

Introduction to the Special Issue: The Science of Prospecction

Roy F. Baumeister
Florida State University

Kathleen D. Vohs
University of Minnesota

Psychology's main theories explain human behavior by pointing to the past: childhood experiences, socialization, reinforcement history. Yet recent evidence has suggested that people do not spend much time actively thinking about the past. The articles in this special issue reflect a growing sentiment that prospecction should be a central focus of psychology. They are about 2 central themes: prediction and pragmatic planning. Prediction studies are largely about when people make predictions and their accuracy (including what mistakes people make). Pragmatic planning, which from evolutionary standpoints might be the more common and basic form of thinking about the future, involves anticipating what a person will have to do, decide, perform. The 2 approaches are quite compatible: prediction in service of pragmatic adjustments would be highly adaptive. To accurately imagine what might happen is likely not an end to itself, because that alone does not enable a person to make changes or ready oneself for the event if and when it comes to fruition. The articles in this special issue—whether on prospecction, prediction, pragmatic planning, or prediction in service of preparation and planning—suggest avenues to pave the way for psychology's brightest future.

Keywords: prospecction, future, thinking, planning, prediction

As caricature, one could say that psychology lives in the past, but people live in the future. Psychology's main theories explain human behavior by pointing to the past: childhood experiences, socialization, reinforcement history. Psychologists have studied memory as much as, or more than, any other time-linked psychological process.

Yet recent evidence has suggested that people do not spend much time actively thinking about the past: remembering, replaying lessons or traumas, and so forth. The past may well be important, and we do not intend to say that psychologists' research focus on the past has been wasteful, but it misses a big part of mental life and psychological processes. According to recent data of our own (Baumeister, Hofmann, Summerville, & Vohs, 2016), people think about the future two or three times as much as the past. They also report that their thoughts about the past are often because of its implications for the future.

This special issue grew out of an initially small curiosity about whether prospecction should be a central focus of psychology. Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, and Sripada (2013) reflected on this point, which evolved into a major grant initiative by the John Templeton Foundation. We held a conference to stimulate exchange of relevant ideas, in part to produce a body of articles, which became this special issue. We opened up the special issue to all comers (including those who had not attended the conference),

and a rich assortment of articles were submitted and underwent a competitive review process. As editors, we can attest that it was painful to us to reject some of the fine, thought-provoking works that were submitted, but we had limited space and had to respect the critical comments of reviewers rather than relying on our favorites and preferences.

Therefore what is here is a set of high-quality survivors of the tough review process and a fine assortment of articles dealing with human future-mindedness.

Another key point we realized while doing this is that when psychologists do get around to studying thoughts about the future, their first impulse may be misguided. If you were suddenly tasked with studying how people think about the future, what would you suggest doing first? An obvious answer would seem to be prediction: When do people predict, and in particular, how accurately do people predict (including what mistakes do people make)? These are interesting and important—but are they really the main form of prospecction? We have come to suspect that predicting the future, though a genuine human activity and a somewhat important one, is not the main goal of prospecction. The more common and basic form of thinking about the future is anticipating what one will have to do, decide, perform. Prediction is real but secondary.

Indeed, in an evolutionary sense, there is little adaptive value to simply predicting as the main form of prospecction. Prediction in service of pragmatic adjustments, though, would be highly adaptive. To accurately imagine what might happen is likely not an end unto itself because that alone does not enable one to make changes or ready oneself for the event if and when it comes to fruition.

Intuitively, one can appreciate the difference by reflecting on one's own situation. We suggest that you, the reader, try this on yourself. Think about tomorrow. What is the content of your thoughts? If prediction is the main focus, then your thoughts about tomorrow focus on specifying what is going to happen, regardless

Roy F. Baumeister, Department of Psychology, Florida State University; Kathleen D. Vohs, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kathleen D. Vohs, 321 19th Avenue South, Marketing Department, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, MN 55455. E-mail: vohsx005@umn.edu

of your own actions and choices. In contrast, if the focus is pragmatic preparation, then your thoughts will focus on what decisions you will have to make, what performances you will have to make, what problems you will have to deal with. The difference is between predicting what is actually going to happen and predicting what circumstances having multiple alternative possible outcomes one will encounter.

Thus, prediction versus pragmatic preparation reflects a fundamental disagreement about the shape of the future. Is it a single path, complicated merely by not knowing what is sure to happen? (This was the view central to determinism, as pioneered by LaPlace (1814/1902): Because the laws of nature are fixed, there is only one possible future.) Or, alternatively, is the future a matrix of choice points, forking roads, threats, and opportunities—in other words, does the future consist of many sets of things that *might but also might not happen*? Prediction, in contrast, is about knowing what will definitely happen.

Put another way: One can imagine some future possible events that in the fullness of time will turn out not to happen. Was the idea that these things might happen basically a mistake, as in the deterministic view? (They never really had a chance?) Or, were they in fact genuinely possible, but human agents and circumstances managed to prevent them? People operate very much as if the latter is true, and so social reality is deeply based on indeterminism. Plus, the odds are that social reality is often true. People believe in multiplicities of possibilities, and most likely that means they are generally right. It is possible that they are pervasively wrong, but one needs clear evidence.

Whatever the metaphysical reality, we think the psychological reality is the latter. There were multiple possibilities. The human agent evolved to cope specifically with multiple possibilities.

Our view is closer to naïve, everyday views, however. In everyday experience, there is at least one major difference between the past and the future: The past cannot be changed, but the future can. The future is thus a matrix of alternatives, of various possibilities that are mutually incompatible, so that if one happens, the other will not. Like an election: Someone will win, and others will lose. The outcome is not written in stone but up for grabs.

Thus, there is a tension between prediction and pragmatic preparing that runs through this special issue. Some researchers focused heavily on how well people can predict the future and what the consequences of their predictions (accurate or flawed) are. Others, however, focused on how people prepare for events they may have to deal with.

We invite readers to delve into the special issue with this lens. Work on prospection—whether prediction, pragmatic planning, or prediction in service of preparation and planning—will pave the way for psychology's brightest future.

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