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When idols look into the future: Fair treatment modulates the affective forecasting error in talent show candidates

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People's affective forecasts are often inaccurate because they tend to overestimate how they will feel after an event. As life decisions are often based on affective forecasts, it is crucial to find ways to manage forecasting errors. We examined the impact of a fair treatment on forecasting errors in candidates in a Belgian reality TV talent show. We found that perceptions of fair treatment increased the forecasting error for losers (a negative audition decision) but decreased it for winners (a positive audition decision). For winners, this effect was even more pronounced when candidates were highly invested in their self-view as a future pop idol whereas for losers, the effect was more pronounced when importance was low. The results in this study point to a potential paradox between maximizing happiness and decreasing forecasting errors. A fair treatment increased the forecasting error for losers, but actually made them happier.

Well, Paula… I'm speechless, I don't know what to say… And well…that's not a great thing.
(Paula Abdul)

What was that?! That was terrible! (Randy Jackson)

I don't think any artist on earth could sing with that much metal in their mouth anyway… it's like a bridge. (Simon Cowell)

In January 2006, Paula Goodspeed participated in an audition of the TV show *American Idol*. As reflected in their harsh comments, the judges were not impressed and sent her home empty-handed. Two years later, the young woman was found dead in her car outside the home of Paula Abdul, one of the judges in *American Idol*. When investigating the case, the spotlight fell on her audition 2 years earlier. After the footage was aired, Goodspeed wrote on her blog that she was finding it difficult to cope with the 'haters' who mocked her. Goodspeed's family said she was confident and had high hopes when entering the competition, but was heartbroken at such a brutal rejection. This incident started the discussion regarding media's responsibility in talent show formats, where aspiring candidates are confronted with harsh comments.

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Affective forecasting

The Goodspeed case illustrates how affective reactions to life events may be influenced by expectations and characteristics of the situation. In the past decade, a substantial body of research has dealt with the question of *how* and *how well* people predict their affective reactions to future events. Research has shown that people are not good at predicting their emotions correctly (for reviews, see Gilbert, Driver-Linn, & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). People expect to feel worse after negative events and better after positive events than they actually end up feeling (e.g., Gilbert, Morewedge, Risen, & Wilson, 2004). For instance, Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, and Wheatley (1998) demonstrated this tendency in six experimental studies in which participants overestimated the duration of their affective reactions across a wide range of life events (i.e., the dissolution of a romantic relationship, the failure of achieving tenure, an electoral defeat, negative personality feedback, an account of a child's death, and rejection by a prospective employer). All six studies confirmed the basic forecasting error and showed an overestimation of emotions after different events. In Study 2 for example, assistant professors were asked to predict how happy they would feel after achieving tenure, and how unhappy they would feel after failing to achieve tenure. Results showed that 'positive experiencers' (assistant professors who achieved tenure) were not as happy as forecasters believed they would be. In addition, recent 'negative experiencers' (assistant professors who failed to achieve tenure) were happier than forecasters estimated they would be. This forecasting error may be a detrimental factor in people's daily lives because it may prompt individuals to pursue the wrong goals (Greitemeyer, 2009), or make the wrong decisions about important life choices (Buehler & McFarland, 2001). If one is convinced that the only way to be truly happy is quitting one's job and moving to the South of France, the eventual outcome may actually be rather disappointing and have far-reaching unforeseen personal implications.

Because of the importance of accurate forecasts, it is crucial to gain insight into the different situations that lead the forecasting error to increase or decrease, and ultimately find ways to manage this error. As Wilson and Gilbert (2005) stated: *Finding ways to increase the accuracy of affective forecasts is a worthy enterprise – though not, we suspect, a particularly easy one* (p. 134). To date, the studies that have answered this call have mostly focused on individual differences (e.g., mood orientation, Buehler, McFarland, Spyropoulos, & Lam, 2007; Big Five personality variables, Hoerger & Quirk, 2010; anxious attachment, Tomlinson, Carmichael, Reis, & Aron, 2010) and to a lesser extent on situational aspects that influence the affective forecasting error (e.g., self-presentation, Dunn, Biesanz, Human, & Finn, 2007; temporal location, Gilbert, Gill, & Wilson, 2002; effect of learning, Wilson, Meyers, & Gilbert, 2001).

Although profiling the *type of individuals* that typically make more or less forecasting errors clearly is important, such knowledge offers few opportunities to actively manage this error by external parties. To find ways to influence the forecasting error, it is crucial to more systematically identify *situational conditions* under which the error increases or decreases. Such knowledge may enable policy makers to actively alter situational characteristics of important life events (e.g., important career moves, election decisions) to minimize forecasting errors. Although a few studies have investigated situational aspects that may influence the forecasting error, to our knowledge only one study has looked at fairness aspects of the event itself. In the sixth study of their paper ('Failure, Inc.'), Gilbert *et al.* (1998) used a student sample to examine individuals' reactions to being rejected or selected by a prospective employer. In this laboratory study, some participants believed that the hiring decision would be

made by a single individual on the basis of little relevant information (unfair decision), and others believed that the decision would be made by a group of individuals on the basis of ample relevant information (fair decision). Participants estimated how they would feel after being told that they had and had not been chosen for the job. After this, all participants were told that they had not been chosen, and they reported their feelings. The authors found that the group of participants in the 'unfair procedure' condition predicted to feel equally bad as the group of participants in the 'fair procedure' condition. However, contrary to their predictions, participants who were rejected based on an unfair procedure reported feeling happier than expected, and were happier than participants who were rejected based on a fair procedure. Presumably, an unfair basis of the decision gave people a handy excuse for the unfavourable outcome, whereas the fair process forced people to consider that they were more deserving of the unfavourable outcome. Apparently, participants did not realize how the basis of the decision would influence their affective reaction to it, but contrary to their anticipation, in this type of hiring decisions the fairness of the event seems to play a role in how accurate affective forecasts are.

In this study, we build on these insights and extend affective forecasting research by examining how individuals *actually* experienced the fairness of the event. Building on Gilbert *et al.* (1998), it can be expected that when anticipating the decision and construing their future affective states, individuals have trouble in taking the fairness of the decision into account. However, it is unclear what happens to their subsequent actual affective reaction when they unexpectedly experience a fair versus unfair treatment. Thus, in a natural field setting we first test how the experience of a fair or unfair treatment influences individuals' actual happiness (and hence leads to larger or smaller forecasting errors). Next, to further increase our understanding of the role of experienced fairness in affective forecasts, we also examined an additional moderator, namely the investment participants have in the life domain being evaluated. It is our expectation that fairness should play a stronger role when the participants are highly invested in the self-views that come into play.

To examine potential modulating effects on the forecasting error, it is necessary to first replicate the forecasting error in its basic form in this new field setting, namely during auditions for the TV talent show *Idool* (Belgian version of *American Idol*). For reasons of brevity, we will refer to candidates that are rejected during the first round of *Idols* auditions as 'losers' and those that may proceed to the next round of auditions as 'winners'. It should be noted that the new and unique setting of this study implies a particular robust and ecologically valid test of the forecasting error. Forecasting researchers have often chosen to examine anticipated emotions only (e.g., Sevdalis & Harvey, 2009), have focused on negative *or* positive events rather than both (e.g., Gilbert *et al.*, 1998; Keller & Bless, 2009) or relied upon a between-group design. In these studies, different samples of participants, often students, are asked to rate either their anticipated or experienced reactions to an event, often in laboratory settings (e.g., Fernandez-Duque & Landers, 2008). In this field study, however, we investigated both anticipated and actual emotional reactions to a high-stakes career decision over time in the same group of candidates. In line with previous forecasting error research, we expect the following:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Winners will overestimate how good they will feel (H1a) and losers will overestimate how bad they will feel (H1b).

Fair treatment

A rich body of social psychological research suggests that reactions to negative events may be caused by the threat this poses to people's assumptions about the controllability, and fairness of their worlds. Probably one of the earliest and best known renditions of this psychological principle is Lerner's (1980) articulation of his 'just-world' theory (for more recent variants of this theory, see for instance Callan, Dawtry, & Olson, 2012; Callan, Ellard, & Nicol, 2006; Otto, Glaser, & Dalbert, 2009). These theoretical perspectives predict that people have a deep-seated psychological need to believe that the world is a fair place, in which individuals get what they deserve (Sutton & Winnard, 2007). As a result, people form separate representations of 'the world of the victim' where unjust things happen to others, versus the 'world of the self' in which justice prevails (see also Hafer, 2002). Hence, when thinking about what will or may happen in one's own future, individuals are generally convinced that they will be treated fairly and that they will receive the outcomes they deserve, leading them to construe their own mental life in function of this.

However, one of the implications of this line of research that remains underexplored but is central to affective forecasting theory, is that the representations people make of future events are often wrong, and that an actual event may be different and less fair from what was previously anticipated. Research indeed suggests that when people think about an event, they often fail to consider the possibility that their particular, momentary conceptualization of the event is only one of many ways in which they might have conceptualized it and that the event they are imagining may thus be quite different from the event that actually comes to pass (e.g., Gilbert *et al.*, 1998; Griffin, Dunning, & Ross, 1990; Griffin & Ross, 1991). This phenomenon, termed 'misconstrual', was proposed as one of the primary causes of why people are so unsuccessful in making accurate predictions about their future emotions (e.g., Gilbert *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, misconstruing an event and the forecasting inaccuracy that follows from it is most likely to occur when the event has never been experienced before (Gilbert *et al.*, 1998). Hence, when forecasters misconstrue an event they typically conceive it as more impactful on their emotions than it actually turns out to be, leading them to overestimate their affective responses (e.g., Gilbert *et al.*, 1998).

In the current setting, the typical construal for candidates will involve the expectation that they will be treated fairly. Individuals typically have inflated positive self-views (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). In the case of *Idols* candidates, we believe that the positivity of their self-concept as singers will be even more elevated given their interest in participating in a talent show. Given their positive self-views in this life domain, an expected fair treatment should result in the recognition of their talent. Thus, the default anticipation will be to be chosen as one of the 'winners' in the first round on the basis of fair procedures. Thus, when candidates are required to anticipate a positive decision (i.e., they stay in the competition), they will consider fair treatment as the default reason for their future success in the competition. After all, they see themselves as potential future idols. This anticipation of a bright future is expected to lead them to predicted high levels of future happiness.

However, when the actual audition takes place, candidates may experience lower fairness than imagined, leading to less positive emotions than predicted, thus a greater discrepancy between the predicted and actual happiness (i.e., a larger forecasting error). Conversely, when candidates feel that they are treated fairly during the audition, this will lead to an increase in positive feelings for winners, attaining a level closer than what was initially anticipated (i.e., a smaller forecasting error). Thus, the forecasting inaccuracy for winners will *decrease* due to fair treatment.

Table 1. Example of change in affective forecasting error due to treatment and importance

	Winners	Losers
Affective forecasting error (AFE)	*Hypothesis 1a* Prediction of happiness: +4 Actual happiness: +2 → Absolute value AFE = 2	*Hypothesis 1a* Prediction of happiness: −4 Actual happiness: −2 → Absolute value AFE = 2
Fair treatment	*Hypothesis 2a* Actual happiness: +3 → Absolute value AFE = 1 (↓ AFE)	*Hypothesis 2b* Actual happiness: 0 → Absolute value AFE = 4 (↑ AFE)
High importance	Actual happiness: +4 → Absolute value AFE = 0 (↓↓ AFE)	Actual happiness: −1 → Absolute value AFE = 5 (↑↑ AFE)
Low importance	Actual happiness: +2 → Absolute value AFE = 2 (= AFE)	Actual happiness: 2 → Absolute value AFE = 2 (↑ AFE)

When candidates have to consider the possibility of failure (i.e., a negative decision), they will construe the anticipated event as one wherein they are treated unfairly. They started off with anticipating recognition of their talent but the prospect of a harsh rejection will lead them to attribute this to faulty procedures. Thus, given their positive self-concept as a singer, unfair treatment is the most likely reason for their failure. However, when the event takes place, and candidates feel they are treated fairly during the audition, even when they lose, this will lead to unanticipated positive feelings regarding the event and a greater discrepancy between the predicted and actual happiness (i.e., a larger forecasting error). Conversely, when losers have the feeling that they are treated unfairly during the audition, this will lead to the expected negative feelings, attaining a level closer than what was initially anticipated (i.e., a smaller forecasting error). Thus, the forecasting inaccuracy for losers will *increase* due to fair treatment. An example of how fair treatment and importance may influence actual happiness (and hence, the forecasting error) is provided in Table 1. In sum, we expect that:

> *Hypothesis 2*: Fair treatment will lead to the experience of an affect score closer to the forecasted affect score for winners (H2a) and further from the forecasted affect score for losers (H2b).

Importance of self-view

Recently, researchers have proposed that fairness concerns become particularly salient when central aspects of the self are under threat (e.g., De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). In their self-activation model of social justice, van den Bos, Miedema, Vermunt, and Zwenk (2011) propose that situations that posit a potential threat for the self are most likely to direct attention to fairness issues. For instance, Johnson, Selenta, and Lord (2006) found that when people's relational self-concepts were triggered, they placed more emphasis on the interpersonal treatment, and were more sensitive to (un)fair events. On the basis of these theoretical perspectives, we expect that the effects of treatment on the affective forecasting error will be more pronounced as candidates are more heavily invested in their self-view as a singer. In line with previous research in the self-concept literature, we conceptualize a high level of self-investment as the importance individuals attach to their focal self-view. Self-views that are strongly linked to individuals' goals and values, those that they identify as more personally important, are self-views that strongly influence candidates' global sense of self-worth. More than a century ago, James (1890) already

suggested that abilities on which people have 'staked their salvation' should contribute significantly to self-esteem, whereas those to which people are less committed should have little impact on their self-worth. Indeed, individuals have been found to seek most feedback on those self-views they are most invested in (Anseel & Lievens, 2007). Given the centrality of highly invested self-views for the candidates' general self-worth, talent show auditions should create a particular sensitive study context for effects of treatment as candidates anticipate an evaluation of the focal self-view as a future artist. In this setting, a high self-investment in their artistic self-view should therefore lead to an increased focus on threats to the self when anticipating the competition, and thus a higher attention to fairness issues.

Hence, we expect that the importance candidates place on succeeding in this audition will influence the relation between fair treatment and the affective forecasting error. More specifically, for winners we expect that when they are treated fairly, they will feel even closer to the happiness level they predicted, when they attach greater importance to succeeding in the audition. For these candidates, succeeding is very important making them more sensitive to just treatment and justice breaches. Experiencing a fair treatment and their heightened attention for it should make the 'winning' situation even more similar to their construal, and hence lead to a smaller forecasting error. On the other hand, candidates who find succeeding less important, will be relatively less sensitive to fairness issues. Hence, although these candidates will also feel better due to fair treatment, this increase in positive feelings will not be as high, leading to a smaller decrease in the forecasting inaccuracy. Thus, for winners we expect the actual happiness score to be closer to what was expected (i.e., a smaller forecasting error) due to fair treatment, and this effect will be more pronounced when importance is high.

For losers, we expect that when they are treated fairly, they will feel less negative than expected, and this will be even more so when they attach greater importance to succeeding in the audition. These 'high importance' individuals will be especially sensitive to just treatment or justice breaches, and hence will react more favourably when treated fairly than individuals who attach low importance to succeeding. Thus, when losers who attach great importance to succeeding are treated fairly, they will feel happier (or less unhappy) than predicted, leading to a greater forecasting error. Candidates who find succeeding less important will not be as sensitive to unfair treatment. Thus, although these candidates will also feel better due to fair treatment, this rise in positive feelings will not be as high, leading to a smaller increase in the forecasting inaccuracy. Hence, for losers we expect the actual happiness score to be further from what was expected (i.e., a larger forecasting error), and this effect will be greater when importance is high.

Hence, in this study we expected candidates' self-reported importance of their self-view to moderate the relation between fair treatment and the forecasting inaccuracy. More specifically, we propose the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 3a*:   For winners, fair treatment will lead to the experience of an affect score closer to the forecasted affect score, and this effect will be more pronounced when importance is high than when importance is low.

> *Hypothesis 3b*:   For losers, fair treatment will lead to the experience of an affect score further from the forecasted affect score, and this effect will be more pronounced when importance is high than when importance is low.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were candidates in the reality television show *Idool* (Belgian version of the renowned singing contest format *American Idol*). This talent show was first aired as *Pop Idol* on British television in 2001. The format has turned into a true global phenomenon, airing over 135 series (e.g., *American Idol, Arab Idol, Australian Idol, Idool*) across more than 40 territories, proving a track record of guaranteed success in every country where it has been aired. In this study, in total 383 candidates participated (40.2% men, 59.8% women; mean age = 20.5, *SD* = 3.2). Self-report data were collected on two points in time (T1 = distributed 1 week before the auditions; T2 = in between 2–6 days after the auditions).[1]

Measures

Affective forecasting (T1, T2)

On T1, participants were informed that they would receive a follow-up questionnaire 2 days after the audition. Participants were asked to predict how (un)happy they would feel at that time if they received a positive decision and if they received a negative decision on a scale from −4 (*very unhappy*) to +4 (*very happy*). Two days after the audition (T2), participants received the follow-up questionnaire and were asked to indicate how happy they felt that time using the same response scale.

Importance (T1)

Importance was measured with three items that assessed the importance the candidates placed on their self-views as a singer and on succeeding in the audition. The three items are: *It is important to me as a person to perform well on this audition*, *I will do my best during the audition* and *I will try as hard as I can to perform as best as I can during this audition*. Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*; α = .87).

Treatment (T2)

Treatment was assessed with four items targeting participants' perceptions of the fairness of treatment (Bauer *et al.*, 2001). Items were: *The judges treated the candidates with respect during the audition*, *I was satisfied with my treatment during the audition*, *The judges were considerate during the audition*, and *I was treated politely and fairly during the audition*. Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*; α = .81).

Results

Perception checks

To examine whether participants' perceptions of treatment reflected the actual fairness of the treatment as coded by two objective, independent raters, we conducted perception

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[1] *The measures reported in this study were part of a larger data collection effort focusing on a diverse set of motivational and attitudinal variables, both qualitative and quantitative, measured at different points in time. These additional data and results from additional analyses can be obtained from the authors upon request.*

checks for this variable. Raters used a rating scale from 1 (*Disrespectful treatment*) to 3 (*Respectful treatment*) to code the unedited video material of the auditions for how the judges actually treated the candidate during their audition. Both raters rated all of the available footage. Coding rules were as follows: *Code this audition as 1 if the judges express their comments to the candidate in a disrespectful and humiliating manner*, *Code this audition as 2 if the judges express their comments to the candidate in a neutral manner* and *Code this audition as 3 if the judges express their comments to the candidate in a respectful and considerate manner*. More detailed coding rules and examples for each of the three possible responses (i.e., 1, 2, 3) were provided for the raters. Inter-rater agreement for this variable was .73. Furthermore, the correlation between the perception of treatment and the actual treatment was .47 ($p = .00$). These results show that candidates' perceptions corresponded with the assessment of the situation by two raters and thus their fairness perceptions were in line with how they were treated by the judges in reality.

Hypotheses 1a and 1b

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the total group and for winners and losers separately are presented in Table 2. Note that this table also provides information on the eventuality that did not occur, namely winners' predictions of losing and losers' predictions of winning. First, as can be seen in Table 3 and Figure 1, a paired sample *t*-test revealed that winners were significantly unhappier than they had expected to be, $t = 3.61, p = .00$ and that losers were significantly happier than they had expected to be, $t = -12.09, p = .00$. Thus, Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported, replicating the basic forecasting error.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b

To create an index of forecasting (in)accuracy, we first calculated the absolute value of the difference between each candidate's affective forecast and experience ($|$ Predicted happiness T1 – Actual happiness T2 $|$). As the outcomes are absolute values, higher values indicate a higher degree of inaccuracy between predicted and actual happiness. This measure was used because we were primarily interested in the size rather than the direction of errors in affective forecasts, an approach that is in line with previous research into moderators of the affective forecasting error (e.g., Dunn, Brackett, Ashton-James, Schneiderman, & Salovey, 2007). More detailed results without absolute difference scores are available from the authors.

Next, to test Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses to see whether treatment influenced the degree of inaccuracy. As predicted, treatment had a significant decreasing effect for winners, $\Delta R^2 = .16$, $F(1, 69) = 12.99$, $p = .00$; $\beta = -0.55$, $p = .00$, and a significant increasing effect on the degree of inaccuracy for losers, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(1, 175) = 8.06$, $p = .01$; $\beta = 0.31$, $p = .01$.[2] Hence, Hypotheses 2a and 2b are supported.

To further determine if the pattern of the interaction for losers was consistent with our hypotheses, we plotted the interaction in Figure 2. Standardized coefficients of the simple

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[2] *Note that including gender, age, and emotional stability as control variables in these and the following regression analyses had no impact on the findings.*

Table 2. Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and intercorrelations among demographic, control, independent, and dependent variables

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Group	—	—	—					
2. Importance T1	4.79 (4.74/4.80)	0.59 (0.75/0.54)	−0.04	(0.87)				
3. Prediction positive event[a] T1	3.75 (3.62/3.78)	0.65 (0.91/0.56)	−0.10	0.43** (0.50**/0.39**)	—			
4. Prediction negative event[b] T1	−1.77 (−1.78/−1.77)	1.51 (1.48/1.52)	−0.00	−0.11* (−0.19/−0.08)	−0.21** (−0.15/−0.24**)	—		
5. Treatment T2	3.03 (4.11/2.59)	1.33 (0.92/1.22)	0.52**	−0.12 (−0.03/−0.15*)	−0.10 (−0.12/−0.02)	0.15* (0.17/0.16*)	(0.81)	
6. Actual happiness T2	1.01 (2.99/0.19)	2.32 (1.29/2.15)	0.55**	−0.13* (−0.06/−0.15*)	−0.07 (0.20/−0.08)	0.19** (−0.05/0.30**)	0.50** (0.47**/0.27**)	—
7. Forecasting error T1–T2	1.93 (0.90/2.34)	1.81 (1.29/1.83)	−0.36**	−0.12 (−0.23/−0.13)	0.06 (−0.21/0.13)	−0.19** (0.01/−0.25**)	−0.10 (−0.40**/0.21**)	0.18** (−0.72**/0.69**)

Note. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of winners and losers are reported below those of the total group between parentheses (winners/losers). [a]This variable refers to the one-item measure: *How happy will you feel if you receive a positive decision?*. [b]This variable refers to the one-item measure: *How unhappy will you feel if you receive a negative decision?*. These variables are mentioned separately, as they are two different constructs measured in a different way. Internal consistency reliabilities are reported in parentheses on the diagonal. *p < .05; **p < .01.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations on affective forecasts and actual happiness of participants (H1a and H1b)

Happiness	Forecast (T1), M (SD)	Actual (T2), M (SD)	Difference T
Winners	3.62 (0.91)	2.99 (1.29)	3.61**
Losers	−1.77 (1.52)	0.19 (2.15)	−12.09***

Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$.
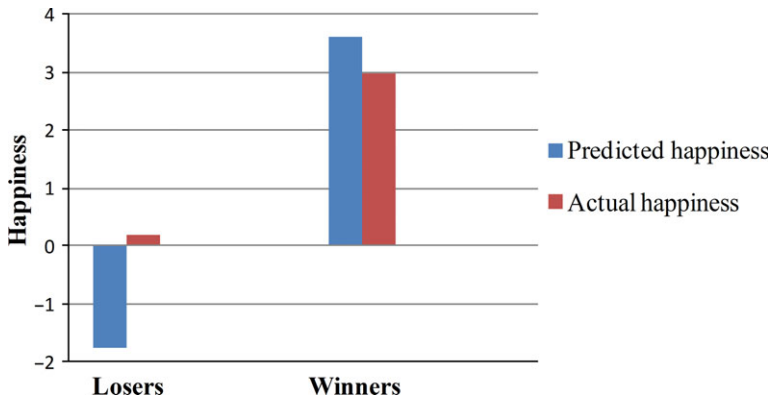
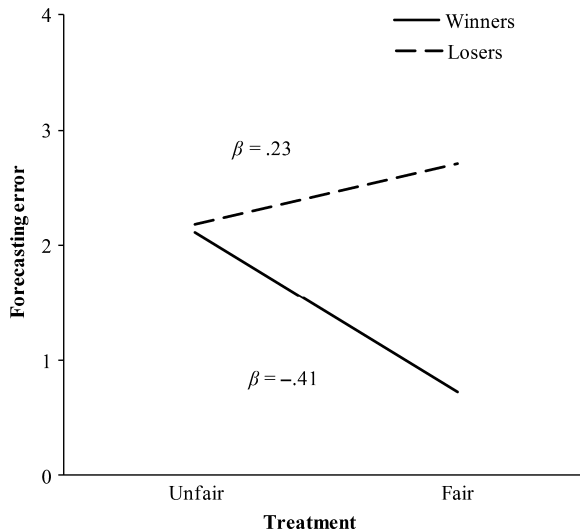**Figure 1.** Affective forecasting error for winners (H1a) and losers (H1b).

Figure 2. Size of affective forecasting error for fair and unfair treatment for winners (H2a) and losers (H2b). *Note.* Fair and unfair treatment was calculated by performing a median split on this variable.

slopes were calculated by using the macros developed by O'Connor (1998). Standardized coefficients of both simple slopes were significantly different from 0 ($\beta = -0.41, p = .01$ for winners and $\beta = 0.23, p < .00$ for losers). As can be seen from Figure 2, the pattern of the interaction for winners and losers was as predicted: the forecasting inaccuracy for

winners decreased due to fair treatment, whereas the forecasting error increased for losers due to fair treatment. Hence, as evidenced by two types of forecasting analytical methods, the results are in line with our theoretical arguments, supporting Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b

Next, we conducted a regression analysis to see which predictors, including the interaction term of treatment and importance, were statistically significant. Results are shown in Table 4. As hypothesized, the interaction between treatment and importance was statistically significant for winners: $\beta = -0.74$, $p = .02$; $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $F(1, 67) = 5.32$, $p = .02$. Furthermore, the interaction was also significant for losers: $\beta = -0.50$, $p = .01$; $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(1, 173) = 6.82$, $p = .01$.

To determine if the pattern of the interaction for losers was consistent with our hypotheses, we plotted the interaction in Figures 3 and 4. Standardized coefficients of the simple slopes were calculated by using the macros developed by O'Connor (1998). For winners, the standardized coefficients of the simple slopes show that only the slope for high importance was significantly different from 0 ($\beta = -0.46$, $p = .00$). The simple slope for low importance was not significantly different from 0 ($\beta = -0.15$, $p = .48$). As can be seen from Figure 3, the pattern of the interaction for winners was as predicted: the forecasting inaccuracy decreased due to fair treatment, and this effect was most pronounced for high importance individuals. Thus, Hypothesis 3a could be confirmed. For losers (Figure 4), only the standardized coefficient of low importance was significantly different from 0 ($\beta = 0.34$, $p = .00$). The simple slope for high importance was not significantly different from 0 ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = .22$). As can be seen from Figure 4, there is indeed an increase in the affective forecasting error for losers, but this is steeper for low importance, and almost non-existent for high importance, which is contrary to what we predicted. Hence, as we observed an increase in forecasting error only for losers with low importance scores, Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

In an exploratory sense, we also tested whether treatment and importance interacted in moderating the relationship between winning versus losing and the affective forecasting error. Thus, we explored the three-way interaction between treatment, importance, and 'group' (which consists of winning versus losing). We entered the two-way and three-way interactions in steps 2 and 3. However, as can be seen in Table 5, the

Table 4. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis of treatment and importance on inaccuracy (H3a and H3b)

	Winners ($N = 71$)						Losers ($N = 176$)					
	b	$SE(b)$	β	t	p	ΔR^2	b	$SE(b)$	β	t	p	ΔR^2
Step 1												
Treatment	−0.52	0.15	−0.38	−3.60	.00	.22***	0.27	0.11	0.18	2.41	.02	.05**
Importance	0.72	0.52	0.44	1.39	.17		0.19	0.33	0.05	0.57	.57	
Step 2												
Treatment × Importance	−0.74	0.32	−0.72	−2.31	.02	.06*	−0.50	0.19	−0.24	−2.61	.01	.04*

Note. Regression coefficients are for the final step.
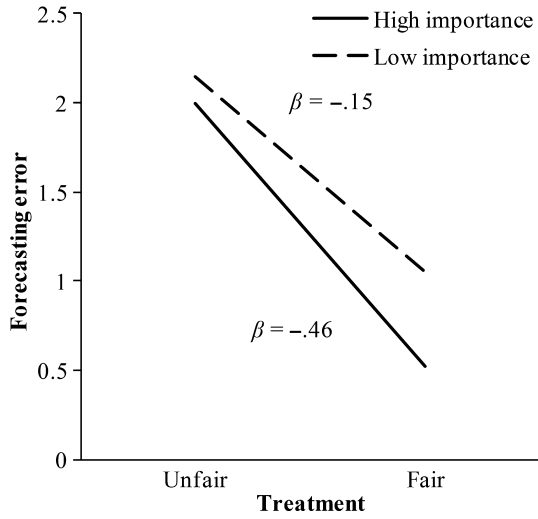*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Figure 3. Interaction of treatment and importance on the affective forecasting error for winners (H3a). *Note.* Fair and unfair treatment and high and low importance were calculated by performing a median split on the variables.
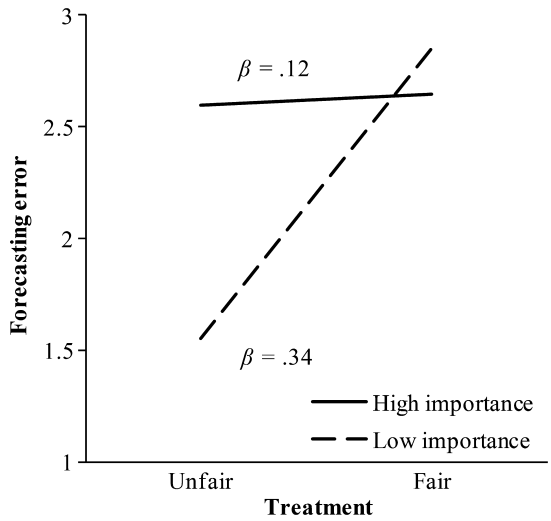

Figure 4. Interaction of treatment and importance on the affective forecasting error for losers (H3b). *Note.* Fair and unfair treatment and high and low importance were calculated by performing a median split on the variables.

three-way interaction among treatment, importance, and group was not significant, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 240) = .25$, $p = .62$. Although this analysis confirms the general pattern of results that was found in the analyses discussed earlier, the result of this three-way interaction was not significant. There can be several potential explanations for not finding a significant result. One possible explanation, for instance, can be the unequal amount of participants in the 'winners' and 'losers' group and a small number of participants in both groups, making it statistically very difficult to find significant three-way interactions.

Table 5. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis of group, treatment, and importance on inaccuracy

	b	SE(b)	β	t	p	ΔR²
Step 1						
Group	−0.98	0.32	−0.24	−3.08	.00	.16***
Treatment	0.10	0.09	0.07	1.06	.29	
Importance	0.30	0.29	0.10	1.06	.29	
Step 2						
Group × Treatment	−0.79	0.23	−0.24	−3.40	.00	.08***
Group × Importance	0.54	0.81	0.10	0.67	.51	
Treatment × Importance	−0.55	0.17	−0.31	−3.26	.00	
Step 3						
Group × Treatment × Importance	−0.25	0.50	−0.08	−0.50	.62	.00

Note. Regression coefficients are for the final step.
***$p < .001$.

Discussion

This study set out to inspire a new line of research on affective forecasting by systematically focusing on situational factors that may enhance or hinder the accuracy of the forecasts people make about their happiness after important life events. A better understanding of how situations (and individuals' perceptions of it) may alter individuals' forecasts is theoretically important as it may bring new insights in how forecasts (i.e., construals) are formed. However, equally important, it will bring much needed evidence to inform policy makers how to develop interventions that may help people in influencing forecasting errors.

We first replicated the basic premise of affective forecasting research in this new, important field setting: In a talent show, losers felt less bad than they had expected, and winners felt less good than they had expected. The main focus of this study was, however, to examine how one aspect of the situation, that should be easily manageable to external parties, may affect this forecasting error. Importantly, we found that the degree of inaccuracy increased for losers and decreased for winners when the received treatment was fair. The finding that outcome favourability interacts with fairness principles in determining emotions is in line with studies showing that outcome favourability and fairness aspects often interact to influence work outcomes such as employees' work attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Brockner *et al.*, 2003; Garonzik, Brockner, & Siegel, 2000). As a final step, we further explored whether this situational influence of treatment had differential effects on talent show participants depending on their investment in their self-view as an artist. This is important, as it would imply that intervention or information strategies designed to mitigate affective forecasting errors might be more appropriate for some individuals and might be customized to specific participants. To this end, we tested the effect of the interaction between treatment and self-view importance. Both regression analysis and repeated measures analysis showed that the effect of the interaction on forecasting inaccuracy was significant. For winners, as expected, we found that the forecasting inaccuracy decreased due to fair treatment, and this effect was most pronounced when importance was high. For losers, we found that the forecasting inaccuracy increased due to fair treatment, but this was more pronounced for low importance, disconfirming our hypothesis. For high

importance, the increase in forecasting error was not significant. Of course, given the complexity of our hypotheses and the fact that this study was conducted in one sample, caution is needed when interpreting these results as it is currently unclear to what extent the conclusions can be generalized to other settings (e.g., recruitment or career orientation).

Theoretical and practical implications

The chief implication of this study is that a fair interpersonal treatment plays an important role when making affective forecasts. Affective forecast errors consist of a discrepancy between two components, (1) the construed situation and (2) the experience of the actual situation. This study examined only natural variations in the second component, the fairness experience of the actual situation, while the construed situation remained unaffected. Thus, the size of the forecasting errors observed in this study reflects changes in the second component and thus sheds new light on the type of construals that are initially formed and what role fairness plays in these construals.

Conceptually, our findings indicate that the anticipation of a future affective state involves the construal of an interpersonal fair situation. Thus, when people reflect on future events, they expect to be treated fairly and this forms the basis of their predictions of how they will feel. However, in the real world events often turn out not to be as just as we would like them to be. Thus, our conclusions imply that an important factor that lies at the basis of misconstrual in affective forecasting is individuals' implicit assumptions that the world is a just place. This knowledge may be crucial given the importance of affective forecasting in guiding our decision-making (Kermer, Driver-Linn, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2006; Mellers, 2000) and pursuing our goals (e.g., Greitemeyer, 2009). Being aware that unrealistically positive or negative predictions may be caused by faulty fairness expectations may help individuals to better manage their predictions and subsequently make better decisions. Furthermore, knowing that the (un)fairness of an event may impact the error and enhance people's reactions may help policy makers (e.g., organizations hiring new employees or making tenure decisions, talent competitions) to pay more attention to the treatment to minimize individuals' forecasting errors.

However, because of the potential paradox this study has pointed to between maximizing happiness and decreasing forecasting errors, this may be more complex than it seems. Although it is generally proposed that we should seek to increase the accuracy of forecasts, one should be careful in deciding on which of the two components to focus, the initial construal or the actual experience. In this study, for instance, a fair treatment actually increased the forecasting error for losers, but made them happier. It will be evident that in practice, we would not recommend providing people with an unfair treatment to decrease forecast errors, so as to make them as unhappy as they originally predicted they would be. Instead, the challenge lies in developing acceptable information strategies that help people in taking potential unfair experiences into account when making forecasts or anticipating important events. Moreover, it may be that forecasting errors are not always detrimental. Even if the anticipated judgements are wrong, they may motivate people to behave in adaptive ways. For example, an academic's anticipation that getting tenure will contribute to his or her happiness can be an important motivator to work hard towards the goal of achieving this desired position.

In addition, we found that the importance of individuals' self-views moderated the relation between fair treatment and the forecasting error. Winners that were

treated fairly and attached high importance to their self-view, felt almost as positive as they had forecasted prior to the auditions. Thus, individuals who attached greater importance to succeeding were indeed more sensitive to instances of fairness and to fairness breaches, leading to more positive feelings when treated fairly, and more negative feelings when treated unfairly. This finding is in line with the predictions of the self-activation model of social justice (van den Bos *et al.*, 2011). The more importance individuals attach to their self-views, the more an evaluation of these self-views may be threatening to their self-worth, leading them to pay more attention to fairness issues. This implies that fairness plays a stronger role in anticipating affective states when people are construing future events that are central than when these are not central to their life. Thus, the support for the moderating role of importance enhances our understanding of how construals are formed in affective forecasting.

This finding bodes well for the viability of the self-activation model of social fairness for explaining people's fairness interpretations in different situations. However, before integrating these previously unconnected research streams, we should pay attention to the lack of support for Hypothesis 3b. With regard to the interactive effects for losers, we found only an increase in the forecasting error for individuals who attached low importance to their self-view as an artist. Losers who were treated fairly but found succeeding not extremely important, felt less bad as they had forecasted prior to the auditions. For these candidates, the combination of fair treatment and low importance led to higher experienced happiness due to the fair treatment, leading to a situation that was discrepant from their initial construal, and thus, increasing the forecasting error. However, we found that when self-view importance was high, the forecasting error was the same for candidates who were treated with respect, and candidates who were treated disrespectfully. Thus, for losers, the treatment candidates receive makes little difference for their happiness when the importance they attach to succeeding is high.

A viable explanation is that, under conditions of extreme self-view investment, candidates have such a high need to protect their ego that when they hear that they 'lost', they no longer pay attention to aspects of the environment such as informational feedback or the way they are treated. In the case of unambiguous negative feedback, paying attention to the fairness of treatment might be even more hurtful for the self as one might be obliged to conclude that the treatment was actually reasonably fair and come to the inescapable conclusion that the central self-view that is so strongly held, is plain wrong. Therefore, from a self-enhancement perspective, it might be safer to 'shut off' from the environment in case of failure and cognitively attribute the threat to the self away. This would be in line with the main tenets of the mnemonic neglect model (Sedikides & Green, 2004), which contends that people recall self-referent feedback poorly when it carries negative implications for central self-aspects, because such feedback is perceived as threatening. For instance, Sedikides and Green (2004) showed that participants manifest such mnemonic neglect only when the central negative feedback is highly diagnostic of self-aspects (high in threat potential), not when it is low in diagnosticity (low in threat potential). Of course, as these explanations are tentative, future research should examine whether further support can be found for them. Our results suggest that predictions of the mnemonic neglect model and the self-activation model of fairness should be reconciled in future research to make more accurate predictions about affective forecasts in high-stakes settings.

Limitations

Although the high-stakes setting and natural observation provided a high external validity, the independent variables were not experimentally manipulated, participants were not randomly assigned to the losers and winners conditions, and all measures were self-report (be it at different points in time), which may cause the internal validity of our findings to be relatively low. Furthermore, it may be possible that factors such as personality, experience with such competitions and talent contribute to both predictions and experience in non-random ways. However, as previous forecasting research has relied extensively on experimental laboratory studies, we believe there is a place for more correlational designs to complement previous studies on moderators of the affective forecasting error. It is clear, however, that the present findings should be re-examined with a design that provides better guarantees for causal inferences.

Second, the within person design may have influenced our results. Future research could address this by for instance including a control group that experiences but does not predict emotions to rule out the potential influence of this design on the findings.

Third, although our results show that a fair treatment may influence the affective forecasting error, caution is needed when interpreting the results. Because of the inherent aspects of this study's setting, candidates received the outcome decision immediately after their audition. Hence, it is possible that candidates' assessment of how well they were treated (i.e., their perception of treatment) was influenced by the decision that was communicated to them. However, the perception checks that were conducted showed a fairly high agreement between candidates' perceptions of treatment and the *actual* treatment they received as coded by two independent raters, indicating that their own assessment of treatment aligned with the actual treatment they received. However, as noted before, future studies should try to replicate our findings in a more controlled setting where the influence of other variables can be ruled out. This way, it will be possible to establish actual situational effects on the affective forecasting error.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that fair treatment and importance have the potential to influence the degree of forecasting inaccuracy. Our findings suggest that both fairness expectations and investment in the life domain play an important role in construing future events in forecasts. This provides new insights towards finding ways to manage the forecasting error. We encourage scholars to seek for other potential situational variables, to actively manipulate them and explore the possibility of developing interventions and information strategies for externally managing individuals' natural tendency to overestimate how they will feel after important life events.

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