



Timothy Willson

Predicting Future Emotions

Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want



Principle

People mispredict how future events will make them feel.

Quote

“People routinely mispredict how much pleasure or displeasure future events will bring.”

So What - Application

If we routinely mispredict how an event will make us feel, then knowing that can help us make better decisions for the future.

If we choose goals based on how we think we will feel, but don't realize how much our brains will focus on other life events that demand our attention, make sense of it pretty quickly, and automatically under the surface create thoughts that protect our well being, then we can be assured that it's hard to predict how an event will make us feel.

So, ask yourself why you want this goal. Is it because you think it will make you happy? Or are there other reasons unrelated to emotions?

The Research Story

Two researchers from University of Virginia and Harvard University gathered research about predicting future emotions. Fairy tales end in “happily ever after” and sometimes we think that getting something we want will make us happy. People can generally predict if something will be pleasant or unpleasant, but mispredict the emotion's intensity and how long it will last. Although we sometimes choose goals based on desired results regardless of the rollercoaster of emotions that accompany it, this research is about when we choose goals because we think they will make us happy.

There are “hot” and “cold” emotional states. Hot is when you're in the emotion and cold is when you're guessing a future emotion you don't feel right now. People underestimate the power of “hot” states like hunger, drug cravings, and big emotions when they are not in them.

Impact bias is the idea that people are usually wrong about the emotional impact a future event will have, so they base their goals on things that won't actually bring the happiness or avoid the unhappiness they desire. One reason we mispredict future emotions is **focalism**, which is assuming we'll think a lot about the event after it occurs rather than other events or normal life demanding our attention. Another reason we mispredict future emotions is **sense making**. When an event happens that isn't well understood, people pay attention to it, react emotionally, try to make sense of it, and the emotions subside as it makes more sense and becomes normal. In one study they gave students in a library a card with a dollar coin attached. Students were happier 5 minutes later when the card had no explanation, but students predicted they'd be happier with the explanation. It's a bit of a paradox that people explain things to themselves so they can repeat good experiences and avoid bad ones, but the very act of explaining it dampens the positive emotions of it.

One last effect is **immune neglect** where our brains automatically create explanations for bad events to protect our well-being. Because it's unconscious, we don't realize it's happening, and don't consider it when we try to predict future happiness. People have stronger reactions to unexpected negative events when they are hard to explain. The way our brains unconsciously create meanings skews our ability to predict how events will make us feel.

Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2005). Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(3), 131–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00355.x>

