

Great expectations: Interpretation of positive or negative information is all a matter of anticipation, psychologist say

August 21 2012, By Greg Tammen

(Medical Xpress) -- Each month a new jobs report is issued in the United States. Each month the report is also met with criticism even if jobs are added.

But a person's decision to view increased hires as a positive or negative may be a matter of how outcomes compare to expectations, said Michael Young, professor and psychology department head at Kansas State University.

According to Young, placing more people in jobs may seem like a positive, but if the numbers are lower than [economists](#) project or are not enough to lower the [unemployment rate](#), then the addition can be seen as a negative.

"You can push around the apparent positivity and [negativity](#) of the outcome by reframing it, and can thereby provide a different [benchmark](#) for comparison," Young said. "Creating 80,000 jobs is better than 20,000 jobs. But creating 80,000 jobs when 180,000 are needed to hold unemployment constant is not so good."

[Psychologists](#) have labeled the mismatch between expectations and actual outcomes as the contrast effect.

[Politicians](#) frequently use the effect to reframe information, giving it

either a positive or negative spin that best serves their purposes and appeals to their base.

"The problems really arise when people fail to do the necessary digging because we like one spin over another since it fits our own suppositions," Young said. "Given that our president is currently a [Democrat](#), a Democratic supporter might be more critical of data that put a negative spin on a jobs report and try to find data that disconfirms the negative framing. If the spin is positive, the Democrat may not look further into the data. The opposite was the case when there was a [Republican](#) in the White House."

Outside of the political arena, Young said the [Christmas season](#) can also see a mismatch between expectations and reality.

"It's like the kid who gets 10 gifts at Christmas and says, 'Is that all?' because he or she expected a huge pile like the ones on TV or a bigger haul than the neighbor got," Young said.

Likewise, animals show similar positive and negative stances when it comes to expectations and the actual outcome. For example, a pigeon will show excitement by responding faster if it receives two food pellets when the custom has been to only receive one. The pigeon will show frustration and disappointment by responding more slowly for the same two pellets, however, if it is expecting the customary four food pellets but only receives two.

Sometimes a negative view on a situation can have a positive effect, Young said.

Gossip, for example, is a form of sharing negative information. Although once dismissed as white noise, some researchers have since determined that gossip helps clarify, communicate and enforce socially

acceptable behaviors that are not published in laws, rulebooks or manuals.

"If I complain about someone's bad breath or cellphone etiquette, there's an implicit message that 'you' should be careful to brush your teeth or not answer your cellphone," Young said. "Interestingly, though, we won't complain about those behaviors to someone who we know when they're engaging in them, but children have no such compunctions."

Similarly, talking about troubles and negative situations helps some people handle complex and frustrating situations.

"It externalizes our own failures so it's about the situation, not about me," Young said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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