

Affective Forecasting: Why We Misjudge Our Future Feelings

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Affective forecasting is the forecasting of one's affect (emotional state) in the future. This kind of prediction is affected by various kinds of cognitive biases, or systematic errors of thought also known as "empathy gap" and "impact bias".

Examples of the impact bias include over-estimating emotional reactions to Valentine's Day, football games, elections, movie clips and the reactions of juries to criminal trials. Reasons for the impact bias include (a) focalism and (b) immune neglect. In terms of focalism, people focus too much on the target event, ignoring peripheral activities that may later occupy their attention and impact their emotional state. In terms of immune neglect, when forecasting emotions, people tend to neglect the role their coping resources will later play in ameliorating distressing affects. As such, those with effective coping strategies are actually more prone to biased affective forecasts.

Imagine that one morning your telephone rings and you find yourself speaking with the King of Sweden, who informs you in surprisingly good English that you have been selected as this year's recipient of a Nobel prize. How would you feel, and how long would you feel that way?

... Now imagine that the telephone call is from your college president, who regrets to inform you (in surprisingly good English) that the Board of Regents has dissolved your department, revoked your appointment, and stored your books in little cardboard boxes in the hallway. How would you feel, and how long would you feel that way?

Psychological immune system

Gilbert and Wilson coined the term "psychological immune system" to encompass a number of biases and mechanisms that protect the subject from experiencing extreme negative emotions. This label draws on an analogy with the biological immune system. These processes affect how the subject processes, transforms or constructs information, making the existing state of affairs more bearable and the alternatives more appealing. The mechanisms of the psychological immune system act without conscious awareness, so people usually fail to anticipate its effects. This is one reason why people are poor at affective forecasting: they typically underestimate the extent to which these processes will shield them from a negative event.

The psychological immune system includes:

- ego defense
- rationalization
- dissonance reduction
- motivated reasoning
- self-serving attribution
- self-affirmation
- self-deception

terror management

Fading affect bias: a bias in which the emotion associated with unpleasant memories fades more quickly than the emotion associated with positive events.

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