The Effects of Uncertainty on Interpersonal Relationships

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent literature reveals not only a curvilinear relationship between uncertainty and obtained pleasure, but a distinction between individuals' preference for uncertainty partially dependent on various personality factors. This study focuses specifically on uncertainty within interpersonal relationships, to look at how individuals with varying levels of need for cognition and propensity for risk taking react, in terms of reported satisfaction ratings, to uncertain situations in the form of social feedback.

**INTRODUCTION**

Interpersonal relations play an important part in an individual's life. Humans as social creatures are motivated to establish and maintain intimate relationships with others, and many individuals define themselves in relation to these close relationships (Knoblock, Westerbeck & Kapringer, 2008). In terms of what makes a relationship fulfilling, however, various individual differences in relation to personality factors, expectations, preference for cognitive ability, the uncertainty of the results, how much control is involved, and so forth (Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009). For the purpose of this study we focused on uncertainty—the state in which an individual lacks information about whether, when, how, or why, an event has occurred or will occur (Bar-Anan et al.)—and its relation to reported mood within relationships. Uncertainty typically has two components: an informational component, where there exists some deficit in knowledge, and a subjective component, which is a feeling of not knowing (Bar-Anan et al., 2009). While some relationships involve a high level of uncertainty, other relationships are more predictable and less uncertain.

Uncertainty thus varies within relationships depending on individual preference; while some individuals may enjoy this state of "not knowing," other individuals constantly seek out information in order to predict and control their environment (Bar-Anan et al., 2009).

Research shows, however, that the paradoxical result of sense-making is that the more some of their affect as they lose their certainty, and thus in working to understand an event in order to predict and control their environment (Bar-Anan et al., 2009). The ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for the Ally Uncertainty Scale, F(1,63)=7.196, p<0.009, n²=.129. As shown in Figure 1, the higher the level of uncertainty experienced, the better the mood reported, and the more excited the participant was to meet his/her matched partner. The nonlinearity demonstrates that uncertainty does in fact intensify affective reactions.

**METHOD**

Participants were asked to fill out several personality questionnaires, and informed that their results would be analyzed by a prospective match that they were about to meet. While waiting to be matched up, participants filled out questionnaires concerning their preference for uncertainty, being told these questions were part of an irrelevant study. Once receiving their results, a brief or detailed description of their match, the participants filled out several questions indicating their mood (excitement/terror and anxiety (low/high) about meeting the individual. This response to the other certain or uncertain condition revealed how individuals differed in their responses to uncertainty.

**RESULTS**

In order to examine the effect of uncertainty on reported mood, a 2 (high/low certainty) x 2 (positive/negative mood) between subjects ANOVA was conducted. The ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for Need for Cognition, F(1,63)=4.404, p=.041, n²=.096, and a significant interaction between Need for Cognition and preference for uncertainty, M(25.052), certainty (M=24.208). While analysis of simple main effects showed only an appreciating of significance, the pattern remained the same: those preferring uncertainty reported more excitement to meet their partner whereas those preferring certainty reported less excitement to meet their partner when uncertain about meeting their partner. The nonlinearity demonstrates that uncertainty does in fact intensify affective reactions. The significant correlation between Need for Cognition and reported mood revealed a finding consistent with past research: when confronted with a situation high in uncertainty, individuals reported increased positive affect than when confronted with a situation low in uncertainty. When looking at the simple main effects, we see that those preferring uncertainty had a significant decrease in mood when confronted with a situation high in certainty. However, those preferring certainty, though reporting more pleasurable moods in certain situations, still reported high affect when approached with a highly uncertain situation. This reiterates the point made by the Pleasure Paradox: despite the attraction of sense-making, attempting to predict one's environment lowers ones emotional response to it, whereas uncertainty can increase or maintain the affective response.

The significant correlation between Need for Cognition and Uncertainty preference was also consistent with our hypothesis, in that those preferring uncertainty scored lower in NFC than those preferring certainty. It is important to note that among those scoring low in NFC, the preference for uncertainty remained high in both groups. It is in the preference for Certainty that a significant difference was noted: those scoring low in NFC reported a slight increase in preference for Certainty, while those scoring high in NFC reported a significant decrease in preference for Certainty. This leaves us with the question: is it that uncertain situations are satisfying regardless of cognitive differences? What would account for the similar means in preference for certainty between the high/low NFC groups?

The significant correlation between Need for Closure and reported mood proved opposite of what was originally predicted: those scoring higher in closure reported increased excitement when faced with the uncertainty situation compared to the certainty situation. This nonetheless makes sense: it seems practical that those preferring closure would wish to meet the stranger in order to obtain the certainty— the closure—they require. Thus, the 'excitement' to meet the individual in a highly uncertain situation can be formed more accurately as 'aversive'. These results have many implications for future research. The expansion of uncertainty preference to several life facets—relationships, occupations, education, interests, life choices—leaves room for extensive future research. The extent of satisfaction gained from uncertainty in high uncertainty, and will generally can be tolerated before the maximum threshold is reached, should be just some of many areas for research. Applying this research to various life aspects can increase satisfaction in many areas of life—such as the workplace or at home—has exhilarating innovations.

**REFERENCES**

