

Sadness and Consumption

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Abstract

Sadness has a curious effect on consumption. Sadness from one situation tends to carry-over to new situations, leading individuals to pay more in order to acquire new goods as well as to eat more unhealthy food (Garg, Wansink, & Inman, 2007; Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004). These undesirable consumption effects of sadness typically occur *without* awareness by those in the sad state; they also typically occur even when the sadness-eliciting events have no rationally-justifiable relation to the consumption choices at hand (Cryder, Lerner, Gross, & Dahl, 2008). Thus, the increased consumption represents more than typical, conscious attempts at “consumer therapy.” Rather, it represents unbidden and undesirable behavior. In two experiments (one with real food consumption and one with real monetary transactions), the present paper examined the hypothesis that sadness’ impact on consumption could be attenuated if the choice context counteracted appraisals of helplessness and enhanced a sense of individual control. Consistent with the hypothesis, results revealed that having a choice of gift (i.e., high individual control), rather than just receiving the very same gift (low individual control) reduced the carry-over of sadness to consumption. Implications for theories of affect and choice are discussed.

Keywords: Sadness, consumption, choice, decision making, affect, emotion

Sadness and Consumption

Research on incidental emotion has discovered the pervasive tendency of emotions to carry over from one situation to another, coloring behavior in unrelated tasks (for reviews, see Forgas, 1995; Isen, 1993; Keltner & Lerner, 2009; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Schwarz, 2000). Incidental emotions (i.e., normatively irrelevant, prior emotions) have been found to reliably influence numerous aspects of judgment and decision making, such as risk seeking (Johnson & Tversky, 1983; Lerner & Keltner, 2001), information processing (Isen, 2001; Tiedens & Linton, 2001), choice (Garg, Inman, & Mittal, 2005), and financial transactions (Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004).

One of the most curious carry-over examples involves sadness and consumption. It is curious for at least two reasons. First, its effects depart from what one would predict based on emotional valence. The standard prediction of a valence-based model would be that any negative emotion, including sadness, should trigger generalized negative valuation of, say, a new product. The idea is that a negative state leads one to perceive the world in negative ways. While disgust, another negative emotion, fits that predicted pattern, sadness in fact does not. Sadness actually triggers *positive valuation* of new products, as measured by willingness to pay (Lerner et al., 2004).

A second curious aspect of sadness and consumption is that the carry-over effect drives consumption behavior across diverse domains. In the domain of eating, for example, sadness (relative to happiness) leads to increased consumption of tasty, fattening food products, such as buttered popcorn and M&M candies (Garg et al., 2007). In the domain of monetary transactions, sadness (relative to a neutral state) leads to increased amount spent to purchase items (Lerner et al., 2004). And the more sad decision makers focus thoughts on themselves during the choice process, the more money they choose to pay in order to acquire a new object -- a phenomenon that has been labeled the "*miserly is not miserly effect*" (Cryder, Lerner, Gross, & Dahl, 2008).

Importantly, sadness in all these cases is *incidental* to the choice at hand. Decision makers are typically randomly assigned to a sadness induction (e.g., reflecting on past sad events) or a neutral-mood induction. According to the subjects themselves, the incidental sadness should have had no rational role in shaping the present choices. Yet it did have a role. Moreover, unlike making a conscious choice to engage in “retail therapy,” the sad feelings in all these studies carried over to the choice without decision makers realizing it. In fact, when decision makers were asked about the possibility of carry-over, they explicitly denied it (for example, see Cryder et al., 2008). Thus, the carry-over represents an unconscious, undesirable effect on spending and eating.

The Present Research

Understanding how to attenuate the undesirable effects of sadness on consumption is an important issue. Individuals do not want to pay more or over-consume when they are sad; yet they do so. Moreover, sadness and over-consumption/overspending may create negative, recursive cycles of behavior. Episodes of over-consumption/spending can themselves lead to negative moods, which then perpetuate these self-defeating behaviors (Leith & Baumeister, 1996).

Although a few studies across different laboratories have now documented carry-over effects of sadness on consumption (i.e., spending and eating), we do not know of any study that has discovered ways to significantly attenuate its effect on consumption. In the present research, we therefore seek to examine whether increasing decision makers’ sense of individual control and decreasing their sense of helplessness would moderate the carry-over effects. More generally, we aim to examine both the robustness of the effect of sadness on consumption as well as its moderating and mediating factors.

Hypotheses: Sadness and Choice

Sadness and Appraisal Themes

Sadness has been associated with the core themes of loss and helplessness (Keltner, Locke, & Audrain, 1993; Lazarus, 1991). Consistent with this, a heightened sense of situational, rather than

individual, control characterizes sadness (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Scherer, 1997; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1985). Accordingly, sadness may evoke implicit goals of changing one's circumstances (Lerner et al., 2004) and acquiring rewarding outcomes (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999) to compensate for the sense of loss and helplessness.

Sadness and Compensatory Behavior

Sadness has also been associated with conscious or unconscious attempts at mood repair (e.g., Raghunathan & Pham, 1999; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Wegener & Petty, 1994). For example, sad (vs. anxious) individuals are more likely to choose high-risk/ high-reward options (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999). More recently, research has revealed a wide range of what might be considered compensatory consumption effects. For example, sad individuals prefer to consume certain "comfort foods" or drinks, such as ice cream or hot tea as opposed to healthier alternatives (Wansink, Cheney & Chan, 2003). Sad individuals are less likely to restrain their consumption of a hedonic, rewarding food than are happy individuals (Garg et al., 2007) unless they believe that eating will not change their mood (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001). Furthermore, offering healthy, less hedonically rewarding food, such as raisins, reverses this effect. That is, in one study, happy individuals ate more raisins than sad individuals did (Study 2, Garg et al., 2007).

These results shed light on the mechanics underlying the relationship between sadness and consumption. Given the underlying themes of loss and helplessness associated with sadness (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Keltner & Lerner, 2009; Lazarus, 1991) as well as the pattern of compensatory consumption, could sadness' effect on consumption be attenuated by providing individuals greater individual control and diminished helplessness?

An opportunity to choose a hedonic (i.e., rewarding) gift, rather than merely being endowed with one, may attenuate the otherwise robust carry-over effect. A long line of research on perceived control and choice suggests that individuals prefer choice (vs. no-choice) because of its link to self-

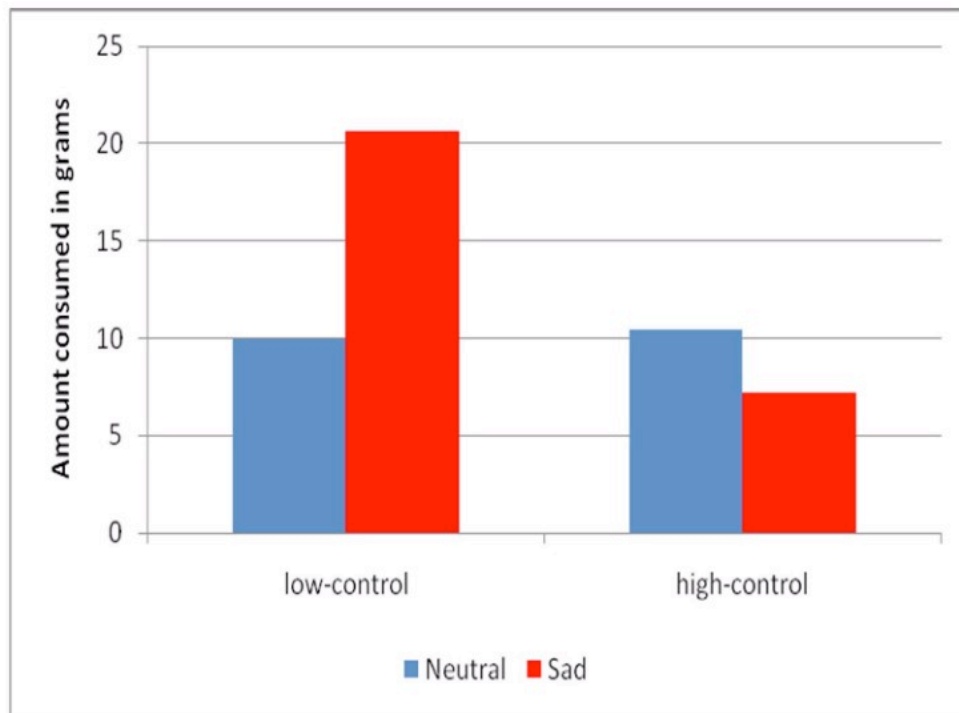


Figure 2. (Study 1) Participants in the sad condition only consumed more M&Ms (as measured in grams) when they were in the low-control condition.

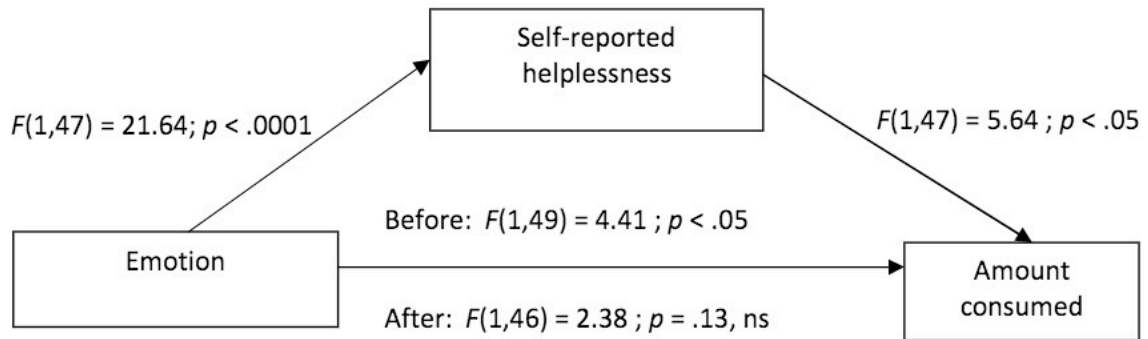


Figure 3. (Study 1) Self-reported helplessness mediates the effect of emotion on M&Ms consumed (in grams) in the *low-control* conditions.

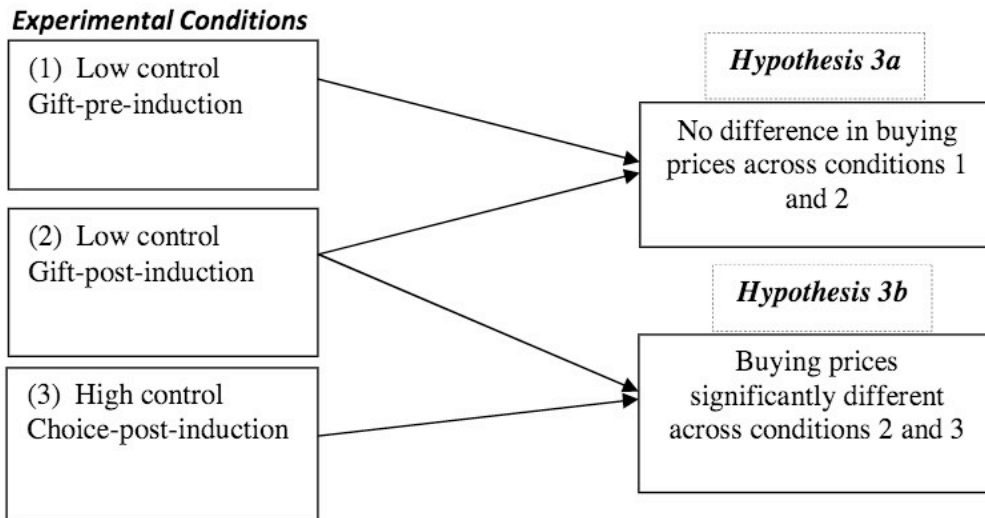


Figure 4. (Study 2) Diagrammatic Representation of Hypothesis 3.

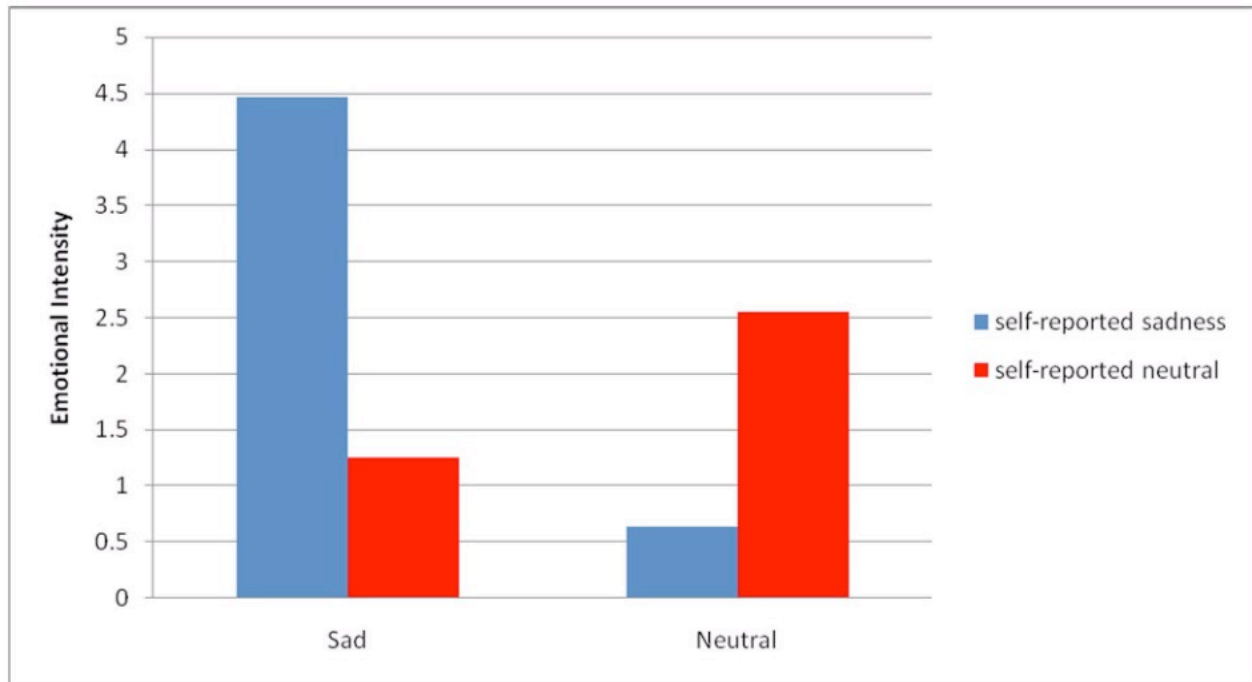


Figure 5. (Study 2) Manipulation check data reveal that the inductions had the intended effects.

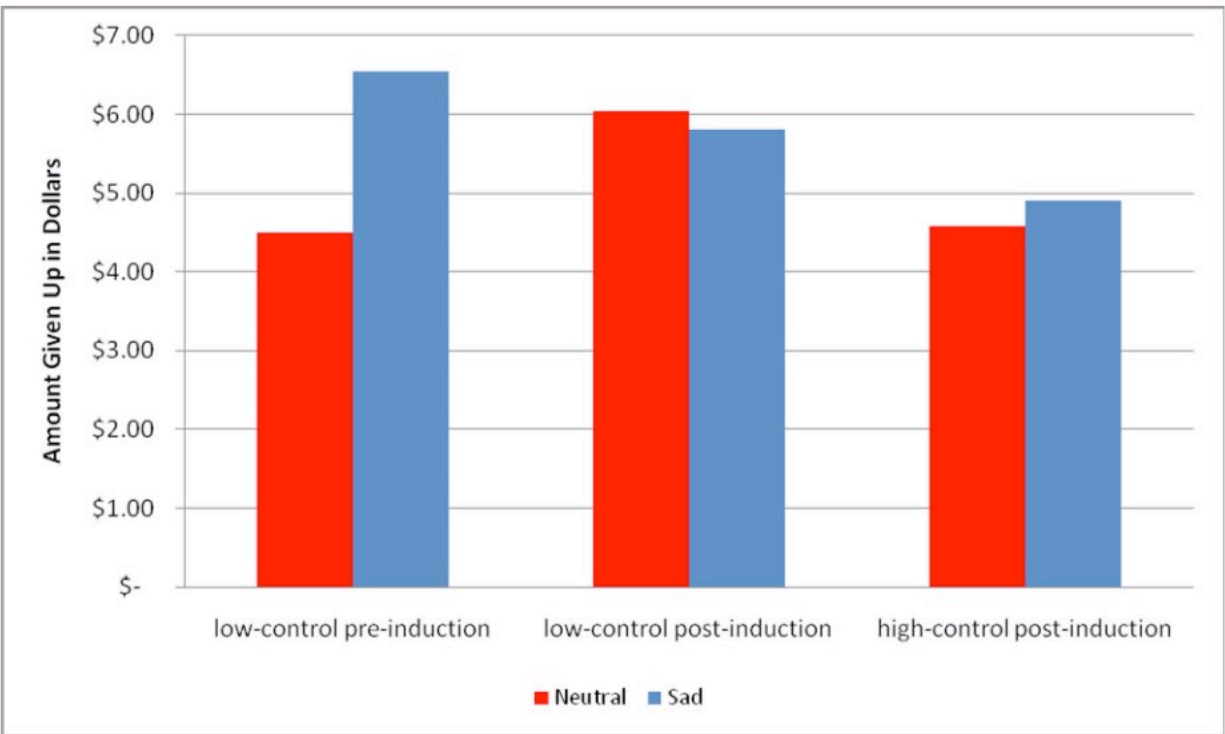


Figure 6. (Study 2) Participants in the sad condition were willing to lose more money in order to purchase the good when they had low control (pre- and post- emotion induction) but this effect is attenuated under high control.