2005

Abstract

Research has established that realistic counterfactual thinking can determine the intensity and the content of people's affective reactions to decision outcomes and events. Not much is known, however, about the affective consequences of counterfactual thinking that is unrealistic (i.e., that does not correspond to the main causes of a negative outcome). In three experiments, we investigate the influence of realistic and unrealistic counterfactuals on experienced regret after negative outcomes. In Experiment 1, we found that participants who thought unrealistically about a poor outcome reported less regret than those who thought realistically about it. In Experiments 2a and 2b, we replicated this finding and we showed that the decrease in regret was associated with a shift in the causal attributions of the poor outcome. Participants who thought unrealistically attributed it more to external circumstances and less to their own behaviours than those who thought realistically about it. We discuss the implications of these findings for the role of counterfactuals as self-serving biases and the functionality of regret as a counterfactual emotion.

© 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

PsychINFO classification: 2340; 2360

Keywords: Counterfactuals; Responsibility; Attributions; Regret

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 020 7886 6567; fax: +44 020 7886 1810.
E-mail address: n.sevdalis@imperial.ac.uk (N. Sevdalis).

1. Introduction

Counterfactuals are alternative versions of the past (Roese, 1997). People live through events and consequences of their own behaviours and of external circumstances. These “...experienced facts of reality evoke counterfactual alternatives and are compared to these alternatives” (Kahneman & Miller, 1986, p. 142). Counterfactual comparisons allow people to draw causal inferences about sequences of actions or events (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Wells & Gavanski, 1989). They also trigger affective reactions to events and decisions. People feel better or worse about past events, on the basis of counterfactual comparisons of these events with other possible events that could have occurred (but actually did not occur). “Upward” counterfactuals improve on reality, thus making people feel worse. “Downward” counterfactuals worsen reality, thus making people feel better (Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993). Kahneman and Miller (1986) coined the term “emotional amplification” for this phenomenon.

In addition to amplifying people’s affective experiences, counterfactuals contribute to the shaping of these experiences. For instance, Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski (1994, studies 2a and 2b) found that, after being exposed to the same affective stimulus (a scenario), participants experienced either shame or guilt, depending on the type of counterfactual they generated. Those who generated behaviour-focused counterfactuals reported predominantly guilt about the outcome of the scenario, whereas those who generated self-focused counterfactuals reported predominantly shame about the same outcome. In another series of studies, Zeelenberg, van Dijk, van der Pligt, et al. (1998, studies 2 and 3) found that participants who generated behaviour-focused counterfactuals, reported predominantly regret about a negative outcome, whereas those who generated situation-focused counterfactuals, reported predominantly disappointment about the same outcome.

An assumption in the empirical investigation of the affective consequences of counterfactual thinking is that counterfactuals tend to conform to some type of “reality check” or constraint (Seelau, Seelau, Wells, & Windschitl, 1995). As Kahneman and Miller (1986, p. 142) argue, “... the statement ‘I almost caught the flight’ is appropriate for an individual who reached the departure gate when the plane had just left, but not for a traveler who arrived half an hour late”. This assumption is also present (albeit implicitly) in Zeelenberg’s (1999) discussion of the functionality of the experience of regret. The thrust of his argument is that, when people regret their past actions or inactions, they learn that, given their goals, these behaviours were inadequate. Therefore, should similar behavioural goals arise in the future, people are likely to avoid repeating the same inadequate behaviours of the past. Foreseeing and avoiding regret thus increases people’s chances of exhibiting appropriate goal-directed behaviours. In this respect, people can only learn from their past regrets if the counterfactual thinking that triggers these regrets is realistic.

People’s counterfactual reconstructions of the past, however, depend on people’s purposes and motivations when they mutate past behaviours or events (Seelau et al., 1995). These motivations may be self-serving rather than aiming to construe past experience in realistic terms in order to learn from it. One such motivation is to feel good about one’s behaviours and decisions. For instance, Tykocinski (2001) has shown that when a goal set in advance is missed, people re-evaluate downwards their initial chances of achieving it. In other words, people lower their expectations *ex post facto*, in order to mitigate the

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات