Dashed hopes and shattered dreams: On the psychology of disappointment
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Introduction

It is not simply a change of state that makes for happiness; there must be something unexpected about it.

We would very soon have got bored by knowing that we were certain not to be really disappointed.

(After Charles Darwin)
No childhood passes without disappointment about a birthday present; adolescence seems to be incomplete without a disappointing love affair, and hardly anyone is a stranger to the unpleasant feeling that stems from buying an expensive product that turns out to be a lemon. Life without disappointment seems remarkably rare. This is partly due to the fact that we tend to be optimistic about our future, and tend to have hopes, dreams, and expectations that good things will happen to us (Scheier & Carver, 1985). People are also optimistic when comparing themselves to others. Thus, people tend to believe that they are more likely than others to have gifted children, to get a good first job, and to earn a high salary (Weinstein, 1980). People also believe that they will be happier, more confident, more hardworking, and less lonely in the future than their peers (Perloff, 1987). However, we cannot always have what we want, our hopes are often dashed, our dreams shattered, and our expectations unfulfilled; all instances that give rise to the experience of disappointment. People can be disappointed about a lot of things, ranging from extremely important things such as being turned down by the love of their life, not getting the job they always wanted, or losing the final of the soccer World Championship, to more mundane events such as seeing a dreadful movie, eating a lousy dinner, or reading a boring book. Although disappointment is frequently experienced, it has attracted only limited research attention.

The lack of attention disappointment has received is surprising, not only because it is a frequently experienced emotion, but also because it can have clear motivational and behavioural consequences. When certain actions or situations lead to disappointment, people could be inclined to refrain from these actions or avoid specific situations in the future. For example, when your carefully planned and prepared birthday party turns out to be a major disaster, you are likely to feel terribly disappointed and may decide not to arrange such a party in the future. Disappointment may also motivate someone to try harder, in order to make up for the earlier disappointment (cf. Higgins, 1989). Thus, your disappointing birthday party could make you decide to do your utmost for next year’s party in order to make it an outstanding success. The experience of disappointment could also have implications for interpersonal behaviour. When your best friend disappoints you, for example, by not showing up at your carefully planned birthday party, this could have implications for your future interaction with this friend. Furthermore, disappointment may also result in resetting one’s targets. Instead of giving a birthday party you may decide to spend a quiet dinner with a few friends.

Not only can the experience of disappointment have an impact on behaviour; but its anticipation can also influence behaviour. People may be motivated to avoid actions or situations that can lead to the experience of disappointment. Research in the field of behavioural decision making has shown that negative emotions that are experienced as a result of decisions tend to become anticipatory (Janis & Mann, 1977). For example, you might decide not to arrange another birthday party, because of the risk that it will again turn out to be a disappointment; or you might decide not to apply for a job because you might not get it. The anticipation of disappointment and the strategies available to mitigate disappointment are addressed in more detail later in this introduction.
WHAT IS DISAPPOINTMENT?

The typical dictionary definition of disappointment relates disappointment to expectations. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary describes disappointment as: "Frustration or non-fulfilment of expectation, intention or desire;" Webster's New World Dictionary describes disappointment as: "To fail to satisfy hopes or expectations." What seems to be central in disappointment is an expectation that is not fulfilled. The relation between disappointment and expectation was already present in the work of Shand (1914). Near the beginning of this century he described disappointment as follows:

In disappointment there is the thought and expectation of an end being realised followed by its sudden frustration; or the experience of the end being realised, and of its failing below expectation. The event being always unexpected, surprise enters into the emotion. The law of disappointment is therefore that: Whenever we think and expect that the end desired, or any process auxiliary to it, will be realised, or that, being realised, it will attain to a certain character, then, when it is not realised, or does not attain to this character, we tend to feel disappointed.

(Shand, 1914, p. 467)

Other authors also stress the role of expectations as a central feature of disappointment. For example, Frijda (1986, p. 280) described disappointment as: "Nonachievement of an expected outcome," Bell (1985, p. 1) described it as: "A psychological reaction to an outcome that does not match up to expectations." Another central feature is that the expectation refers to something positive or desirable. According to Shand (1914) disappointment implies that we have been hopeful, if not confident, that something we desired would happen. He defines disappointment as an emotion that is closely linked to desire. Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988, p. 110) also stress the importance of both desire and non-fulfilment of an expected outcome in their definition of disappointment: "To be displeased about the disconfirmation of the prospect of a desirable event." Moreover, they state that the intensity of disappointment is affected by hope. High hopes give rise to more intense disappointment if these hopes are dashed. Mowrer (1960, p. 169) also relates disappointment to hope: "When a hope signal appears and then disappears the reaction is one of disappointment." In a slightly different vein, Frijda (1986, p. 287) links disappointment with promise: "Promises generally turn into disappointments when not fulfilled." Disappointment, thus, is experienced in a situation in which something positive was expected but did not occur. It seems to be closely linked with hope, desire, and promise.

Does the experience of disappointment depend on the reason why the desired outcome did not occur? In other words, is disappointment dependent upon attributions concerning the obtained (disappointing) outcome? Weiner, Russell, and Lerman (1979) describe disappointment as 'outcome dependent and attribution independent,' that is, an emotion that is experienced regardless of the perceived attribution for the event that led to the disappointment. In their research participants were asked to think of an occasion in which they did badly on a test. The reason for their poor performance was systematically varied. It was the result of lack of ability or effort, personality, bad luck, or other persons (e.g., teachers or friends). After recalling and describing a failure event, participants were asked how they felt in the situation, using three affective labels to characterise their emotional reactions. Results showed that disappointment was more or less equally often named in all
Weiner et al. inferred from these results that disappointment is not differentially associated with any single attribution (ability, effort, personality, others, or luck).

This conclusion seems somewhat premature in light of other findings. Smith and Kluegel (1982), for example, showed that people's disappointment about their perceived financial position in life is associated with external attributions (i.e., other factors than their ability, education, and effort). Frijda, Kuipers, and Ter Schure (1989) showed that events in which disappointment was experienced were seen as being caused by something other than the self. Finally, Zeelenberg et al. (1998c) found that external attributions were associated with more intense disappointment. In sum, disappointment is experienced in a situation in which something positive was expected but did not occur. Furthermore, results of several studies suggest that disappointment is mainly associated with external attributions.

Outcome-related and Person-related Disappointment

Disappointment is usually defined as a reaction to an event or an outcome that falls short of expectations, as illustrated by the definitions described earlier in this chapter. Disappointment, however, can also be a reaction to behavioural acts of others or oneself. People frequently say that they are disappointed in their friends for letting them down, or that they are disappointed in themselves. Outcome-related disappointment is best described as the result of an outcome that does not match up to expectations. Person-related disappointment, on the other hand, concerns a behavioural act of either oneself or another person that does not meet one's expectations of how one should have behaved in a certain situation. Thus, person-related disappointment is also an 'outcome-dependent and attribution dependent' emotion. However, in the case of person-related disappointment the experienced disappointment is attributed to the actor. Thus, disappointment about one's own behaviour is expected to be associated with internal attributions, while disappointment in another is likely to be accompanied by dispositional attributions about that person.

ANTICIPATION OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Frijda (1994) stated that "actual emotions, affective response, anticipation of emotions or the anticipation of future emotions can be regarded as the primary source of decisions" (p. 118). Not surprisingly, the role of the anticipation of disappointment has attracted most attention in the field of behavioural decision making. The role of disappointment in decision making was first explored by Bell (1985), and Loomes and Sugden (1986). Their work diverges from the classical consequential view of decision making. The central proposition of their theories is that individuals form expectations about uncertain prospects. If the actual consequence turns out to be worse than what was expected, people will experience a sensation of disappointment. This sensation generates a decrement of utility, which modifies the basic utility derived from the consequences (Loomes & Sugden, 1987).

Basically, the decision maker's disappointment is assumed to be a function of the difference between what (s)he expected and what (s)he got. More formally, disappointment = dp(x-y) in a lottery where x is at least as preferred as y, p is the probability of winning, and d is a constant reflecting the degree to which a unit of disappointment affects the decision maker (see Bell, 1985, p. 5). Bell argued that although psychological feelings of disappointment and
elation (the positive counterpart of disappointment) are ignored in rational economic analysis, they play a role in the evaluation of alternatives by decision makers. People who anticipate these feelings may take them into account, for example, when comparing uncertain alternatives. This is in line with Janis and Mann (1977), who argued that negative emotions that are experienced tend to become anticipatory and can have an impact on decision making.

FUNCTIONS OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Emotions do not simply occur; they also signal events that are relevant to the individual’s well-being or concerns (Frijda, 1994). They can be considered as a mechanism for signalling to the organism’s cognitive and action systems that events are favourable or harmful to its ends. They serve as feedback (Carver & Scheier, 1990), or as information (Schwarz & Clore, 1988) about the nature and urgency of the situation. This information can serve as data for judgment and decision making processes (Carver & Scheier, 1990), as well as for reordering processing priorities (Schwarz, 1990). Not only do emotions have a signalling or informative function; they can also serve as motivators for behaviour aimed at dealing with these emotional events. Frijda stated that: "Emotions exist for the sake of signalling states of the world that have to be responded to, or that no longer need response or action."

Negative emotions, such as disappointment, frustration, and regret result from threat or harm to some concern, goal, or motive (cf. Frijda, 1994), or from the realisation that the rate of progress towards a goal is less than expected (Carver & Scheier, 1990). They inform the individual that the current situation is problematic, and that it is characterised either by a lack of positive outcomes or by the threat of negative outcomes (Schwarz, 1990). Negative emotions alert or inform the individual that some action should be undertaken in order to set things right or prevent unpleasant things from actually occurring (Frijda, 1994; Schwarz, 1990).

Disappointment is no exception to this; in disappointment an unexpected event seems suddenly to arrest the process of desire; and disappointment registers that fact. Furthermore, disappointment seems to correct the "excesses" of hope and confidence (cf. Shand, 1914). Or as Stanley (cited in Shand, 1914, p. 488) puts it: "Disappointment turns life from false dreams to stern realities: It prompts to an investigation of causes, and arouses cognition to a full understanding of the situation. Hope thereby, becomes more rational and realisable." Disappointment serves the useful function of counteracting the excesses of hope and suppressing confidence or optimism that is not well-founded. However, when it excludes hope, confidence, or optimism it could hinder behavioural action; that is, it could discourage us from new undertakings.

Anticipating disappointment can be quite functional. As Shand (1914) noted, "There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, this maxim disappointment teaches. We become therefore to expect failures and disappointments, and to feel them less keenly because we have expected them." This is consistent with Averill (1968) who argued that the function of emotions is not only situated in direct dealings with the emotional event, but can also be of an anticipatory and preventive nature. The anticipation of disappointment could serve the function of prompting a person to intensify his or her efforts or preparations to avoid a negative outcome. Thus, the anticipation of disappointment could help prepare us for a
possible negative outcome, or intensify our effort in order to avoid a possible negative outcome.

THIS DISSERTATION

The issues we investigate in the remaining chapters (2-9) of this dissertation are outlined below. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on the experience and the appraisal pattern of disappointment. We investigate what kind of emotion it is and how it can be distinguished from other negative emotions.

In Chapter 2 we investigate the experience of disappointment. First, we examine several general aspects of the experience of disappointment. We address the frequency, duration, and painfulness of disappointment, and examine three common assumptions about the experience of disappointment. These three basic assumptions concern whether disappointment is an aversive emotion; that is, a negative emotion that people do not like to experience (see e.g., Bell, 1985; Loomes & Sugden, 1986). A second, related assumption is that people also try to avoid the experience of disappointment (see e.g., Armor & Taylor, 1998; Bell, 1985; Loomes & Sugden, 1986; Shepperd, Ouellette & Fernandez, 1996). A third assumption we examine is that when people cannot avoid disappointment, they try to minimise or get rid of it (see e.g., Armor & Taylor, 1998). In Chapter 2 we also investigate the subjective experience of disappointment. Among the issues we address are: What feelings and cognitions accompany disappointment? Which behaviours are people likely to engage in when experiencing disappointment? What actions do they take and what motives or goals are associated with the experience of disappointment?

In Chapter 3 we examine the relationship between disappointment and type of negative outcome. We argue that negative emotions can result from two different negative situations. They can be the result of either the absence of a positive outcome ("not having what you want") or the presence of a negative outcome ("having what you do not want"). We investigate the hypothesis that disappointment is caused more by the absence of a positive outcome than by the presence of a negative outcome. Furthermore, we test the hypothesis that the absence of a positive outcome plays a larger role in disappointment than in related negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, frustration, and regret.

In Chapter 4 we examine the distinction between two kinds of disappointment, that is, outcome-related disappointment and person-related disappointment. The former refers to disappointment about an outcome, the latter to disappointment in a person. First, we examine which kinds of disappointment people have in mind when asked about disappointment in general. Second, we investigate the relationship between outcome-related disappointment and disconfirmed expectations, and the relationship between person-related disappointment and violated norms or standards. Third, we examine the appraisal patterns associated with outcome-related and person-related disappointment. Furthermore, we compare these patterns to those of four related negative emotions (sadness, anger, frustration, and regret). Outcome-related disappointment, person-related disappointment, and the four related negative emotions are described in terms of various appraisal dimensions, such as motivational state, legitimacy, and agency.
In Chapters 5-7 we investigate three variables that are assumed to affect the intensity of (outcome-related) disappointment. Chapter 5 examines the effect of the prior probability of obtaining a desired outcome on the intensity of disappointment (when the outcome is not obtained), and compare this to the impact of prior probability on the intensity of elation (when the outcome is obtained). Chapter 6 investigates the impact of investing effort (to obtain a desired outcome) on the intensity of disappointment, and compare this to the impact of effort investment on the intensity of regret. In Chapter 7 we investigate the impact of the degree to which a desired outcome is realised, on the intensity of disappointment. Finally, we simultaneously investigate the impact of the three intensity variables, probability, effort, and realisation. In this study the impact of these variables on the intensity of disappointment is examined in a field study, using athletes as respondents.

In Chapter 8 we focus on the anticipation of disappointment and ask how people cope with disappointing experiences. In one study we ask people which strategies they use to avoid disappointment or to reduce the intensity of disappointment. Next, we test the hypothesis that people tend to lower their expectations when confronted with an uncertain (and possible disappointing) outcome. Furthermore, we test the hypothesis that people are more likely to lower their expectations when feedback about a self-relevant outcome is expected, and when this feedback is near in time.

Finally, in Chapter 9 we summarise and discuss the findings of the studies presented in this dissertation.