

Personality Neglect: The Unforeseen Impact of Personal Dispositions on Emotional Life

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Abstract

The present research provides the first evidence that people neglect their own personalities when they envision their future emotional lives. In Study 1, students ignored the impact of their dispositional happiness in predicting how they would feel 2 weeks after receiving grades. Yet dispositional happiness played an important role in shaping actual emotional experiences. Similarly, exhibiting personality neglect, participants in Study 2 overlooked their trait levels of neuroticism and optimism when forecasting their reaction to Barack Obama's election, though these personality dimensions were related to their actual emotional reactions. Because they overlooked the influence of their own dispositions, individuals incorrectly predicted their future feelings. Ironically, as a result of this personality neglect, more optimistic individuals were less likely to see their emotional future in an overly rosy light, whereas more neurotic individuals were more likely to overestimate the pleasure that the future would bring.

Keywords

affective forecasting, personality, self-knowledge, happiness

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How well do people know their own personalities? Most can accurately rate their dispositions (e.g., Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996), but they may not show the same clear-sighted self-knowledge when faced with one of the most important tasks of all: predicting their own future happiness. In fact, we suggest that people exhibit personality neglect, meaning that they largely overlook the weight of their dispositions—and this, in turn, leads them to envision their future emotional lives erroneously.

Happiness is critically determined by personal dispositions (Diener & Lucas, 1999); traits such as dispositional happiness, optimism, and neuroticism consistently shape emotional reactions to life events (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998; Scheier & Carver, 1992). Therefore, if people overlook their own emotional dispositions in making forecasts, this oversight could produce a substantial source of miscalculation, one that goes beyond past conceptions of forecasting errors (e.g., Gilbert & Wilson, 2009).

Previous research on affective forecasting has shown that individuals seem especially prone to overestimate the intensity and the duration of their future emotions, exhibiting the *impact bias* (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), largely because they fail to appreciate the power of hedonic adaptation (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). However, recent empirical work has challenged the classic hedonic-treadmill

model and highlighted the key moderating role played by personal dispositions (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). For example, although people adapt to marriage after about 2 years (on average), some individuals stay happily married for a lifetime, whereas for others the joys of marriage fade away after a few months (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Ironically, if dispositions shape actual emotional experiences but are largely neglected when people imagine their emotional futures, then happy, optimistic people may underestimate their own future well-being, whereas negative people—the “negative Nancys” of the world—may envision a brighter emotional future than will actually come to pass.

As an initial test of whether individuals neglect their own dispositions when making affective forecasts, we examined the influence of dispositional happiness on students' affective forecasts and emotional reactions to receiving grades (Study 1). We hypothesized that trait happiness would be related to emotional experiences, but not to forecasted emotions. Extending our findings to a larger sample of working adults and a new set of emotional dispositions (i.e., neuroticism and optimism), we

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then investigated the same personality-neglect hypothesis in relation to the 2008 U.S. presidential election (Study 2).

Study 1

Method

In return for extra course credit, 47 freshmen at the University of Louvain (89% women, 11% men; mean age = 18.5 years, $SD = 1.0$ years) rated their dispositional happiness and were then asked to predict how they would feel 2 weeks after receiving their overall grades for the term. Two weeks after receiving their grades, participants reported their actual feelings. Dispositional happiness was assessed using the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), a well-validated measure composed of four 7-point items ($\alpha = .85$).

Six weeks before the end of the term, participants were asked to predict how they would feel 2 weeks after receiving their overall grades if their grades were (a) two steps lower than they were expecting (e.g., a C instead of an A), (b) one step lower than they were expecting, (c) at the expected level, (d) one step higher than they were expecting, and (e) two steps higher than they were expecting. Two weeks after receiving their term grades, participants rated their happiness. As in past affective-forecasting studies, forecasts and actual emotion ratings were made on the same 11-point scale ranging from *extremely sad* (−5) to *extremely happy* (+5; e.g., Gilbert et al., 1998).¹

Results and discussion

Results supported our hypothesis that dispositions would shape participants' actual feelings but would be largely neglected when people made affective forecasts: Dispositional happiness was positively related to how good people felt after receiving their grades ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.57$; $r = .30$, $p < .05$), but had no bearing on how good they expected to feel given the grades they in fact received ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 2.83$; $r = -.14$, $p = .36$). These two correlations differed significantly from each other, $t(44) = 1.98$, $p = .05$ (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

These results supply preliminary support for personality neglect, as dispositional happiness was related to actual—but not anticipated—emotional reactions. Because receiving grades was a positive event for some participants and a negative or neutral event for others, our small sample size did not provide us with the power to examine the impact bias and test whether or not it was moderated by personality. Therefore, in Study 2, we attempted to replicate our findings while examining whether personality moderated the extent to which individuals overestimated their happiness in response to a consensually positive event. On the basis of our initial evidence of personality neglect, we hypothesized that neurotic participants would neglect their own propensity for malaise, leading them to greatly overestimate the happiness they would experience in response to a positive event. Conversely, we

expected that the tendency to overestimate happiness in the wake of a positive event would be reduced among optimistic individuals, whose sunny dispositions would yield levels of happiness that converged with their forecasts.

Study 2

Method

In early October 2008, as part of a larger two-wave online study, 250 Belgian adults (65% women, 35% men; mean age = 35.6 years, $SD = 11.8$ years) predicted how they would feel the day following the U.S. presidential election. On November 5, 2008, the day after the election, participants were asked to report their actual emotions and then to complete a battery of measures, including the key measures of neuroticism and optimism.

Neuroticism was assessed using the Neuroticism subscale from the well-validated Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). This subscale is composed of eight 5-point items ($\alpha = .83$). Optimism was measured via the Life Orientation Test–Revised (LOT–R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994), which consists of six 5-point items ($\alpha = .70$).

Approximately 1 month before the U.S. presidential election, participants were asked to predict how they would feel the day following the election if Barack Obama won and if John McCain won. The day following the election, participants were asked to report how they actually felt. Predicted and actual emotions were rated on the same scales used in Study 1.

Because 98% of our Belgian sample supported Obama, his election was a positive event. Therefore, to calculate impact bias, we computed a difference score (forecasted emotion minus experienced emotion), reflecting how much happier participants expected to be following the election than they actually were.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. The results of Study 1 were conceptually replicated: Participants' neuroticism and optimism were unrelated to their affective forecasts regarding Obama's victory but were significantly correlated with their actual happiness the day following the election, with neuroticism being negatively correlated with happiness and optimism being positively correlated with happiness. For both traits, the disposition-experience correlation differed significantly from the disposition-forecast correlation ($ps < .05$).

Confirming our hypotheses, the data showed that neuroticism was positively correlated with the impact bias. That is, more neurotic individuals showed a stronger tendency to overestimate their happiness after this positive event, a pattern suggesting that they neglected their own proclivity for malaise in the face of positive events. Conversely, optimism was negatively correlated

Table 1. Results From Study 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among the Variables

| Measure | Mean | SD | Correlation | | | | | |
|-------------------------|------|------|-------------|-------|-------|--------|------|--|
| | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| 1. Neuroticism | 2.83 | 0.73 | 1.00 | | | | | |
| 2. Optimism | 3.46 | 0.77 | -.47** | 1.00 | | | | |
| 3. Forecasted happiness | 2.32 | 1.58 | .07 | .08 | 1.00 | | | |
| 4. Actual happiness | 1.60 | 1.97 | -.29** | .26** | .07 | 1.00 | | |
| 5. Impact bias | 0.72 | 2.44 | .28** | -.16* | .59** | -.76** | 1.00 | |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

with the impact bias. That is, more optimistic individuals were less likely to overestimate their happiness after the positive event, as their natural joie de vivre delivered positive emotional experiences that converged with their forecasts.

Building on these findings, we further suspected that personality could not only moderate the intensity of the impact bias, but even eliminate or reverse it if participants had particularly joyful dispositions. Because neuroticism and optimism were significantly correlated, we standardized and combined these variables (with neuroticism reverse-scored) to create an overall measure of dispositional positivity. As expected, dispositional positivity significantly moderated the impact bias ($r = -.25, p < .01$). Figure 1 depicts this moderation by displaying the impact bias for participants who scored at five levels of dispositional positivity: very low (lowest 10% of participants), low (next 20%), medium (middle 40%), high (next 20%), and very high (top 10%). Whereas participants on average overestimated their happiness following this positive event, $t(249) = 4.68, p < .01$ (a result replicating previous findings), repeated measure t tests for the different subgroups revealed that participants with high dispositional-positivity

scores did not, $t(50) = 0.76, p = .45$. Although analyses of extreme groups should be interpreted cautiously, it is also interesting to note that participants scoring very high on dispositional positivity significantly underestimated their future happiness, $t(24) = 2.03, p = .05$.

General Discussion

The present research provides the first evidence that people neglect their own personalities in envisioning their emotional reactions to future events. In both student and adult samples, participants failed to foresee the weight of their affective dispositions in shaping their actual experiences following discrete emotional events; this effect emerged consistently across three major affective dispositions (happiness, neuroticism, and optimism) and occurred regardless of whether participants rated their dispositions at the forecasting stage (Study 1) or the experiencing stage (Study 2). Students high in dispositional happiness overlooked their own baseline well-being when predicting how happy they would be after receiving their term grades, but this disposition played an important role in their actual happiness. Likewise, participants ignored their own levels of neuroticism and optimism when making their forecasts, though these personality dimensions were related to their actual emotional experiences after the election. Ironically, then, optimistic individuals were less likely to see their emotional future in an overly rosy light, whereas neurotic individuals were more likely to overestimate the pleasure that the future would bring. Moving beyond research showing that, on average, unforeseen emotional adaptation leads people to overestimate the intensity of their future emotions (e.g., Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Gilbert et al., 1998), our work suggests that interindividual variability in emotional dispositions can magnify, attenuate, and even reverse the impact bias.

Why do people fail to incorporate dispositional information in their forecasts? Knowledge about personality traits is stored in a specialized subsystem within semantic memory (Klein, Cosmides, Costabile, & Mei, 2002), whereas simulations of future emotional reactions are primarily constructed from representations stored in episodic memory (D’Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2004; Schacter, Addis, & Buckner, 2007).

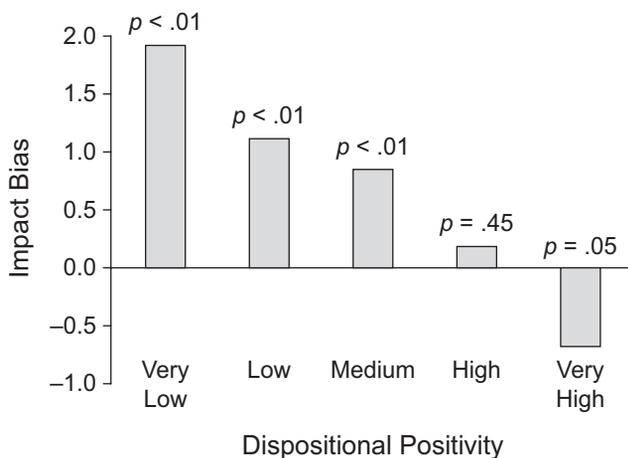


Fig. 1. Impact bias in Study 2 for participants scoring very low (lowest 10% of participants), low (next 20%), medium (middle 40%), high (next 20%), and very high (top 10%) on dispositional positivity. The p values indicate the results of repeated measures t tests on the difference between forecasted and experienced happiness.

Semantic and episodic memory are functionally independent. For example, an amnesic patient was able to rate his personality in a highly reliable and consistent manner even though he was unable to recollect a single thing he had ever done (Klein, Rozendal, & Cosmides, 2002). Thus, the neglect of personality-related knowledge in affective forecasting may occur because episodic, rather than semantic, information is typically activated when one envisions the future.

Beyond determining the mechanisms underlying personality neglect, future research should investigate its relevance to well-being. For example, individuals high in dispositional happiness who are planning their next vacation might not need to waste money and effort finding the perfect location (because they will be happy in the end anyway). By contrast, people with less happy dispositions might be more prone to regret the slightest annoyance, so carefully planning every detail of the trip might be the best strategy for their future well-being. In short, simply taking a moment to step back and reflect on one's personality may provide a clearer window into one's own future emotional life.

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Note

1. Although this single-item measure has been used in previous research, we validated it by asking a separate group of participants ($N = 60$) to predict how they would feel on a particular day, or to report their actual feelings that day, on both our 1-item measure and the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Correlations between our 1-item measure and the PANAS (Positive Affect score minus Negative Affect score) were .70 and .73 for forecasts and experiences, respectively, casting doubt on the possibility that low reliability of our forecast measure (relative to our experience measure) could account for personality neglect.

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