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The Unforeseen Costs of Extraordinary Experience

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Abstract

People seek extraordinary experiences—from drinking rare wines and taking exotic vacations to jumping from airplanes and shaking hands with celebrities. But are such experiences worth having? We found that participants thoroughly enjoyed having experiences that were superior to those had by their peers, but that having had such experiences spoiled their subsequent social interactions and ultimately left them feeling worse than they would have felt if they had had an ordinary experience instead. Participants were able to predict the benefits of having an extraordinary experience but were unable to predict the costs. These studies suggest that people may pay a surprising price for the experiences they covet most.

Keywords

social interaction, prediction, happiness

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More than 600 people have paid a minimum of $250,000 for a seat on the world's first commercial spacecraft, soon to be launched by Virgin Galactic. Their journey will last a few hours, but they will talk about it for years to come, because until a rocket ride to space is as common as a train ride to Chattanooga, these citizen-astronauts will have had an experience so extraordinary that it will make them the stars of every cocktail party and family reunion they attend for the remainder of their natural lives.

Or will it? Extraordinary experiences have two consequences, one of which may be more obvious than the other. The obvious consequence is that they are enjoyable. Floating weightless for several minutes while gazing down at Earth is an experience that falls somewhere between delightful and dazzling, which is why so many people are willing to pay so much money to have it (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2013). The less obvious consequence is that such experiences can make the people who have them strangers to everyone else on earth—and, as a rule, earthlings do not always treat strangers so nicely. At worst, people may be envious and resentful of those who have had an extraordinary experience (Smith & Kim, 2007), and at best, they may find themselves with little to talk about. Indeed, when people interact, they typically discuss the things they have in common (Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Stasser & Titus, 1985), and an afternoon in orbit typically is not one of them. Extraordinary experiences are both different from and better than the experiences that most other people have, and being both alien and enviable is an unlikely recipe for popularity.

Do extraordinary experiences have social costs, and if so, can people accurately foresee them? To answer this question, we brought groups of participants to the laboratory to watch videos. One of the participants in each group watched a video that was superior to the video watched by the others. Then we left the participants alone in a room to have a completely unstructured social interaction, and afterward, we measured how they felt. We expected that participants who had watched the superior video would feel better than the others right after watching the movie, but worse than the others after the social interaction. In subsequent studies, we asked participants to predict how they and others would feel in

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these circumstances. We expected participants to mistakenly predict that they and others would feel better after a social interaction that followed an extraordinary experience rather than an ordinary experience.

Study 1

Method

Pretesting materials. Given our previous experience with similar procedures, we hoped to recruit roughly 75 participants to pretest our materials. By the end of the academic term, we had recruited 76 participants (37 male, 39 female; mean age = 21.2 years, *SD* = 2.31 years), who reported to the Harvard Decision Science Laboratory and participated in exchange for payment. Each participant watched four 10-min videos that had been randomly selected from a pool of 10 videos that ranged from TED talks to Pixar movies to landscape montages. After watching a video, participants answered two questions: First, they answered "How did you feel while watching the movie?" by marking a 100-point linear scale whose endpoints were labeled *not very good* and *very good*. Second, they answered "Overall, how good is this movie?" by awarding it between zero and five stars.

On the basis of their responses, we chose two videos for use in Study 1. One was a video of a talented street magician performing tricks for an appreciative crowd. It received a mean rating of 4.22 stars (*SD* = 0.74), and we refer to it as the *4-star video*. The other video was a low-budget animation. It received a mean rating of 2.25 stars (*SD* = 1.21), and we refer to it as the *2-star video*. These two videos were awarded significantly different numbers of stars, $t(57) = 7.50$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [1.45, 2.50], Cohen's $d = 1.95$. The 13 pretest participants who happened to have seen both of these videos also awarded the 4-star video more stars than the 2-star video, $t(12) = 5.415$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [1.47, 3.45], Cohen's $d = 2.60$, and reported feeling better after watching the 4-star video ($M = 79.08$, $SD = 15.83$) than after watching the 2-star video ($M = 31.15$, $SD = 20.00$), $t(12) = 6.456$, $p < .001$, mean difference = 47.92, 95% CI = [31.75, 64.10], Cohen's $d = 2.66$.

Participants. Given our previous experience with similar procedures, we hoped to recruit roughly 75 participants. By the end of the academic term, we were able to recruit 68 participants (29 males, 38 females, 1 of unknown gender; mean age = 20.73 years, *SD* = 2.30 years), who reported to the Harvard Decision Science Laboratory and participated in exchange for payment.

Procedure. Each session involved 4 participants. When they arrived, they were seated in individual cubicles and told that each participant would watch a short video in his or her own cubicle; that all participants would then be escorted to another room, where they would sit around a table together for about 5 min and have an unstructured conversation; and that all participants would then return to their individual cubicles and answer some questions.

Next, participants answered the question "How do you feel right now?" by marking a 100-point linear scale whose endpoints were labeled *not very good* and *very good*. We refer to this as the *preinteraction feelings* measure. They were then given brief written descriptions of the two videos and were told that pretest participants had given one of the videos an average rating of 4 stars and the other an average rating of 2 stars. Because the descriptions were relatively ambiguous (e.g., "Everyone's a dreamer. Watch as different characters find themselves faced with a stark choice: fiction or reality?"), we were able to counterbalance the descriptions across sessions such that each description was used to describe the 4-star video in about half the sessions and the 2-star video in the remaining sessions.

Next, 1 participant (the *extraordinary experiencer*) was randomly assigned to watch the 4-star video, and the remaining 3 participants (the *ordinary experiencers*) were assigned to watch the 2-star video. All participants were truthfully told which video they and the other participants had been assigned to watch. To ensure that they understood what they had been told, we asked them to indicate which video they and the other participants had been assigned to watch.

Participants then watched the video that they had been assigned. When they were finished, they were escorted to a large room, seated around a large table, and told to "talk amongst yourselves" for 5 min. The experimenter gave them no other instructions and left the room. Five minutes later, the experimenter returned and escorted the participants back to their individual cubicles, where they answered questions. First, participants answered the question "How do you feel right now?" by marking a 100-point linear scale whose endpoints were labeled *not very good* and *very good*. We refer to this as the *postinteraction feelings* measure. Second, participants answered the question "In general, how did you feel during the interaction that took place?" by marking a 100-point linear scale whose endpoints were labeled *included* and *excluded*. We refer to this as the *postinteraction exclusion* measure.

Results

All participants correctly indicated which video they and the other participants had been assigned to watch, so no participants were excluded from our analyses. As

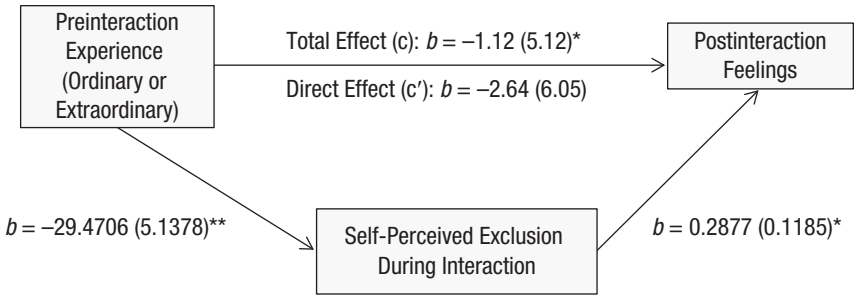

Fig. 1. Mediation analysis of Study 1: self-perceived exclusion during the social interaction as a mediator of the effect of the preinteraction experience on postinteraction feelings. Asterisks indicate significant paths (*$p < .05$, **$p < .001$).

expected, the preinteraction feelings of extraordinary experiencers ($M = 68.71$, $SD = 22.33$) and ordinary experiencers ($M = 68.22$, $SD = 20.03$) did not differ, $t(66) = 0.085$, $p = .993$, mean difference = 0.49, 95% CI = [–11.03, 12.02], Cohen's $d = 0.02$.

We ran 17 groups of 4 participants. Because the data were nested within groups, we began our analysis by fitting a multilevel regression model with preinteraction experience (ordinary or extraordinary) as the individual-level predictor, participant's group number (1–17) as the group-level predictor, and postinteraction feelings as the outcome variable. Because the model's random effects did not explain a significant portion of the variance, we used *t* tests to compare extraordinary and ordinary experiencers. This analysis revealed that after the social interaction, extraordinary experiencers felt worse ($M = 53.26$, $SD = 22.00$) than did ordinary experiencers ($M = 64.37$, $SD = 16.94$), $t(66) = –2.25$, $p = .034$, 95% CI = [0.88, 21.35], Cohen's $d = 0.57$, and also felt more excluded ($M = 80.47$, $SD = 15.63$) than did ordinary experiencers ($M = 51.00$, $SD = 25.00$), $t(66) = 5.736$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [19.21, 39.73], Cohen's $d = 1.41$.

Did extraordinary experiencers feel bad after the social interaction *because* they felt excluded during it? To determine whether self-perceived exclusion mediated the relationship between preinteraction experience and postinteraction feelings, we conducted a bootstrapping analysis using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro. Results based on 10,000 bootstrapped samples supported the proposed mediation (see Fig. 1). The total effect of preinteraction experience on postinteraction feelings was significant ($b = –1.12$, $SE = 5.12$, $p = .034$), and the direct effect was not ($b = –2.64$, $SE = 6.05$, $p = .66$), which suggested full mediation. The indirect effect of preinteraction experience on postinteraction feelings through self-perceived exclusion was significant ($b = –8.48$, $SE = 3.59$, bias-corrected 95% CI = [–16.49, –2.28], $p < .05$). In short, participants who had had an extraordinary experience felt excluded during a subsequent social interaction, and this left them feeling worse than participants who had had an ordinary experience instead.

Study 2

Method

Study 1 showed that the nonsocial benefits of an extraordinary experience did not survive the payment of its social costs. Although extraordinary experiencers watched a video that had made pretest participants feel good (and therefore presumably made the extraordinary experiencers feel good too), they left a subsequent social interaction feeling worse than ordinary experiencers did because they felt excluded. But if extraordinary experiences ultimately leave people feeling bad, then why do they seek them? One possibility is that people do not expect extraordinary experiences to spoil their social interactions and leave them feeling bad. In Study 2, we examined this possibility by asking participants to predict how they would feel in the situation we had created in Study 1. We expected participants to mistakenly predict that they would feel better after a social interaction if they had first had an extraordinary experience rather than an ordinary experience.

Participants. On the basis of our previous experience, we hoped to recruit roughly 100 participants. We successfully recruited 105 people (56 males, 49 females; mean age = 21.4 years, $SD = 2.37$ years) on Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in exchange for payment.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that "you and three other people are taking part in a research study at a local university. When you arrive, the researcher flips a coin to determine which of two videos you will watch." Participants were then given the same information that participants in Study 1 had been given about the 2-star movie and the 4-star movie. They were asked to imagine that one member of their group had been assigned to watch the 4-star movie and that the others had been assigned to watch the 2-star movie. Next, participants were asked to imagine that the research study comprised three parts: Part 1, in which each participant

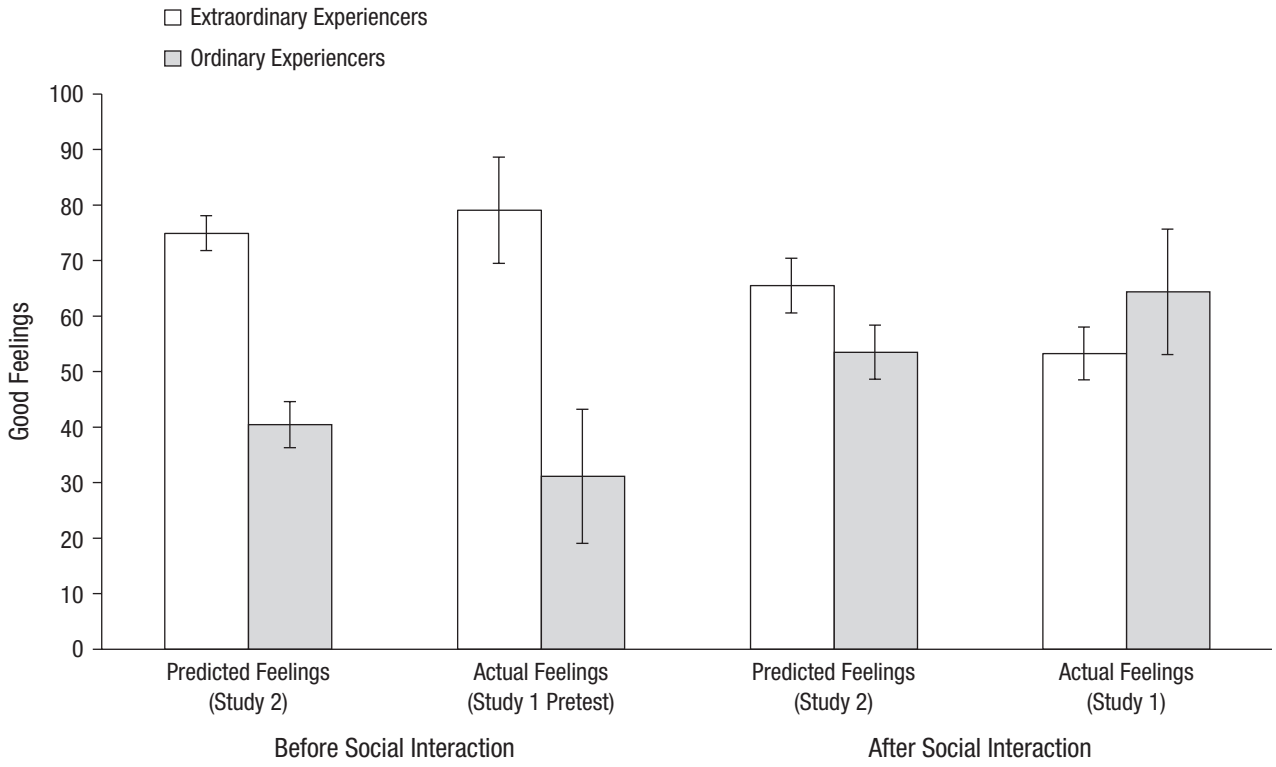

Fig. 2. Participants' predictions of their feelings before and just after the social interaction in Study 2 and participants' actual feelings in Study 1. The error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

would spend approximately 10 min alone in his or her own cubicle watching the video to which he or she had been assigned; Part 2, in which all participants would spend approximately 5 min having an unstructured conversation in a different room; and Part 3, in which all participants would return to their individual cubicles and then, 10 min later, answer some questions.

After learning about this experimental procedure, participants made two sets of predictions. For one set, they imagined that they were the participant who had been assigned to watch the 4-star movie and predicted how they would feel at the ends of Parts 1, 2, and 3. (Note that the first of these predictions corresponds to the timing of the pretest measure in Study 1, and the second of these predictions corresponds to the timing of the postinteraction measure in Study 1.) They made these predictions by marking a 100-point linear scale whose endpoints were labeled *not very good* and *very good*. For the second set of predictions, participants imagined that they were one of the participants who had been assigned to watch the 2-star movie and predicted how they would feel at the ends of Parts 1, 2, and 3, using the same 100-point linear scale. The order in which participants made these two sets of predictions was counterbalanced.

Results

No participants were excluded from our analyses, which revealed that participants expected an extraordinary experience to leave them feeling better than an ordinary experience at all points in time: just after watching the video ($M = 74.94$, $SD = 16.14$, vs. $M = 40.44$, $SD = 21.31$), $t(104) = 12.54$, $p < .001$, mean difference = 35.50, 95% CI = [29.05, 39.96], Cohen's $d = 1.83$; just after having the social interaction ($M = 65.48$, $SD = 25.47$, vs. $M = 53.50$, $SD = 25.24$), $t(104) = 3.219$, $p = .002$, mean difference = 11.98, 95% CI = [4.60, 19.36], Cohen's $d = 0.47$; and 10 min after the social interaction had ended and they had returned to their cubicles ($M = 69.94$, $SD = 19.79$, vs. $M = 47.87$, $SD = 24.76$), $t(104) = 7.47$, $p < .001$, mean difference = 22.08, 95% CI = [16.22, 27.94], Cohen's $d = 0.99$. Figure 2 shows results for the first and second of these measures and, for comparison, the results for the pretest and postinteraction feelings measures in Study 1. As the figure shows, participants correctly predicted that the extraordinary experience would leave them feeling better than the ordinary experience would before the interaction, but failed to realize that it would leave them feeling worse after the interaction.

Study 3

Method

The results of Study 2 suggest that people cannot always predict the social costs of extraordinary experiences. In Study 3, we replicated Study 2 with several modifications: First, rather than predicting how they themselves would have felt if they had participated in Study 1, participants in Study 3 estimated how the actual participants in Study 1 felt. Second, participants in Study 3 were asked to estimate how the participants in Study 1 felt after the social interaction, but were not asked to estimate how participants in Study 1 felt before the social interaction. Third, participants in Study 3 were asked to estimate how much each of the participants in Study 1 talked during the social interaction. The first of these modifications was made to ensure that participants in Study 2 had demonstrated a failure to foresee the social costs of extraordinary experience rather than a failure to recognize that they were subject to the same costs as anyone else. Specifically, it is possible that participants in Study 2 knew that most extraordinary experiencers would be excluded from a social interaction and would feel bad as a result, but also believed that they themselves would be exceptions to this rule. The second modification was made to ensure that Study 2 participants' predictions of the postinteraction feelings of participants in Study 1 had not been biased by their predictions of the preinteraction feelings of participants in Study 1. Finally, the third modification was made so we could determine more directly whether participants in Study 3 believed that extraordinary experiences would lead people to be excluded during a social interaction.

Participants. Given our previous experience, we recruited 100 participants (62 males, 37 females, 1 of "other" gender; mean age = 21.4 years, *SD* = 2.40 years) on Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in exchange for payment.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that "four people are taking part in a research study at a local university" and that when they arrive, "the researcher flips a coin to determine which of two videos they will watch." Participants were then given the same information that participants in Studies 1 and 2 had been given about the 2-star movie and the 4-star movie. They were asked to imagine that one member of the group had been assigned to watch the 4-star movie and that the others had been assigned to watch the 2-star movie. Next, participants were asked to imagine that the research study comprised two parts: Part 1, in which each participant would spend approximately 10 min alone in his or her own cubicle watching the video that he or she had been assigned, and Part 2, in which all participants would spend approximately 5 min having an unstructured conversation in a different room.

After learning about this experimental procedure, participants made predictions about how each of the 4 participants would feel after the 5-min social interaction. They made these estimates using a 7-point Likert scale whose endpoints were labeled *not very good* and *very good*. Next, participants were asked to estimate the percentage of the total interaction time that each of the 4 participants would spend talking. They were told that these four estimates had to sum to 100.

Results

No participants were excluded from our analyses. We averaged each participant's ratings of the 3 ordinary experiencers and then compared these averages with participants' ratings of the extraordinary experiencer. As in Study 2, participants mistakenly predicted that after the social interaction, the extraordinary experiencer would feel better (M = 4.81, SD = 1.66) than the average ordinary experiencer (M = 4.11, SD = 1.18), $t(99) = 3.775$, $p = .007$, mean difference = 0.700, 95% CI = [0.20, 1.20], Cohen's $d = 0.49$. Did participants expect the extraordinary experiencer to be excluded from the interaction? No. In fact, they predicted that the extraordinary experiencer would talk more (M = 28.55%, SD = 19.71) than the average ordinary experiencer (M = 23.82%, SD = 6.56), though this difference was only marginally significant, $t(99) = 1.801$, $p = .075$, mean difference = 4.73, 95% CI = [–0.48, 9.95], Cohen's $d = 0.32$. In short, participants did not expect the extraordinary experiencer to be excluded from the interaction, and they expected the extraordinary experiencer to feel better—not worse—than the ordinary experiencers.

General Discussion

Pleasures come in two varieties: the social and the nonsocial. A hallmark of the nonsocial pleasures—whether the cool tingle of Dom Pérignon or the hot snarl of a new Maserati—is that people adapt to them quickly, which is why such experiences are typically best when they are novel or rare (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). The social pleasures have a different appeal. People crave acceptance, belonging, and camaraderie (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and the hallmark of these pleasures is that they come more readily to those who fit in than to those who stand out. The two varieties of pleasure give rise to a pair of incompatible desires: to do what other people have not yet done and to be just like everyone else (Brewer, 1991; Fromkin, 1970, 1972). Satisfying the first of these desires can frustrate

the second. When extraordinary experiences separate a person from others, these experiences may ultimately reclaim more joy than they provide.

Experiences need not be all that extraordinary to have this unfortunate consequence. In Study 1, merely seeing a movie that was better than the movie their peers saw was enough to make participants feel excluded from a subsequent conversation, and these feelings of exclusion were enough to leave those who had seen a good movie feeling worse than those who had seen a bad one. It is not difficult to imagine why this might have happened: Extraordinary experiencers had little in common with their ordinary peers, who had a lot in common with each other, which made the extraordinary experiencers both alien and enviable, which led the ordinary experiencers to treat them poorly, which left them feeling excluded and bad. And yet, if it is not difficult for *us* to imagine why the extraordinary experiencers might have ended up less happy than the ordinary experiencers, why was it so hard for participants in Studies 2 and 3 to imagine it? These participants clearly expected the hedonic benefits of seeing a good movie to survive a conversation with people who had seen a bad one. Why did they not foresee the social costs of this extraordinary experience?

There are at least three possibilities. First, extraordinary experiences generally confer their nonsocial benefits before they extract their social costs, and research suggests that the further away an event is in time, the less likely people are to imagine it in a vivid, realistic, and detailed way (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Participants in Studies 2 and 3 may have thought more about the effects of the extraordinary experience than about the effects of the social interaction simply because the former was more imminent.

Second, even if these participants thought about the social interaction, they may not have considered the possibility that the extraordinary experiencer would be excluded from it. Social dynamics are inherently difficult to predict (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000), and participants may simply have mispredicted the way in which this one would unfold. For example, they may have expected peers who had seen a bad movie to be eager to hear about a good one, they may have expected a conversation among peers to focus on common interests rather than uncommon movies, and so on. A conversation among four unacquainted individuals can go many ways, and our participants may simply have been wrong about the way this one was most likely to go.

Third, and finally, even if participants thought about the social interaction and considered the possibility that the extraordinary experiencer would be excluded from it, they may not have appreciated just how bad this exclusion would make the extraordinary experiencer feel. After all, exclusion does not have to hurt: Students are excluded from faculty meetings, and defendants are excluded from jury deliberations, and neither feel bad about it. Exclusion makes people feel bad only when it signals interpersonal rejection (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001). Participants may have expected the extraordinary experiencer to be excluded from the conversation without realizing that the extraordinary experiencer would feel rejected, and even if they did realize it, they may have underestimated just how bad that rejection might feel (Gilbert & Wilson, 2009; Nordgren, Banas, & MacDonald, 2011).

Our studies show that extraordinary experiences can have social costs, but that does not mean they must. There may well be extraordinary experiences (such as a close encounter with a movie star) that not only are thrilling when they happen, but also subsequently make a person more appealing ("You really met her? Wow! Tell us what she's like?"). The present studies simply show that having extraordinary experiences can sometimes spoil our interactions with those who did not share them, and that we cannot always predict when this will happen. It is easier to imagine the rocket that will take us into space, it seems, than the people who will bring us down to earth.

Author Contributions

All authors developed the study concepts and contributed to the study designs. G. Cooney collected and analyzed the data; D. T. Gilbert and G. Cooney drafted the manuscript, and T. D. Wilson provided critical revisions; all authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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