

# Affective Forecasting and Individual Differences: Accuracy for Relational Events and Anxious Attachment

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We examined whether accuracy of affective forecasting for significant life events was moderated by a theoretically relevant individual difference (anxious attachment), with different expected relations to predicted and actual happiness. In 3 studies (2 cross-sectional, 1 longitudinal), participants predicted what their happiness would be after entering or ending a romantic relationship. Consistent with previous research, people were generally inaccurate forecasters. However, inaccuracy for entering a relationship was significantly moderated by anxious attachment. Predictions were largely unrelated to anxious attachment, but actual happiness was negatively related to attachment anxiety. Moderation for breaking up showed a similar but less consistent pattern. These results suggest a failure to account for one's degree of anxious attachment when making affective forecasts and show how affective forecasting accuracy in important life domains may be moderated by a focally relevant individual difference, with systematically different associations between predicted and actual happiness.

affective forecasting, happiness, emotion, individual differences, attachment style

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Thinking about the future can be both crippling and energizing. One may think, for example, that finding that special romantic partner will provide ultimate bliss and eternal happiness. Conversely, the prospect of losing a mate's love may beget expectations of utter and prolonged despair.

Predicted emotional reactions to possible life events are known as

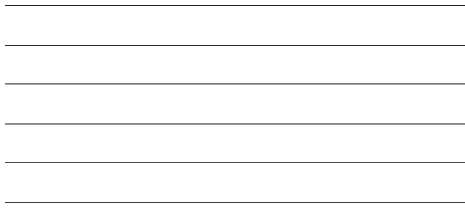
(Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Although most people relate to the accuracy of affective forecasting, the pattern of accuracy for entering a relationship is moderated by anxious attachment (BlonW021W021(W021W021diffe483ve style





ship and breaking up, and, crucially for present purposes, examined moderation by anxious attachment.

## **Method**



(1998) that used a 6-month timeframe to compare loners' (singles) predicted happiness to the actual happiness of young lovers, presumably due to the shorter timeframe.

**Moderation by anxious attachment for entering a relationship.** As shown in Figure 1, within the subsample that began a new relationship, there was the same pattern as in Studies 1 and 2. Not surprisingly given the small sample size the regression of forecasting inaccuracy scores (i.e., predicted minus actual happiness difference score) on attachment anxiety did not approach significance using a two-tailed test; however, anxious attachment did have a significant negative simple effect for actual happiness, and the simple effect for predicted happiness was not significant.

**Longitudinal replication test for breakup.** Replicating Gilbert et al. (1998) and our Studies 1 and 2, but for the first time in a longitudinal context, we found that people were happier after the

breakup of a relationship than they expected to be, paired  $t(60) = 10.44, p < .001$ .

**Moderation by anxious attachment for breakup.** As shown in Figure 2 and as in the previous studies, the interaction with breakup was again relatively weak and nonsignificant.

## General Discussion

Meta-analytically combining the two surveys and the longitudinal study,<sup>2</sup> we found that accuracy of affective forecasts for two highly important life events—entering and ending a relationship—was significantly moderated by an important relationship-relevant

<sup>2</sup> Comprehensive meta-analysis program (Borenstein, Hedges, & Rothstein, 2007).

individual difference—attachment anxiety. (For entering a relationship, young lover vs. loner interaction  $\beta = .31$ , old lover vs. loner  $\beta = .29$ ,  $s < .001$ ; for breakup,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $s < .05$ , and  $\beta = .19$ ,  $s < .001$ , respectively.) In each case, the effect followed the same pattern: negative associations between attachment anxiety and actual happiness following the event (for entering,  $\beta = -.42$  and  $\beta = -.41$ ,  $s < .001$ , respectively; for breakup,  $\beta = -.24$ ,  $s < .05$ , and  $\beta = -.42$ ,  $s < .001$ , respectively), but near-zero associations for predictions (for entering,  $\beta = -.04$ , 95% CI  $[-.13, .04]$ ; for breakup,  $\beta = .02$ , 95% CI  $[-.09, .12]$ ). This key near-zero association for predictions might seem an ambiguous null finding, especially given our reliance on single-item measures, following Gilbert et al. (1998). However, contrary to this interpretation, the single-item measure was sufficient to yield a clear interaction, had very small confidence intervals, and was sufficient to yield considerable overall mean differences between actual and predicted happiness for breakup.

These studies showed for the first time that forecasting accuracy (or as it is sometimes referred to in the literature) differs systematically as a function of a focally relevant individual difference. Moreover, the theoretically expected distinct effects of this individual difference on predictions and outcomes were systematically shown.

In addition, comparison of Figures 1 and 2 reveals an important difference in the role of attachment anxiety for entering and ending relationships. Those low in anxious attachment were fairly accurate when it came to entering a relationship, but accurate for breaking up. Low anxious attachment is traditionally (and justifiably) considered ideal. But these findings tentatively suggest one shortcoming: Less anxious people may be prone to immune neglect and thus systematically underestimate their ability to cope with romantic breakups. Future research might directly test the mechanism behind these findings. Persons high in anxious attachment, in contrast, seem to exhibit something akin to depressive realism (Alloy & Abramson, 1979).

Our findings also bear importantly on general issues pertaining to affective forecasts. Our studies largely replicate Gilbert et al. (1998) regarding systematic inaccuracies in affective forecasts for relationship events, and do so for the first time in a more representative sample, using a longitudinal design and for different lengths of time. Meta-analytically, both young and old lovers were inaccurate at predicting their emotions about entering a new relationship (using the Stouffer test, overall  $z = -3.82$  for young leftover contrast;  $z = -4.70$  for old lover contrast,  $s < .001$ ). Although these results are inconsistent with those in smaller samples, using a large sample, they are consistent with the affective forecasting research suggesting that people are generally inaccurate forecasters. Consistent with previous research, people were inaccurate overall in their breakup predictions (overall  $z = -8.83$ , young leftover contrast;  $z = -8.48$ , old leftover contrast,  $s < .001$ ).

Of course, there are limitations to this work: The present findings will benefit from replication; our assessment of the focal individual difference (and of happiness) was entirely self-report; the methods (even if partially longitudinal) are essentially correlational; and generalizability is limited to the Western, individualistic cultural context of our samples. Future research might also explicitly test whether anxious attachment might moderate nonrelational events. In addition, future affective forecasting research

should measure varied aspects of emotion. Perhaps both highly anxious individuals and less anxious individuals might make better predictions if asked to be mindful about their full repertoire of emotional responses.

Nevertheless, these studies advance knowledge of affective forecasting in several ways: They demonstrate the basic effect for the first time in a broad, longitudinal sample. They also showed for the first time that (a) a relevant individual difference can moderate affective forecasts, (b) an individual difference can moderate these forecasts by having systematically different effects on predictions and outcomes, and (c) attachment anxiety appears to undermine prediction accuracy for entering a relationship but to enhance it for breakups.

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