The Glass Is Both Half Full and Half Empty: the Strategic Use of Mixed Counterfactual Thoughts.

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How do people convince themselves to repeatedly engage in consumption activities that often result in negative outcomes, without apparent regard for these past experiences? The purpose of this research is to examine how mixed counterfactuals may contribute to our understanding of potentially dysfunctional consumer behaviors such as gambling. Using a simulated poker machine game, we demonstrate that frequent gamblers, unlike infrequent gamblers, generate mixed counterfactuals in response to their outcomes. This potentially dysfunctional use of counterfactual thoughts enables the frequent gambler to gloss over a loss and devalue a win leaving the glass half full and half empty.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14583/volumes/v36/NA-36

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why is it that after experiencing inevitable losses, heavy gamblers continue to spend money on gambling? Consumers often engage in a variety of consumption behaviors that are not necessarily in their best interest, apparently paying little attention to previous experiences that yielded questionable outcomes. The decision to gamble again, for example, should be influenced at least in part by one’s success on previous occasions. And evaluations of these experiences should, on average, discourage repeat behavior. The purpose of this research is to examine how mixed counterfactuals may contribute to our understanding of potentially dysfunctional consumer behaviors. More specifically, we investigate frequent gamblers dysfunctional use of mixed counterfactuals in order to justify a loss, and devalue a win.

Relevant Literature and Hypotheses

Counterfactual thinking is the process of imagining alternative outcomes that could have, but did not occur (Roese 1997). Theorists have categorized counterfactuals in terms of their directionality. Upward counterfactual thoughts (UCTs) involve the generation of better alternative outcome(s). Downward counterfactuals thoughts (DCTs) involve the generation of worse alternative outcome(s) to reality. UCTs increase negative affect with our actual outcome, via a comparison to the better imagined alternative. DCTs increase positive affect with our actual outcome, via a comparison to the worse imagined alternative. An important determinant of the directionality of counterfactual thoughts is outcome valence. Research shows that people are more likely to spontaneously generate UCTs following failure, and DCTs following success (Gleicher et al. 1995; Griev et al. 1999; Markman et al. 1993; Sanna, Chang, and Meier 2001). This can be explained in terms of the functional value of counterfactual thoughts.

Functional accounts assume that counterfactuals can beneficially serve people’s goal states and motivations (Roese 1994; Roese and Olson 1995). UCTs generally serve a preparatory function, and DCTs generally serve an affective function (McMullen 1997; Mc Mullen and Markman 2000; Roese and Hur 1997). Therefore, using UCTs following failure may be functional as the resulting negative affect helps one to learn from the past and avoid similar failures. On the other hand, generating DCTs following success may be functional as the resulting positive affect allows one to appreciate their success. Thus, we hypothesize that infrequent gamblers should show a significant difference in the direction of their counterfactual thoughts for a loss compared to a win (more UCTs for loss, more DCTs for win), further they should feel more disappointed with a loss relative to a win.

Whereas functional accounts are concerned with the beneficial role of counterfactual thinking in people’s understanding of events, the dysfunctional perspective implicates the potentially adverse use of counterfactuals (Sherman and McConnell 1995). We propose that mixed counterfactuals (both UCT and DCT) may be generated in response to an outcome to justify continuing an activity. Frequent gamblers may use DCTs dysfunctionally to discount a loss and gloss over any problems signaled by their UCTs. Frequent gamblers may use UCTs dysfunctionally to devalue a win and dismiss their appreciation for an outcome which could have been worse as was signaled by their DCTs. In effect, we hypothesize that mixed counterfactuals are strategically generated to counteract more spontaneous functional responses in order to justify replaying the game. Thus, we predict that frequent gamblers unlike infrequent gamblers, should generate mixed counterfactuals, and should not reveal any differences in their affective reaction to a loss relative to a win.

Method

One hundred and forty two gamblers played 300 games on a computer displaying a simulated poker machine game called Maid Marion. The design included one manipulated independent factor and one measured factor. The patterns of wins and losses in the games were pre-determined to manipulate the outcome of the experience (win, loss). A series of questions were asked to determine whether the participant was a frequent gambler. After the game ended, gamblers counterfactual thoughts and affective reactions were collected.

Results

We demonstrate that infrequent gamblers generated significantly more upward relative to downward counterfactuals for a loss, and more downward relative to upward counterfactuals for a win. Further, they were more disappointed (less pleased) with a loss, and more pleased (less disappointed) with a win. These results supported our predictions regarding a functional use of counterfactual thoughts which enable the infrequent gambler to learn from a loss and appreciate a win.

In contrast, we demonstrate that frequent gamblers generated mixed counterfactuals. Further, unlike infrequent gamblers, they did not reveal any significant differences in their disappointment with a loss relative to a win. These results supported our predictions regarding a potentially dysfunctional use of counterfactual thoughts which enable the frequent gambler to gloss over a loss and devalue a win, in order to justify replaying. Interestingly, our results suggest that mixed counterfactuals may have been generated sequentially, as evidenced by the additive/subtractive changes in frequent gamblers affective response. Further, our results suggest that frequent gamblers dysfunctional response may be mediated via their negative affect rather than their positive affect.

Discussion

This paper examined the potentially dysfunctional use of mixed counterfactuals in the context of gamblers evaluations of poker machine outcomes. Evidence of mixed counterfactuals and their dysfunctional influence on affect was demonstrated for frequent gamblers. In this paper, ‘mixedness’ was defined in terms of the direction of counterfactual thoughts; generating both UCT and DCT in response to an outcome. Interestingly, our results support the idea that mixedness stems from the direction of counterfactuals bearing an additive/subtractive influence on affect, rather than from dual modes of affective processing. However, future research should examine and compare the multiplicity of forms through which duality, or mixed counterfactuals may manifest.

Further, in this research we were not able to directly measure the sequential nature of dysfunctional counterfactuals, rather this was inferred from the pattern of affective response. However, this effect and other mixed counterfactual process mechanisms should
be empirically tested. While the context of investigation in this paper is limited to gambling, our findings provide a platform for research into the effects of mixed counterfactuals and their potentially dysfunctional effects. We conclude by acknowledging the possibility that in other situations, mixed counterfactuals may serve a functional purpose, this remains to be examined.

REFERENCES


