Problems with Premortems: Self-serving attribution bias in a popular debiasing strategy

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Summary

In psychologists' attempts to mitigate one bias, might we magnify others? We demonstrate this accidental side effect in a series of studies investigating a popular debiasing strategy called the premortem.

The premortem – imagining a negative future outcome and identifying reasons why it occurred – is broadly endorsed by psychologists to mitigate overconfidence. **We find that while the premortem debiases overconfidence, it magnifies attribution bias.** Specifically, individuals doing a premortem engage in self-serving causal attribution, blaming their prospective failures on factors outside of their control (e.g., the weather, bad luck) rather than reasons within their control (e.g., their skill, efforts).

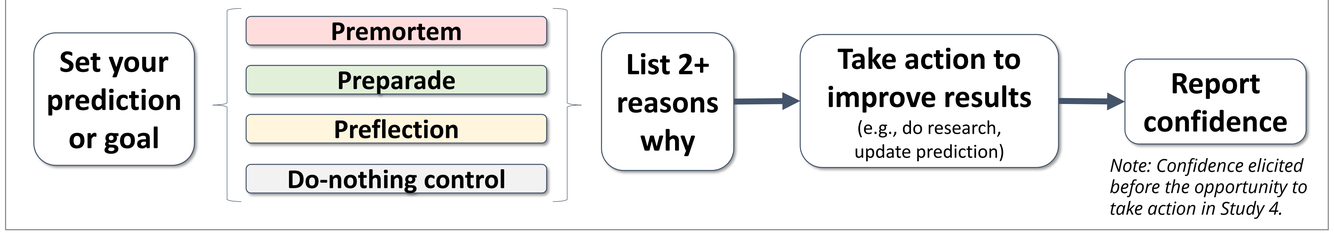
Across three pre-registered studies and one pilot (N=2345) in varied self-relevant domains, we compare the premortem to alternative exercises in which an individual might engage: the preparade (imagining a positive outcome), and the preflection (imagining outcomes without primed valence) or a do-nothing control. Especially compared to the preparade, the premortem (A) mitigates (over)confidence while (B) exacerbating attribution bias. No differences emerged in taking action to improve results.

Our data suggest caution in adopting debiasing tools such as the premortem without fully investigating their nuanced, secondary effects.

Overview of Studies

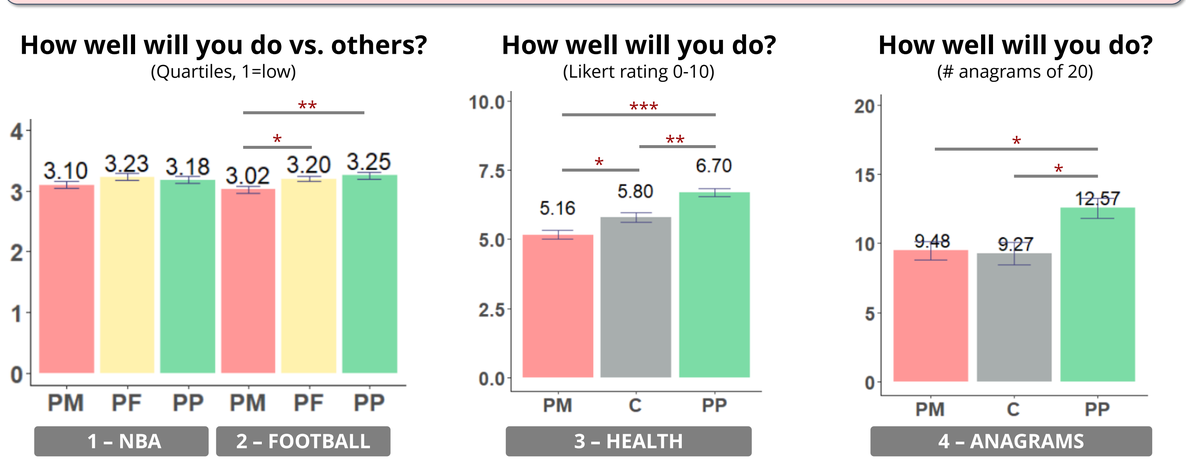
STUDY	DOMAIN	PAID FOR OUTCOME	SUBJECT POOL	TOTAL SAMPLE	CONDITIONS (IV): PRE-MORTEM (-)	PRE-PARADE (+)	PRE-FLECTION (?)	DO-NOTHING CONTROL
1	**NBA Playoff Predictions**	Y	MTurk	937	•	•	•	
2	**Fantasy Football Predictions**	Y	Prolific	708	•	•	•	
3	**Health Goal Achievement**	N	Prolific	615	•	•		•
4 Pilot	**Anagram Achievement**	Y	Prolific	85	•	•		•

Study Flow

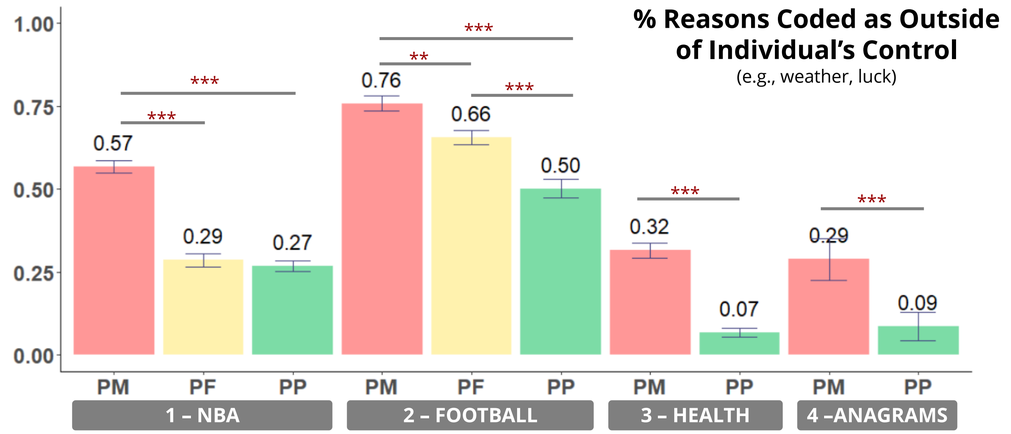


Results

(A) Mitigating overconfidence...



(B) ...but magnifying attribution bias



Key References

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