

Future offenses cause more intense feelings than past actions, study finds

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People feel worse about a transgression that will take place in the future than an identical one that occurred in the past, according to new research from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

Thinking about future events tends to stir up more emotions than events in the past, said Eugene Caruso, an assistant professor of [behavioral science](#) at Chicago Booth who conducted the research which appeared recently in the [Journal of Experimental Psychology: General](#).

Whether an event has happened or will happen, can affect people's perceptions of [fairness](#) and morality, such that [judgments](#) will tend to be more extreme for offenses that could happen in the future rather than those that already took place, he found.

In one of the study's experiments, participants were asked how they felt about a soft drink vending machine that automatically raised prices in hot weather. When told that the vending machine would be tested the following month, participants felt more strongly that adjusting prices was unfair compared to another group that was told that the machine had been tested in the previous month.

People also are more likely to think that a future offense deserves harsher punishment. In another experiment, participants were told about a dilemma faced by two late-night TV hosts in December 2007 when their shows' writers went on strike.

The hosts eventually chose to go back on the air without the writers. The group of participants that was told about this decision a week before the shows returned thought that the move was less acceptable than the group that was informed a week after the shows were broadcasted. Moreover, the group that was told in advance said they would watch the shows less.

That future events evoke more intense emotional responses also applies to good deeds. The results of another experiment show that a large charitable donation made people feel better, and rate the donation as more generous, when it would be made in the future than when it was given in the past.

Why then is the future more evocative than the past? In general, people respond to future situations with heightened emotions as a way to prepare themselves for action, Caruso said. Thus, even though they do not actually have control over something that is about to happen -- as the study's experiments show -- this "overlearned" response to the future persists.

Moreover, people seem to be good at rationalizing and making sense of emotional experiences. Once these events have passed, they become ordinary and the emotions associated with them less extreme.

If past harm is indeed perceived as less severe than future harm, then one perverse consequence is that past injustices will be generally met with less severe punishment than future misdeeds. Thus, those looking to behave unethically may take advantage of the knowledge that people tend to forgive past transgressions more leniently than future ones. This can apply to individuals, corporations, or governments that decide to engage in risky or unethical behavior with the expectation that the consequences will be less severe once their actions have taken place.

A tobacco company, for instance, that wants to introduce a potentially

harmful but profitable new product may come to the conclusion that it is better to proceed and deal with the consequences after the fact. Although the fallout for any unethical action may be severe, those evaluating the decision once it has passed may judge it relatively less harshly than those contemplating it before it has started.

Provided by University of Chicago

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