

When does a near-miss sting?

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Abstract

Near misses—missing the desired outcome by a small margin—are more emotionally intense than normal misses, even though the outcomes tend to be no different, and people readily accord near-miss effects when reasoning about others. Yet there are still open questions: what are the distance dimensions along which near misses are judged, and how do people incorporate near misses into more general affective cognition (or reasoning about emotion). In this paper we show that intuitive theories of emotion seem to weigh near-misses even for random events, and this is driven by the semblance of action-outcome contingency. Finally, we incorporate near misses into a larger model of affective cognition, and quantify the psychological cost of a near-miss relative to winning and losing.

Keywords: Near Miss; Counterfactual Distance; Lay Theories; Emotion

“Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades” – English Idiom

When Rob achieves a desired outcome, such as winning a soccer match, we intuitively know that he would feel positive. Conversely, when Rob fails to achieve an outcome, we can reason that he would feel negative. If he just fails to achieve the outcome by a small margin, a *near-miss*, such as losing a soccer game by a single goal, we intuitively recognize that he actually would feel worse, because the outcome was so close. Penalty shootouts in soccer provides the most exaggerated of such near-miss scenarios: the losing team often loses because of one missed ball, sometimes an inch shy of escaping the goalkeeper’s hands. These details add much more emotional intensity to all agents involved, more so than just a simple loss. Contrary to the above idiom, close counts—*emotionally*.

Such intuitive reasoning about emotions comprise what we call *affective cognition*, or reasoning about emotions and other affective states (some citations xxx, Ong, Zaki, & Goodman, under review). Psychologists have long known that near-misses form an integral, but surprisingly not well understood part of affective cognition (Johnson, 1986; Gleicher et al., 1990). Most of this work falls under the broader category of counterfactual thinking (Byrne, 2002; McMullen & Markman, 2002; Medvec & Savitsky, 1997; Roese, 1997). Near-miss counterfactuals are particularly engaging to think about, because these possible worlds almost happened: they were separated from the current world by some small “distance”. Consider Kahneman and Tversky (1982)’s classic example of Mr Tees, who missed his plane by 5 minutes, and Mr Crane, who missed his plane by 30 minutes. Both men were delayed due to traffic, but people consistently and reliably judge the person who narrowly missed his plane to feel much worse than the one who missed it by a wider margin.

One proposed *causally-relevant* explanation for the near miss effect is that of controllability: Mr Tees could easily think of actions he could have done differently (“if only I woke up ten minutes earlier”) that would have led to him catching the plane.

There however, remains many open questions, and we list just three of them here. First, what is the nature of these “counterfactual distances” — the distances that separate the desired-but-unattained counterfactual world from the current world. The answer most commonly proposed by the current literature asserts that people should consider causally-relevant dimensions, like the amount of time one misses a plane by. This would predict that people should not exhibit near miss effects in their lay theory when considering games of chance, or random events, as the causal process that generated the outcomes are based on chance. This however, is not intuitive; gamblers, for example, persist more after near misses, indicating a near-miss effect on motivation, even though the outcome of gambling tasks such as slots are independent of the gambler’s actions (Kassinove & Schare, 2001; Reid, 1986). In Experiment 1, we show that observers readily judge an agent who “narrowly misses” on a die game (by rolling a number close to the target number) to feel worse than one who misses by a larger amount, even though outcomes on a die game are not ordered like the number line.

Second, how do observers reason using these distance dimensions? Depending on the context, different dimensions of distance should matter to different extents. In Experiment 2, we show that observers are sensitive to contextual shifts that change the relevance of different distances in a random card-guessing task. (to discuss with Noah more on this point. [action-outcome contingency.](#))

Finally, how much does a near-miss cost psychologically? That is, what is the relative size of near miss effects relative to actually winning or losing an amount. In Experiment 3, we build upon a previous model of affective cognition (Ong, Zaki, & Goodman, under review) and explicitly incorporate modeling of near-miss effects into this quantitative model. This allows us to estimate relative effect sizes, and shed more light on their modeling.

(Only Experiment 2 is ready so far.).

Predictions

Experiment 2: Changing the relevant dimensions

We designed Experiment 2 to dissociate closeness effects along different dimensions. Using a card guessing task, we

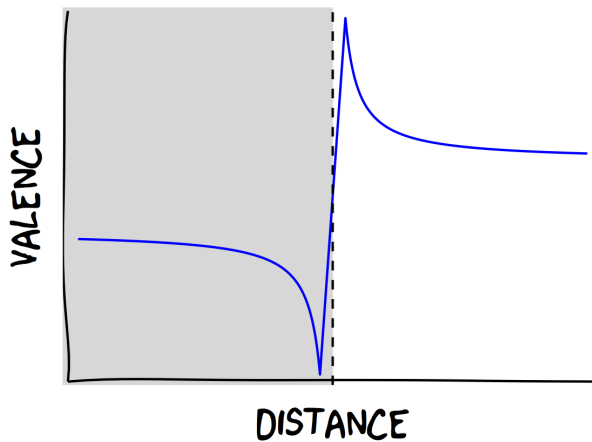


Figure 1: Prediction.

manipulated the task-relevance of both the positions of the cards or the numbers written on the cards, and showed that only near-miss effects along the task relevant-dimension are incorporated into observers' lay theory of emotion.

Participants. We recruited 300 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and assigned them to one of three conditions: Single-Trial-Position (N=100), Two-Trial-Position (N=100), Single-Trial-Number (N=100).

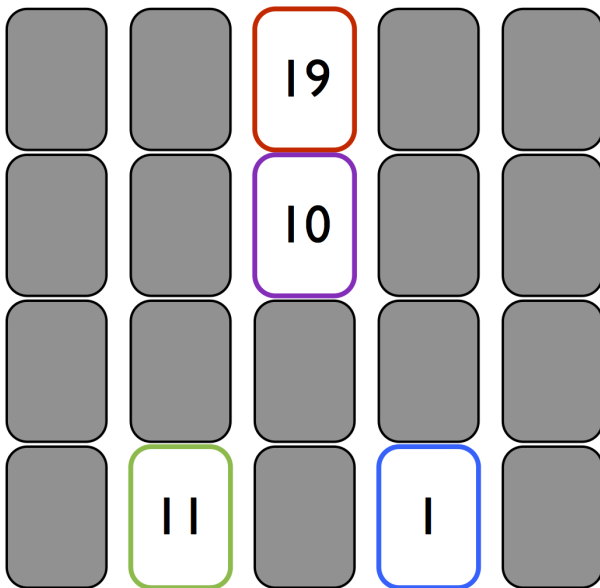


Figure 2: Expt 2 Paradigm. The target card, 10, is outlined in purple. 19 (red), is **Proximally** close, 11 (green) is **Numerically** close, while 1 (blue) is **Far** on both proximity and numerosity.

Procedures. In the Single-Trial-Position (ST-Pos) condition, participants saw a 5x4 array of cards face down. They

were told that two characters were playing a game: the cards were numbered 1-20, and they had to pick the number 10 to win. After the characters picked their cards, the winning number 10 is revealed (see Fig. 2) There were three possible characters (of which participants only saw two): Scott, who picked 19 (proximally-close), Frank, who picked 11 (numerically-close), and David, who picked 1 (far). Participants rated the emotions of the two characters they saw, before answering a forced-choice question "Who felt worse?", with the option to say "Both felt equally bad." In total there are 3 possible pairings ("Proximal vs. Numerical", "Proximal vs. Far", and "Numerical vs. Far"), which are all between subject manipulations. Each participant only saw one trial.

The Two-Trial-Position (TT-Pos) condition was similar to the ST-Pos condition, except that after characters picked their cards but before the winning card is revealed, participants make one set of emotion attributions and one forced-choice on who felt worse. Following this, the winning number 10 is revealed, and then participants make another set of attributions.

In the Single-Trial-Number (ST-Num) condition, we changed the rules of the game. There were 19 blank cards, and a target card (circled in purple). Characters were assigned a blank card and had to guess what the number was behind the target card, writing their answers on their assigned blank card. Thus, in the Position conditions, the number of the goal was known (10) while the position was unknown, characters picked a position and were assigned a number (based on their choice); in this Number condition, the position of the goal was known, but the number was unknown, and characters were assigned a position and picked a number. Importantly, the visual description that participants saw is similar to the Position conditions. Thus, after characters wrote their guesses, the winning number behind the purple card is revealed (to be 10). Participants then attributed emotions to the two characters.

Predictions. We predicted that in the Single-Trial-Position condition, proximity would be judged to be a more relevant dimension of closeness than numerosity, and so the proximally-close character would be judged to feel worse than the numerically-close character, although the numerically-close character would, to a lesser extent, be judged to feel worse than the character who chose the numerically and proximally far card. In the Single-Trial-Number condition, on the other hand, proximity is irrelevant, and so we predicted that the numerically close character would be judged to feel the worst, and there would be no difference between the proximally close character and the far character.

The Two-Trial-Position condition has an interesting twist. Prior to finding out the position of the winning card, position is still a more relevant dimension than numerosity, but not knowing the position of the winning card makes it impossible to judge closeness based on proximal distance. Observers should judge based on numerosity. At this point, there would be no difference between the proximally close and the

far characters, and we predicted that the numerically close character will be judged to feel the worse of them all (similar to ST-Num). However, after finding out the position of the winning card, proximal closeness becomes much more relevant, and we expect to see the proximally close character being judged the worst (similar to ST-Pos).

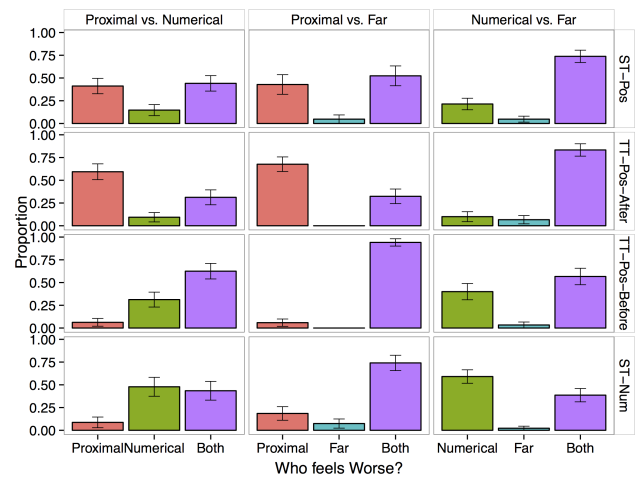


Figure 3: Expt 2 Results. Proportions of forced choice response. Note that the DV is “Who feels Worse?” Error bars indicate standard errors. Top row: Single-Trial-Position. 2nd row: Two-Trial-Position, after card is revealed. 3rd row: Two-Trial-Position, before card is revealed. Last row: Single-Trial-Number.

Results. Results for emotion attribution.

The results for the forced-choice ratings are in Fig. 3. In line with our predictions, we find that in the ST-Pos and TT-Pos (after the card was revealed) conditions, the proximally-close character was judged to feel the worst (TODO XXX STATS), and to a much smaller extent, the numerically-close character was judged to feel worse than the far character (TODO XXX STATS). In contrast, in the ST-Num and TT-Pos (before the card was revealed) conditions, the numerically close character is judged to feel worst (TODO XXX STATS).

Experiment 3

Fitting into model of AffCog
 Meta analysis results

Discussion

Acknowledgments

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