COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING AND REGRET IN THE CONTEXT OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

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Counterfactual Thoughts

- Mental simulations of alternatives to reality
- Ubiquitous (Hofstadter, 1979)
- Spontaneous (Markman et al., 1993; McEleney & Byrne, 2006)
- Automatic (Goldinger et al., 2003; Roese, Sanna, & Galinsky, 2005)
- Unique antecedents and consequences
- Frequency not always the best indicator of impact
Counterfactual Potency (CP); (Petrocelli, Percy, Sherman, & Tormala, 2011)

- Perceived likelihood of the alternative to reality
  - “Maybe [Certainly] I could have…”
  - “…it might have [would have] been better.”

- “If” likelihood (IL)
- “Then” likelihood (TL)

- \[ CP = IL \times TL \]
Counterfactual Thinking and Decision Making

“Any assessment of the quality of a given decision will be dictated by mental simulations of what might have happened had an alternative decision been made…” “…counterfactual thinking is therefore of great relevance to contemporary theorists of decision making.” (Roese, 1999, p. 576)
If only Orpheus hadn’t looked back at Eurydice before completely leaving the underworld…
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Prenuptial Agreement

Prenuptial Agreements (Prenups) aren't just for the wealthy. A Prenup can protect you from responsibility for your spouse's debts and avoid potential arguments if you ever divorce. Determining how your assets are passed on and tailoring the ownership of your property are just a few of the important benefits of a Prenuptial Agreement. You can also clarify what property each person brings to the marriage (separate property) and how property, assets and income acquired during marriage will be owned. You can also outline exactly how you and your spouse's finances are handled. Without a Prenup, should you divorce or pass away, the distribution of your property will be determined by the laws of your state which may not reflect your wishes.

Start by selecting a state.

North Carolina

Make Document

How it works:  
+ Build your document  
→ Save, print & share  
→ Sign it & make it legal

PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENT

This Prenuptial Agreement ("Agreement") is made by and between

_____________ (""), an adult residing in

_____________, and

_____________ (""), an adult residing in

_____________, in consideration of the contemplated marriage of

the above-named parties. This Agreement shall not be effective until the marriage contemplated by

the parties is solemnized.
WEDDING INSURANCE

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Getting married is one of the most exciting events in a person’s life. And hosting the perfect wedding celebration, though sometimes stressful, should be an enjoyable time. But if the unexpected were to happen, you may never get to experience the joy of walking down the aisle. And even worse, you may be left with unforeseen bills and liability for things you didn’t plan for.

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- **Interdependence Theory** (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959)
- **Investment Model** (Rusbult, 1980, 1983)

In the context of established models of relationship commitment, what is the relevance of forgone alternatives and the perceived likelihoods of those alternatives?

- Counterfactual Potency-Forgone Alternatives ↑
  Current Relationship Commitment ↓ ↑

- Mediation by Regret-Forgone Alternatives
### STUDY 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Undergraduate Sample (n = 97)</th>
<th>Community Sample (n = 104)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection</strong></td>
<td>Lab cubicles</td>
<td>Mturk (online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td>51 (52.58%)</td>
<td>70 (67.31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (years)</strong></td>
<td>18.91 ($SD = .95$)</td>
<td>35.05 ($SD = 10.87$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration of rel. (months)</strong></td>
<td>31.48 ($SD = 30.54$)</td>
<td>89.19 ($SD = 91.80$)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
“Computerized Self-Administered Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaire”

Current relationship partner:
- Initials
- Age, sex, duration of relationship
Alternative relationship partner:

“Now we would like you to think about some other people that you know that you might have considered dating other than (current partner)…” “…Please list one of the individuals you might have considered dating other than (current partner).”

List maximum of three sets of initials
Counterfactual potency-forgone alternatives (global)

- IL: “Given all of the people that came to mind…, what do you perceive is the likelihood that you might be in a dating relationship with one of those other people now?”

- TL: “Assuming that you were actually in a dating relationship with one of the other people…, what do you perceive is the likelihood that you would be better off?”

  - not at all likely (0) to extremely likely (10)
Regret-forgone alternatives (global)

“To what extent do you regret not choosing an alternative relationship?”

- not at all (0) and completely (8)

Investment Model Variables (Rusbult et al., 1998)

- Satisfaction ($\alpha = .97$)
- Quality of alternatives ($\alpha = .83$)
- Investment size ($\alpha = .92$)
- Commitment ($\alpha = .92$)
Indirect effect = -.02 (SE < .01), 95% CI [-.04, -.01], Z = -3.69, p < .001
\( \chi^2(df = 1) = .63, p = .43, \text{RMSEA} = .00, \text{CFI} = 1.00 \)
Community Sample of Adults ($n = 104$)

Indirect effect = −.03 (SE < .01), 95% CI [−.05, −.02], $Z = -5.44$, $p < .001$

$\chi^2(df = 1) = .32$, $p = .57$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00
“Never had a chance”

STUDY 1
“Hey, it was possible”

“Never had a chance”

STUDY 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Undergraduate Sample (n = 100)</th>
<th>Community Sample (n = 154)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Lab cubicles</td>
<td>Mturk (online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>46 (46.00%)</td>
<td>107 (69.48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>19.16 (SD = 1.09)</td>
<td>35.24 (SD = 11.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of rel. (months)</td>
<td>36.05 (SD = 37.11)</td>
<td>106.78 (SD = 111.74)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similar to Study 1
- List one forgone alternative

Counterfactual potency (CP) manipulation
- High [low] CP condition list two reasons why there is some possibility [why it is not very likely] they could actually be in a relationship with the alternative, today, if not for their current partner
- High [low] CP condition list two reasons why being in a romantic relationship with the alternative listed might be satisfying [not be so satisfying]
Manipulation check

CP-Forgone Alternative:

- high CP condition ($M = 20.62$, $SD = 22.77$)
- low CP condition ($M = 12.65$, $SD = 20.23$)
  - $t(252) = 8.68$, $p < .01$
- No moderation of sample (undergraduate vs. community sample) $F(3, 250) = 2.06$, $p = .15$. 
CONCLUSIONS

- Explaining/predicting relationship commitment with a modified Investment Model:
  - Forgone alternatives as standards of comparison
    - person next door vs. high school sweetheart
  - Perceived likelihoods of those alternatives
  - Regret associated with forgone, alternatives

- Counterfactual potency: It doesn’t take much…
  - $(M \approx 20.00)$
CONCLUSIONS

- Dissonance reduction / self-perception processes

- “I forwent some high quality alternatives…”

  - Low investment relationships: reduce commitment
    - (e.g., “I forwent a chance to date Redford; why should I settle for De Niro now?”)

  - High investment relationships: “evidence” of commitment
    - (e.g., “I forwent a chance to date Audrey and stayed with Katharine all these years – I must be a very committed partner.”)
Can counterfactual potency adjustment techniques successfully reduce relationship regret?

Is the relational perceiver wrong (distorted in his/her perception of alternatives and/or current commitment)?
Thank you!

- Lara K. Kammrath
- Melanie Rose Uy
- Devin F. L. Cowens

Petrocelli, Kammrath, Brinton, Uy, & Cowens. (in press). Holding on to what might have been may loosen (or tighten) the ties that bind us: A counterfactual potency analysis of previous dating alternatives. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.*