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On the misguided pursuit of happiness and ethical decision making: The roles of focalism and the impact bias in unethical and selfish behavior [☆]



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ABSTRACT

An important body of research in the field of behavioral ethics argues that individuals behave unethically and selfishly because they want to obtain desired outcomes, such as career advancement and monetary rewards. Concurrently, a large body of literature in social psychology has shown that the subjective value of an outcome is determined by its anticipated emotional impact. Such impact has been consistently found to be overestimated both in its intensity and in its duration (i.e. impact bias) due to focalism (i.e. excessive focus on the desired outcome). Across four empirical studies, this investigation demonstrates that reducing focalism and thereby attenuating the impact bias in regards to desired outcomes decreases people's tendency to engage in both unethical and selfish behavior to obtain those outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Individuals often behave unethically and selfishly to benefit themselves because they want to obtain certain desired outcomes, such as monetary rewards and career advancement (Barsky, 2008; Kern & Chugh, 2009; Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004; Tenbrunsel, 1998; Wang & Murnighan, 2011; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014; Ordóñez & Welsh, 2015). In the field of judgment and decision making and, specifically, in the literature exploring affective forecasting, researchers have repeatedly shown that individuals overestimate the emotional impact of desired outcomes, a phenomenon that is known as the *impact bias* (for a review of this literature see Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, 2013). In the present investigation, I combine the literatures on behavioral ethics and affective forecasting to argue that the motivation of individuals to engage in unethical and selfish acts to obtain desired outcomes is similarly affected by the impact bias. Across four empirical studies, I experimentally reduce the impact bias by decreasing *focalism*, defined as individuals' excessive focus on the desired outcome at the expense of other factors (Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000; Wilson & Gilbert, 2013). By doing so, I demonstrate that individuals' expected impact of desired outcomes is reduced and that,

as a consequence, their unethical or selfish behavior to obtain those outcomes also decreases. An important implication of this investigation is that achieving goals and outcomes through unethical and selfish behavior is misguided not only because such behavior has negative consequences for others, but also because it does not maximize the perpetrators' well-being in the manner that the former anticipate.

1.1. Affective forecasting and ethical decision making

Decision affect theory proposes that people anticipate how they will feel about the outcomes of decisions and use these predictions to guide their choices (Mellers, Schwartz, Ho, & Ritov, 1997; Mellers, 2000; Mellers & McGraw, 2001). Likewise, the theory of anticipated emotion (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001) suggests that prior to engaging in a certain type of behavior, people imagine how they will feel about its potential outcome, and proceed accordingly. In support of these theories, several empirical findings indicate that most decisions are driven by a prediction made by an individual on how that decision will make him or her feel (Loewenstein & Schkade, 1998). Such prediction is usually referred to as affective forecasting (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005), and is motivated by individuals' desire to "attain outcomes that will make them happy and avoid those that will make them miserable" (Levine, Lench, Kaplan, & Safer, 2012, p. 584).

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In the present investigation, I seek to incorporate this literature on affective forecasting to the field of behavioral business ethics by investigating the role that biases in affective forecasting – such as focalism and the impact bias – play when individuals face decisions that have implications not only for themselves but also for others, such as unethical and selfish behavior. Unethical behavior is generally defined as any action that is “morally unacceptable to the large community” (Jones, 1991), or “general dishonesty, such as cheating or lying” (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015, p. 5). This investigation exclusively addresses unethical/selfish behavior, that is, unethical acts that individuals conduct to benefit themselves and not others (Dubois et al., 2015, p. 5). In addition, this investigation addresses selfish behavior, defined as behavior that benefits oneself at the expense of others, but that is not always considered unethical (Dubois et al., 2015, p. 5). In short, I explore the role of focalism and the impact bias in motivating individuals to benefit themselves at the expense of others, including behavior that is widely seen as unethical and selfish (e.g., deception), as well as behavior that is selfish but not necessarily unethical.

Over the past decade, researchers have started addressing the role of emotion in ethical decision making (Bazerman, Gino, Shu, & Tsay, 2011; Gino & Shea, 2012; Teper, Zhong, & Inzlicht, 2015; Zhong, 2011), including the role of general positive affect (Gaudine & Thorne, 2001), of positive and negative mood (Noval & Stahl, 2015), and of more specific emotional states, such as guilt (Ghorbani, Liao, Cayköylü, & Chand, 2013), empathy (Cohen, 2010), embarrassment (Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008) and envy (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008). The role of affective forecasts remains underexplored with the exception of studies addressing the role of affective forecasting errors in the anticipation of guilt (Ruedy, Moore, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2013) and the role of anticipated guilt in promoting ethical behavior (e.g., Ghorbani et al., 2013; Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Yam & Reynolds, 2014). Whereas the latter research refers to affective forecasts in terms of the psychological costs of unethical behavior (Lewicki, 1983), in this investigation, I exclusively examine affective forecasting related to the *motivation* to engage in unethical and selfish acts.

Rick and Loewenstein (2008) argue that the role of motivation to engage in unethical behavior has not been addressed as often as the role of costs of such behavior, even though “given sufficient motivation, people can persuade themselves of almost anything, including why behavior that they normally would have considered to be unethical is in fact morally acceptable.” (2008, p. 645). It is indeed intuitive and has also been empirically demonstrated that motivation and incentives are a key determinant of individuals' decisions to behave unethically, for example, in decisions to engage in bribery (Hegarty & Sims, 1979), to deceive others (Tenbrunsel, 1998), and to behave selfishly (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, Baker, & Martin, 2014; Dubois et al., 2015). A growing line of research argues that individuals engage in deception to achieve specific goals, particularly when those goals are ambitious and hard to reach (e.g., Jensen, 2001; Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Schweitzer et al., 2004; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014; Ordóñez & Welsh, 2015) and that goals lead individuals to morally disengage (Barsky, 2008). Recently, scholars have argued that it is not only the goal or the desired end state that determines behavior but also the perceived importance of that end state (Tang & Milkman, 2015). Related to the latter point, the previously cited literature on affective forecasting suggests that when individuals seek to obtain a certain outcome, such as a promotion or a bonus, they are primarily concerned not with the promotion or bonus per se, but rather with the pleasure that they anticipate deriving from these forms of wealth and power (Gilbert, 2006).

In view of the previously described importance of affective forecasts (i.e. anticipated emotional impact) in determining the value of outcomes, I propose that affective forecasts similarly influence

individuals' decisions to obtain desired outcomes through unethical and selfish means. Next, I explore the literature on errors of affective forecasting – including the impact bias and focalism –, which finds that the anticipation of emotional impact of desired outcomes is pervasively overestimated (see Kahneman & Thaler, 2006; Loewenstein & Schkade, 1998; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, 2013 for reviews). Consistent with this literature, I propose that the outcomes that individuals seek to achieve via unethical and selfish means are similarly overvalued and, consequently, that reducing this overestimation should decrease individuals' unethical and selfish behavior.

1.2. The role of the impact bias and focalism on unethical and selfish behavior

The impact bias is broadly defined as individuals' tendency to exaggerate the emotional impact that future events will have on their lives (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, p. 351). Although people are generally accurate at predicting what would make them feel good or bad, they tend to overestimate both the initial intensity and the duration of such feelings (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). A seminal paper on the role of adaptation in human happiness revealed that individuals mispredicted the duration of unhappiness after becoming paraplegic in a similar manner that other individuals mispredicted the duration of happiness after winning the lottery. Both paraplegics and lottery winners adapted and returned to their baseline levels of happiness much faster than they had anticipated (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Similarly, later scholars found that the elation experienced by assistant professors who received tenure was neither as high nor lasted as long as those professors had predicted (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Comparable effects were found for professors who failed to obtain tenure and who, after a rather short while, recovered from the event that they had previously expected would cause them great and lasting misery (Gilbert et al., 1998). Such overestimation of the emotional impact of life events has been found to be prevalent in a wide variety of populations and related to a variety of goals and outcomes, from sports and political events to increasing one's income and moving to California (e.g., Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Dolan & Metcalfe, 2010; Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Gilbert et al., 1998; Hoerger, Quirk, Lucas, & Carr, 2011; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006; Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997; Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson et al., 2000).

The most important source of the impact bias is believed to be focalism, also referred to as the focusing illusion (Dolan & Metcalfe, 2010; Kahneman et al., 2006; Morewedge, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2007; Levine et al., 2012; Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson et al., 2000; Wilson & Gilbert, 2013). Focalism occurs because individuals tend to focus excessively on the outcome in question – that is, on the focal event – when predicting how that outcome will make them feel (Wilson et al., 2000). Kahneman and Thaler (2006) explain that withdrawal of attention is the main mechanism of adaptation to any life change: as individuals who experience a changing event become continuously aware of their new state – such as winning the lottery, becoming paraplegic, or receiving tenure – the novel event ceases to be the exclusive focus of attention, and other aspects of life resume to evoke pleasure and displeasure (Kahneman & Thaler, 2006). When individuals anticipate the impact of an outcome, however, they are focused on the specific event whose impact they are trying to predict and fail to account for the emotional impact of other life occurrences. Consequently, the impact bias results from overestimating how much and for how long the focal desired outcome will be in one's thoughts once it is achieved (Wilson & Gilbert, 2013).

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