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Blessed are those who expect nothing: Lowering expectations as a way of avoiding disappointment

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Abstract

The present paper addresses a way in which people can try to avoid disappointment: namely, by lowering their expectations about obtaining a desired but uncertain outcome. It was hypothesized that people endorse this strategy when two specific (contextual) conditions are met. First, self-relevant feedback should be anticipated, and second this feedback should be anticipated in the near future. An experiment in which self-relevance and timing of the feedback about the outcome were manipulated supported this hypothesis. Results showed that participants only lowered their estimates about a test score, when feedback about their test score was self-relevant and anticipated close in time. Implications and functionality of the use of this strategy are briefly discussed.

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Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.
Alexander Pope, 1688–1744

1. Introduction

Outcomes of decisions often give rise to the experience of emotions. We experience positive emotions when a decision turns out favorably and we experience negative emotions when a decision turns out unfavorably. Two of the emotions that attracted most attention from decision researchers are regret and disappointment (see for overviews, Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Landman, 1993; Mellers, 2000; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000). Disappointment is experienced when the chosen option turns out to be worse than expected. Whereas regret is experienced when the chosen option ends up being worse than the rejected options. In other words, disappointment stems from disconfirmed expectancies, whereas regret stems from bad decisions. Research has shown that both emotions have a negative impact on the utility that is derived from decision outcomes (e.g., Mellers, 2000) and on consumer satisfaction (e.g., Inman, Dyer, & Jia, 1997). In our own research we have found that both emotions have a qualitatively different phenomenology, and both have different impact on behavior (e.g., Zeelenberg et al., 2000). In the present study we focus on the effects of the anticipation of negative emotion on decision making. In particular we focus on the effects of anticipated disappointment.

Ideas about the role of regret and disappointment in decision making were first formalized by the economists Bell (1982, 1985) and Loomes and Sugden (1982, 1986). Not only do these theories assume that individuals experience emotions as a consequence of making decisions, but also that individuals anticipate the experience of these emotions, and take them into account when making decisions. Thus, according to these theories decisions are partly based on regret and disappointment aversion (i.e. on the tendency to make choices in such a way as to minimize the future experiences of these emotions). These ideas about the relevance of emotions for decision making are consistent with those in emotion research. As Frijda (1994, p. 118) pointed out, “Actual emotion, affective response, anticipation of future emotion can be regarded as the primary source of decisions.” Recently, mounting empirical support has become available for the notion that the anticipation of regret influences decision making processes (see for a review, Zeelenberg, 1999). However, virtually no empirical research has focused on the effects of anticipated disappointment on these processes. In the present article we argue that one way in which anticipated disappointment can insert its impact on decision making processes is through its influence on expectations. Let us describe why and how this would happen.

As defined by Bell (1985) disappointment is a psychological reaction to an outcome that does not match up against prior expectations. Basically, an individual's disappointment is assumed to be in direct proportion to the difference between what (s)he expected and what (s)he got (see for empirical evidence supporting this assumption, van Dijk & van der Pligt, 1996; Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, & Pieters,

2002). Given this definition, people can basically employ two different strategies in order to avoid disappointment.

First, they may bring the outcome in line with their expectations. Second, they may bring their expectations in line with an anticipated (lower) outcome. The first strategy may be often difficult and hard to accomplish. Of course, people will try their best when striving for a desired outcome. However, outcomes are often dependent upon several different factors, some of which are beyond our control. Hence, often it may be hard to obtain the desired outcome. Moreover, as our own research has shown, increasing the amount of effort invested may backfire when the attempt is unsuccessful. We have found that the more effort decision makers invest in obtaining a desired goal, the more disappointed they are when the goal is not attained (see van Dijk, van der Pligt, & Zeelenberg, 1999).

The second strategy that people may employ in order to avoid disappointment, bringing expectations in line with an anticipated lower outcome, is the one that we are currently focussing on. We think that this strategy could be more easily applied. Thus, when people fear that their expectations exceeds a desired outcome they may attempt to avoid disappointment by strategically lower their expectations about obtaining the desired outcome.

The strategy of lowering expectations is consistent with the assumed link between expectations and satisfaction. Feather (1967, 1969) suggested that people perceive unexpected positive outcomes as more attractive than expected positive outcomes and unexpected negative outcomes as more repulsive than expected negative outcomes. Thus, irrespective of whether an outcome is favorable or unfavorable, the lower one's initial expectations, the greater one's satisfaction or the less intense one's disappointment with the actual outcome. Hence, when people are faced with uncertainty regarding the occurrence of a desirable outcome, they may attempt to protect themselves from the experience of disappointment by underestimating their chances of obtaining the outcome in question.¹

Decision makers will not always lower their expectations in order to avoid disappointment when confronted with uncertain outcomes. The incentive to use this strategy is in our view dependent upon at least two factors. A first factor that determines the use of this concerns the self-relevance of the consequences of the outcome. Frijda (1986) states that emotions are experienced when an outcome has consequences that are relevant for a person's concerns or beliefs. Building on this assumption, outcomes only evoke disappointment when they have self-relevant consequences. We therefore argue that the incentive to lower expectations in order to avoid disappointment

¹ This strategy can be related to *defensive pessimism* (Norem & Cantor, 1986), which involves setting low expectations before encountering a risky situation. The difference between defensive pessimism and our proposed strategy of setting low expectations as a means of avoiding disappointment is the timing of the use of the strategies. Defensive pessimism, typically studied in achievement motivations settings, involves a priori structuring of a situation before a performance is begun. However, the strategy we focus on in the present paper, lowering expectations in order to avoid disappointment, occurs *after* the performance, but *before* feedback about the performance.

will be especially strong when an outcome with self-relevant consequences is at stake.

Apart from self-relevance, another important determinant of whether people lower their expectations in order to avoid disappointment seems to be the temporal proximity of feedback on whether an outcome is obtained or not. The incentive of people to lower their expectations should be especially strong when the threat of disappointment is immediate, that is when feedback about obtaining an outcome is close at hand. When outcome feedback is still relatively remote people could be inclined not to lower their expectations in order to savor the pleasure of a possible favorable outcome (cf. Loewenstein & Linville, 1986). However, when the moment-of-truth appears, the incentive of avoiding disappointment will in our view override the incentive of savoring a possible favorable outcome, this will result in lowering expectations.

Results of several studies provide support for our line of reasoning. For example, in a study by Nisan (1972), participants who anticipated taking an exam immediately were less confident that they would answer an item correctly than participants who would take the exam in four weeks. More recently, Shepperd, Ouellette, and Fernandez (1996) asked college sophomores, juniors, and seniors to estimate their likely starting salary at their first full-time job after graduation. Students' estimates of their starting salary were assessed twice, once at the beginning of the semester and once at the end of the semester (i.e. two weeks prior to graduation for seniors). Results showed that only seniors became less optimistic at the end of the semester, as graduation approached. In a second study they asked students to estimate their exam score a month before their exam, and again several times after completing the exam yet prior to receiving feedback. As proximity of feedback neared, students lowered their estimates concerning their exam score. In a related vein, Taylor and Shepperd (1998) showed that when people believe that they are being tested for a medical condition with severe consequences, and that they will learn the result of this testing in the near future, they become more pessimistic in their predictions.

Thus, whether individuals lower their expectations about future desirable outcomes in order to avoid disappointment seems a function of (at least) two conditions: (a) whether an outcome with self-relevant consequences is anticipated and (b) the temporal proximity of self-relevant feedback. That is, people have an incentive to avoid disappointment by lowering their expectations about a future desirable but uncertain outcome when feedback on this outcome is self-relevant and anticipated, and when this feedback is close in time.

Summarizing the above, in the present article we hypothesize that people avoid disappointment by lowering their expectations concerning obtaining a desired outcome. Lowering initial expectations reduces the chance of experiencing disappointment. The lower expectations are, the smaller the chance that this expectation exceeds an obtained outcome and hence the smaller the chance of getting disappointed. Moreover, we hypothesize that people use this strategy when they will be confronted with self-relevant feedback and when this feedback is anticipated close in time. When people are *not* confronted with self-relevant feedback (i.e. with no feedback at all, or feedback that is irrelevant) there is no possibility of a discrepancy

between one's expectation and outcome and therefore no possibility of experiencing disappointment and no incentive to lower expectations. Furthermore, when feedback is still remote there is no direct threat of disappointment and no need to lower expectations. If there is no direct possibility of getting disappointed, people have no incentive to lower their expectations. In sum, we hypothesize that lowering expectations is *only* a motive for avoiding disappointment when self-relevant feedback about a desirable outcome is anticipated in the near future.

To test the above described hypothesis, we conducted an experiment in which psychology students took a test described as a strong predictor of future success in a career in Psychology (self-relevant) or in Law (self-irrelevant). Half of the participants were told that they would receive their test score at the end of the experimental session (immediate feedback); the other half were told that they would receive their result in about two weeks (delayed feedback). Participants estimated their test score at two points during the session: Time 1, immediately after completing the task; and Time 2, at the end of the session. Time 2 was for the participants in the immediate feedback condition just before they thought they would receive feedback on their test score. For the participants in the delayed feedback condition, Time 2 was still about two weeks before they received feedback on their test score. We expect that only the participants who receive self-relevant immediate feedback lower their estimates concerning their test score. More specifically, we predict that participants in the self-relevant/immediate feedback condition lower their estimates ratings from Time 1 to Time 2 to a greater extent than the participants in the other three conditions (self-relevant/delayed; self-irrelevant/immediate; self-irrelevant/delayed).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and design

Psychology students at the University of Amsterdam ($n = 80$) participated in this study. The study was part of a larger test session, which consisted of two unrelated studies. Participants were seated in separate cubicles. They were randomly assigned to one of two (self-relevant vs. self-irrelevant) \times 2 (immediate feedback vs. delayed feedback) conditions of the factorial design. Time of measurement was a within-subjects factor. There were 20 participants in each condition. One student was excluded because it appeared that this student studied Law instead of Psychology.

2.2. Procedure and measures

Participants were told that the whole session consisted of three unrelated studies. At the beginning of the session, participants were presented with a 'career questionnaire'. The two relevant questions on this questionnaire were: "How important do you find a career in Psychology?" and "How important do you find a career in Law?" Both questions could be answered by placing a mark on a 100 mm labeled at the left endpoint *not at all* and at the right endpoint *very much* line (resulting in

a score on a 100 point scale). These two questions were embedded in questions concerning the importance of a career in Chemistry, Physics, and Economics. In the following task, participants were presented with an 'intuitive intelligence test'. This test was not really an intuitive intelligence test, but rather a test especially created for this study and consisted of 50 items taken from several different IQ-tests. The participants were informed that: "This research is concerned with the evaluation of a new intelligence test, that is, the intuitive intelligence test. We are interested in how you evaluate this new test. First, we ask you to fill in a test and after this test you will receive a questionnaire intended to evaluate the test." The introduction of the questionnaire varied across conditions. Participants in the *self-relevant* conditions read the following introduction:

The test you did is an intuitive intelligence test. Intuitive intelligence is especially important for quick and accurate responses in a wide variety of situations. One could describe it as a kind of direct, immediate intelligence. Research has shown that this kind of intelligence is especially relevant for psychologists; they work with a lot of people and often have to respond quickly and accurately. Research has shown that there is a high correlation between the score on the intuitive intelligence test and success in a career in Psychology.

Participants in the *self-irrelevant* conditions read an identical instruction, but were told that the test was especially relevant for lawyers. Furthermore, participants in the *immediate feedback* conditions were told that they would receive their test score individually in a sealed envelope at the end of the test session. They were told that this would be after the third, unrelated study which would take about 30 min. Participants in the *delayed feedback* conditions were told that they would receive their score at the end of this research project, which would be in about two weeks. In order to manipulate this convincingly, these latter participants were asked to write their name and address on an envelope and told that their test score would be send to them by mail.

After the participants had completed the intuitive intelligence test, they were presented with a questionnaire in order to evaluate this new test. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions, including the dependent variable. First, participants were asked: "What percentage of answered questions do you think you answered correctly?" Participants could answer by marking a position on a 100 mm line, labeled 0% at the one endpoint and 100% at the other. The remaining 13 questions were bogus questions and requested information about the test. Examples of these questions are: "What do you think about the lay-out of the test?" and "To what extent did you enjoy the questions?" These questions could also be answered by marking a position on a 100 mm line appropriately labeled at each endpoint.

In order to obtain two "independent" estimates of the percentage of correct answers over time, the questionnaire was constructed in such a way that after participants read the first page (containing the instruction and the main dependent variable, i.e. percentage of correct answers) they were confronted with a page which consisted of questions concerning a 'group A' and a 'group B'. Thus, after participants gave their estimates concerning their test score, they were presented with questions they

could not answer. As we hoped for, participants typically warned the experimenter after discovering this ‘mistake’.² The experimenter told them that “something must have gone wrong while copying the questionnaires.” The experimenter further told the participants that a new questionnaire would be given. Because the questionnaires were somewhere else in the building, participants were asked to continue with the second (unrelated) study. They were given a questionnaire, which took about 30 min. After this task participants received the ‘evaluation’ questionnaire for the second time. This questionnaire contained the same 14 questions (the ‘wrong page’ was left out). The first question assessed (for the second time) participants’ estimates concerning their test score. All participants in the immediate conditions knew that after their first estimate it would take about 30 min (the time to complete the third, unrelated, task) before they received feedback on their score. After the second estimate they knew that they would receive feedback about their score right away. After finishing the questionnaire participants were probed for suspicion and fully debriefed.

3. Results

3.1. Career importance ratings

First, we investigated whether our participants found a career in Psychology more important than a career in Law. This was important, since our self-relevance manipulation was based on this assumption. Overall, participants found a career in Psychology significantly more important than a career in Law, $M(\text{Psychology}) = 65.6$, $M(\text{Law}) = 27.2$, $t(78) = 11.56$, $p < 0.001$. More importantly, to test whether in the two self-relevance conditions a career in Psychology was seen as important, and in both self-irrelevance conditions a career in Law was seen as unimportant, ratings of importance were tested against midpoint of the scale. Analyses revealed that in the self-relevance conditions importance ratings for a career in Psychology were significantly higher than midpoint of the scale, $M = 68.92$, $t(38) = 5.36$, $p < 0.001$. Whereas, in the self-irrelevant conditions importance ratings for a career in Law were significantly lower than midpoint of the scale, $M = 25.18$, $t(38) = 6.26$, $p < 0.001$.

3.2. Lowering expectations

In order to test our main predictions about the lowering of expectations, we analyzed the participants’ estimates concerning their test score on Time 1 and Time 2. The mean scores are depicted in Table 1. An analysis of covariance was performed using estimates at Time 2 as the dependent variable, relevance and feedback as the

² When a participant did not warn the experimenter him- or herself, the experimenter approached this participant, and told him or her that he heard from other participants that something was wrong with the questionnaire. This concerned only a small minority of the cases.

Table 1

Mean percentage of correct answers and standard deviations (between brackets) for each condition

Relevance	Feedback			
	Immediate		Delayed	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
Self-relevant	58.3 ^a (16.8)	51.5 ^b (15.3)	63.7 (18.3)	63.2 (16.3)
Self-irrelevant	58.1 (18.1)	56.3 (20.1)	61.0 (21.0)	60.6 (19.8)

Note: Entries are mean estimates of percentage of correct answers, scores could range from 0 to 100. Means per condition that have a different superscript, differ significantly, $p < 0.05$.

independent variables, and estimates at Time 1 as a covariate. Controlling for initial estimates, participants in the immediate feedback conditions provided lower estimates than participants in the delayed feedback conditions, $F(1, 78) = 4.10$, $p < 0.05$. No significant main effect was found for relevance condition, $F(1, 78) = 1.10$, ns. Also no significant interaction effect was found for feedback by relevance, $F(1, 78) = 1.42$, ns. In addition, the effect of the covariate, Time 1 estimates, was significant, $F(1, 78) = 177.71$, $p < 0.001$.

Recall that we predicted that participants in the immediate self-relevant feedback condition would lower their estimates from Time 1 to Time 2 to a greater extent than participants in the other conditions. We compared the differences between estimates at Time 1 and Time 2 for the participants in the self-relevant immediate feedback condition with the differences for the participants in the other conditions, using a contrast analysis in which the self-relevant immediate feedback condition was contrasted against the other three conditions. This contrast analysis revealed a significant effect, the difference between Time 1 and Time 2 was greater for participants in the self-relevant immediate feedback condition than for the participants in the other three conditions, $t(75) = 2.17$, $p < 0.05$. Furthermore, as can be seen by the scores in Table 1, participants in the immediate self-relevant feedback condition became less optimistic in their estimates over time, $t(19) = 2.45$, $p < 0.05$. Participants in the other conditions did not change their estimates, $ts < 1$, ns.

4. Discussion

In the present study we focussed on one specific strategy that people may employ in order to avoid future disappointments, namely lowering their expectation about concerning the attainment of a desired, uncertain outcome. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that people employ this strategy when two conditions are met. First, self-relevant feedback about the attainment of the outcome is anticipated and second this feedback is anticipated in the near future. Results support our hypothesis, and show that people only lowered their estimates concerning a test score when they expected immediate feedback on that test and when the test was relevant for them.

These results are in line with findings recently reported by Taylor and Shepperd (1998), who showed that although people are optimistic in their personal predictions, they brace themselves against negative feedback if they anticipate that their optimis-

tic outlook may be challenged. More specifically, these authors investigated the effects of event severity, testing, and feedback timing on personal predictions. Their results showed that when people believe that they are being tested for a medical condition with severe consequences, and that they will learn the result of this testing in the near future, they become more pessimistic in their predictions. They argue that this bracing process might be driven by general negative affect. That is, people may lower their expectations and make pessimistic predictions because they are worried that their expectations might exceed their outcomes. We suggest that people lower their expectations as a pre-emptive attempt to regulate the specific emotion disappointment. Some empirical evidence for this line of reasoning is provided by van Dijk (1999). In a survey in which spontaneous responses were obtained about which strategies people use in order to avoid disappointment, lowering expectations was by far the most frequently mentioned strategy. That is, people may anticipate the disappointment they would feel if their expectations exceed their (actual) performance. As a consequence they reduce their expectations to minimize the possibility of performing worse than expected, and to avoid any ensuing disappointment.

The strategy of lowering expectations about obtaining a desired outcome could be applied in a variety of self-relevant situations. People could lower their expectations concerning getting a positive response from a potential date, getting their article accepted in a prestigious journal or getting a favorable verdict in a court case. Because most decisions are based upon expectations that specific courses of action lead to specific consequences, any changes in expectations are likely to influence preferences for different courses of action. For example, when awaiting the verdict in a court case people could lower their expectations about winning the court case. This could result in a situation in which people are more willing to plea bargain instead of awaiting a (possible disappointing) verdict. Our results suggest that this behavior is most likely to occur when the outcome resolution is at hand. Another example would be individuals awaiting medical treatment. Coming closer to an operation could diminish patients' expectations about a positive outcome. This could in turn have an effect on patients' willingness to undergo surgery, or other disruptive treatments.

We want to acknowledge explicitly that lowering expectations is only one way of avoiding disappointment. People can also use other ways of preventing this emotion to occur. van Dijk (1999) another frequently mentioned strategy for avoiding disappointment was investing (extra) effort in obtaining a desired outcome. Tykocinski (2001) documented yet another strategy. She showed that people sometimes change the perceived probabilities of relevant events post-facto, so that the disappointing reality appears almost inevitable and the more positive alternatives seem highly unlikely thereby avoiding or at least mitigating the experience of disappointment.

We argue that these two strategies (the retrospective lowering of expectations versus extra investments of effort) differ in one important respect, namely in their appropriateness to specific situations or in the position they occupy within an action sequence. Investing (extra) effort is only useful when the effort increases the probability of obtaining a desired outcome and therefore decreases the probability of disappointment. Investing effort is therefore only appropriate when people are confronted with a situation in which something can be done about obtaining the

desired outcome. Examples are taking an exam or going for a job interview. In these situations investing extra effort in preparation can increase the probability of passing the exam or performing well in the job interview, and therefore decrease the probability of disappointment. Lowering expectations is most appropriate in situations when nothing can be done about the outcome or performance, but people have not (yet) been provided with feedback about an outcome or performance. Examples are the period after taking an exam or job interview, but before feedback is provided on the result of the exam or job interview. Lowering expectations decreases or eliminates the discrepancy between expectations and a possible negative outcome, and therefore decreases the probability of disappointment. Whereas changing the perceived probabilities of relevant events post-facto is most appropriate in situations when nothing can be done about the outcome or performance and when people have been provided with unfavorable feedback. Examples are failing an exam or not being hired for a job. Changing the perceived probabilities of relevant events post-facto reduces the discrepancy between expectations and the obtained outcome therefore decreases the experience of disappointment.

The present research does not yet provide insight into when people apply each of these possible strategies and how efficient they are. These are very relevant questions because research has shown that disappointment is a frequently and intense emotion. For example, Schimmack and Diener (1997) analyzed the frequency and intensity of emotions experienced in real-life events. Their results show that disappointment was the third most frequently experienced negative emotion (after anxiety and anger) and the first most intense negative emotion. Moreover, other research found that disappointment is one of the most frequently experienced emotions after failure on a task (Weiner, Russel, & Lerman, 1979).

Remains the question whether lowering expectations regarding the attainment of a desirable outcome could serve a useful function. Lowering expectations can be regarded as functional when it leads to taking disappointment into account as a possible outcome and therefore resulting in a less intense negative experience. As Stanley (cited in Shand, 1914, p. 488) stated: "There is many a slip between 'twixt the cup and the lip' this maxim disappointment teaches. We come therefore to expect failures and disappointments, and to feel them less keenly because we have expected them." However, when the anticipation of disappointment leads to excessive lowering of expectations, that is, when it leads to a complete loss of hope, confidence, or optimism it may be less functional. For example, when the threat of a possible disappointment leads to the adaptation of maladaptive coping styles to deal with this threat, for example, fatalism, hopelessness, avoidance, or learned helplessness (Rippetoe & Rogers, 1987; Seligman, 1975).

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