

Baron, J.

The Effect of Normative Beliefs on Anticipated Emotions

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In 3 experiments, Ss were asked how they would or should make hypothetical decisions and how they would react emotionally to the options or outcomes. The choices were those in which departures from proposed normative models had previously been found: omission bias, status quo bias, and the person-caution effect. These effects were found in all judgments, including judgments of anticipated emotion. Arguments against the departures affected judgments of anticipated emotion as well as decisions, even though the arguments were entirely directed at the question of what should be done. In all but one study, effects of these arguments on anticipated emotion were as strong as their effects on decisions or normative beliefs. Thus, in many situations, people think that their emotional reactions will fall into line with their normative beliefs. In other situations, some people think that their emotional reactions have a life of their own. It is suggested that both normative beliefs and anticipated emotions affect decisions.

Experiment 1

Experiment 2

Experiment 3

Discussion

Normative arguments affected anticipated emotions essentially as strongly as they affected normative beliefs or hypothetical decisions, except for the prisoner scenario in Experiment 1. In many subjects whose beliefs or decisions agreed with the normative argument initially, arguments affected anticipated emotions, bringing emotions into accord with beliefs or decisions. In other subjects, the arguments affected beliefs or decisions without affecting emotion.

Normative beliefs could affect anticipated emotions and decisions in three ways. First, subjects could believe that normative beliefs determine emotions. The change in anticipated emotion, in turn, could allow subjects to change their decisions. In this case, anticipated emotions are a determinant of decisions. The ancillary experiment following Experiment 1 suggests that some subjects do believe that decisions are affected by anticipated emotions, thereby supporting this mechanism (but not impugning the others). Second, a change in normative beliefs could affect the decision, and subjects could then believe that they could bring their own emotions into line with their decision. (See Ainslie, 1992, for a discussion of the control of emotions.) Third, the normative beliefs could have independent effects on decisions and beliefs about future emotions. None of these possibilities can be ruled out. At first blush it might seem that a correlation between emotion change and decision change would rule out the third account, but it is possible that the correlation is induced by differential effectiveness of the argument in changing normative beliefs. Further investigation is needed.

In most of the situations studied here, people seem to assume that their emotions will be

justified and reasonable, so that they can do what they believe to be right without interference from their emotions. In the prisoner scenario, however, some people think that their anticipated emotions are unaffected when normative beliefs change. In situations like this, a change in normative belief will not necessarily lead to behavior change, and it could lead to conflict between belief and emotion. This "emotional inertia" could complicate efforts to change decision making through purely cognitive means, such as cognitive therapy (Clark, 1986), debiasing (Larrick et al., 1990), or education (Baron & Brown, 1991).

Our results point to two different beliefs about the relations between emotion and normative judgment. By one belief, emotions fall into line (or can be brought into line) with rational judgment. The other belief, a sort of Freudian theory, holds that emotion is not affected by rational argument. When people hold this theory about their own emotions, they may resist rational appeals concerning their decisions, for – even if they are intellectually persuaded – they will be held back by the belief that their emotions will not follow along. Even if they are convinced that radon is more dangerous than pesticides, they will not favor a change in governmental priorities away from pesticides and toward radon because of the fear that they will worry more if the change is made.

No evidence, however, indicated that this sort of belief in the nonmalleability of emotion causes resistance to the intellectual argument itself. If people believe that emotions and normative beliefs should be consistent and that emotions would not change, such resistance might be expected. The role of folk-psychological theories in belief change is another topic for further investigation (see Baron, 1991).

The danger of holding the view that emotions will coincide with normative beliefs is that the Freudian view could be correct. A young man or woman could be convinced that premarital sex is not immoral and then engage in it, thinking that no guilt feelings will follow, but then experience the guilt feelings anyway.

Does this sort of thing happen? It's hard to tell. In the real world, belief change itself is rarely complete and stable. I am impressed, however, with the findings of cognitive therapists such as Salkovskis, Clark, and Hackman (1991), who found that panic attacks can be controlled by pure change in belief about their origin. Patients who believe that incipient attacks represent an immediate medical crisis, when convinced otherwise, cease having full-blown attacks. The fear that leads to the full-blown attack is, in this case, controlled by a belief that the fear is unjustified.