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Homo Prospectus

Martin E. P. Seligman, Peter Railton, Roy F. Baumeister
and Chandra Sripada • Oxford UP © 2016 • 400 pages

Life Advice / Psychology

Take-Aways

- Prospecion – the act of looking to the future – is central to the human mind and existence.
- Prospecion gives humans a competitive edge.
- Considering the future is useful in learning, cooperation and memory.
- A wandering mind is common and useful for learning and planning.
- Prospecion guides moral thinking: People anticipate future negative outcomes, and then act to avoid them and the negative emotions they bring.
- People don't construct the future in isolation. The future is a social construct.
- Prospecion plays a major role in culture. Shared vision promotes a sense of unity, while trust enables trade and social interaction.
- Prospecion is central to intelligence.
- Prospecion can go wrong and contribute to depression.
- Some components of creativity decline with age; others are stable or can increase.

Recommendation

The four authors of this dense but fascinating work offer varying perspectives on the human mind, drawing from philosophy, psychology and psychiatry. Together, *Learned Optimism* author Martin E. P. Seligman and professors Peter Railton, Roy F. Baumeister and Chandra Sripada argue that “prospection” – how people look toward the future – defines what it means to be human. They make an extended case integrating philosophical arguments with psychological studies in a larger biological or evolutionary context, and they illustrate their points with ample, interesting references to pop culture. The result is a worthwhile reflection on what it means to be a person. *getAbstract* recommends it to anyone interested in reflection and self-knowledge.

Summary

A Different Name

The name *Homo sapiens* means “wise man,” but that’s not a good label for humanity overall. Some people may become wise with effort, but attaining wisdom isn’t easy or automatic. To gain wisdom, people must practice “prospection,” looking forward and anticipating what will come in the best, most functional way. The term for human beings should be *Homo prospectus* instead.

“The future cannot be experienced directly, as long as it remains in the future. Hence it must be imagined.”

To use their resources effectively, people must plan for challenges. Anticipation gives people an edge in competition and helps them coordinate their activities. Anticipation is also an evolutionary edge. People look ahead, estimating what results different actions will cause. Any living thing must know it has to beat its competition. “In the game of life, life must win every moment of every day, while death has to win only once.”

“Contemplating the future appears to focus attention on uncertainties, possibilities and dangers.”

Anticipation is central to coding information, learning and memory. Human memory is dynamic. People continually re-evaluate the past, reshaping it and giving it new weight. Anticipation is bound up with decision making. You can make better decisions by imagining what might and might not happen. Building a model and testing it is an effective way to learn and to figure out your relationship with your environment. This model should be an active, evaluative map, with varying paths leading to possible actions and goals. This mental map evaluates experiences, and communicates its evaluations through emotions. Change the model if it doesn’t work.

“Scarcity and competition, and coordination and competition, are two sides of the same evolutionary coin.”

Your feelings aren't distinct from your thinking. Emotions are central to thought. Empathy lets people simulate or imagine how others see the world. People have a social nature that enables them to learn from each other, rather than learning only from what they experience directly.

Intuition and Affect

Intuition guides people through much of life. Insights from intuition often arrive even when people aren't seeking them. People acquire intuitions "implicitly," by accumulating a body of experience. Growing up using a language, you experience thousands of models. You use them below the level of consciousness to evaluate sentence structure.

"Human beings are social animals, indeed social in a way that is unprecedented in nature. Human beings use culture to organize their social life."

Your intuition works like a computer search program. As soon as you begin carrying out an action, it starts trying to match that action against patterns it already knows so it can make sense of it. This active processing yields evolutionary payoffs: Generating a superior anticipatory model brings clear survival benefits.

"Animals with bigger and more complex social networks had bigger brains than animals whose social worlds were more limited."

The brain continually processes and evaluates to prepare the mind for new thoughts. Its ongoing evaluations take the form of "affect," or emotion. These emotional communications often lead the body into action. People naturally trust their sensations. This is a survival trait: You learn from experience and anticipate the future more effectively when you trust your senses. You can use your affect and your positive or negative evaluations to guide what you do.

"Like time and energy, mental processing and nerve channel capacities are limited."

People tend toward a positive attitude as their "default affect." They reshape affective responses based on their experiences, but they also need the world to seem more positive than negative.

The "Separate Processors" School of Thought

In addition to intuition, you also can process information in a conscious, deliberate way. These two schools of thought or approaches seem qualitatively different. Intuition uses a nonverbal, experiential approach, while deliberative thought is a rational and verbal approach. However, this sharp division is only part of the picture. Yes, these approaches can clash – with intuition urging people in one direction while deliberation tugs them in another. But, ideally, they work together, with deliberation resting on an intuitive foundation.

"Intelligence is one of the core traits; one of its main functions – perhaps the primary and original function – is to predict the future."

Recent research and experience support this "massive reuse model." When people make decisions, they think rationally, but they also remember their past experiences and feel the emotions associated with them.

Studies show that “mind-wandering” is a common form of deliberation. Research results suggest that letting your mind drift links to the brain’s “default mode” and to a form of planning. Letting your mind wander enables it to build a general map of a situation and promotes learning.

“Without a culture that has an established future, nobody would build, let alone invent, an airplane.”

The recent, highly influential “Complementary Learning Systems” (CLS) model sees memory as also using two systems. One is detailed but shallow. The other is deeper, applies more abstract thought and identifies patterns. Repeating examples fuel this system, promoting pattern recognition. The hippocampus repeatedly recalls detailed memories to facilitate deep learning.

Creating the Future

People do not create the future alone. The future “is socially and culturally constructed.” Commercial flights take place on physical airplanes, but the system of scheduling and booking flights is a social construct, as is the exchange of money that pays for building the planes, training the pilots, and the like. Shared social realities spring from evolution. One person would find it hard to escape a charging lion, but working in groups, people kill lions.

“Beings with excellent maps but no goals can wander, but only by chance will they stumble upon what they want or need.”

In an evolutionary framework, competition comes long before cooperation. Species compete, as do individuals. In many primate groups, every monkey does something crucial alone. By contrast, humans cooperate, but that requires trust. Trust depends on and assumes prospection. Trusting someone assumes that if you act now, that person will repay you later, either directly or through social rewards and approval.

Applying Prospection

Prospection multiplies the power of culture. It allows groups to engage in “collective planning” and to share a vision of a desired future. Shared visions support economic exchanges. Prospection plays a role in morality. While early cultures developed both religion and ethics, the two did not link closely to each other. The Greek gods acted selfishly and childishly. Over time, the nature of gods changed. Gods became grander, more knowing and more ethical. These “big gods” promote morality and trust: Trust comes more easily with people who share your concept of god.

“Thinking of prospection as a matter of a solitary individual imagining things forward in time is seriously deficient and perhaps slightly absurd.”

When people think about the past, their purpose usually is to make sense of it so they can better deal with the present and future. But when people consider the future, which they do a lot, they need to assume that they can shape it.

All learning and planning orient to the future. Planning is essential to prospection: It unites past, present and future. Building connections among your actions across time adds meaning to each individual action. Planning is tiring “mental work.” People tend to be “relentlessly and unrealistically optimistic” about their personal future. They deal with the future more accurately only when trying to make decisions, but they revert to optimism because it feels good and builds confidence.

Intelligence and Free Will

One useful definition of intelligence includes an evolutionary component: People developed intelligence to become better at predicting the future. When you live in a group, you need to know how your actions will affect others and how they will respond. People use “construction processes” to assemble their options. They mentally examine a series of choices, extrapolating them as realistically as they can. They evaluate which ones achieve their goals, and then use the “selection processes” to choose. The breadth of people’s options defines humans as a species.

“The deadliest predator on the planet is not the strongest or swiftest, but the one with the longest time horizon of anticipation.”

People face alternatives that are fundamentally different, not just different in degree – like deciding between going to fight in a war or staying home to care for an aged parent. Having free will means people can express who they are “in numerous and diverse ways.” Free will has a subjective component: People experience themselves as being able to choose. Free will means making choices, taking one path or another.

Considering the Future

Emotions play a complex role in thinking about the future. People who are engaged in prospection feel emotions in the present as signals of what they expect to feel in the future. Emotions “stimulate reflection.” But, when you weigh your emotional responses, you need to distinguish between fully realized emotions and “automatic affect.” People’s more developed emotions generate automatic affects or emotions about the future. These automatic feelings appear and fade quickly, and may remain unconscious. They are simple reactions, registering as quick positive or negative evaluations.

“Anticipation, it turns out, is at the heart of effective learning, for it is through the formation of expectations that an animal is able to detect error and metabolize experience selectively into usable information.”

These fast, emotive judgments guide your responses to other people. If you didn’t have them, you’d be crippled in social situations and in contemplating the future. People can’t experience the future directly because it doesn’t exist yet, so they must be able to create mental simulations of the future – and emotions play a role in those scenarios. Some emotions, like guilt, anticipate that you may feel bad at some future time if you make a certain choice or take a certain action now. People may shape actions in anticipation of what they expect to feel later, though scientific evidence suggests that current emotions don’t shape a person’s actions. Instead, prospection is central to human moral sense.

“All animals live on a limited budget of energy and time, and so must ensure that they do not expend their last energy before they have found a way to replenish.”

People tend to respond to moral questions intuitively. Often, these intuitive judgments linger on a visceral level even after people think through a situation and find they lack justifications for their judgments. When you respond intuitively to a moral challenge, you generate mental simulations that include expectations about how a scenario might play out. These judgments emphasize possible future harm.

Negative Prospection

Prospection can work in a negative manner. It can contribute to depression. Depressed people envision more “negative futures” and can both overestimate and overemphasize risk, making negative futures seem more likely and more awful. Depressed people have a “pessimistic predictive style”: They find personal reasons to believe that the future will be negative. These explanations are “pervasive and permanent.” They build on one another, reinforcing a depressive mind-set about the future. Recognizing this process offers possibilities for intervention.

People can boost their prospection; therapists can help. Several formal approaches using future orientations offer hope. So do less-formal approaches, like visualizing the path you might take to reach a goal, projecting yourself forward to achieving the goal, or using “anticipatory savoring” to make future positive outcomes more real and attractive.

Creative Aging

Creativity involves imagination – mental simulations of varying realities. Prospection is a kind of reality, in which you imagine futures that differ from the present. Creativity requires originality, practical application and a sense of your audience. Innovation takes creativity one step further.

Three factors contribute to creativity: cognition, motivation and interaction. Cognitive factors – like “fluid reasoning” sensory processing, intuition or memory – play a larger role in the sciences than the arts. Processing speed, memory, fluid reasoning and originality decline with age. Expertise, pattern recognition and the use of heuristics remain stable or increase. Cognitive factors weakly predict “creative achievement,” which correlates with motivation and personality.

Being open to new experiences supports your flexibility and cognitive abilities. “Interpersonal processes” sustain your creativity. Many creative people, including Nobel Prize winners, work in collaboration, which promotes pleasure, motivation and versatility.

About the Authors

Martin E. P. Seligman is director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center and author of more than two dozen books, including *Learned Optimism*. **Peter Railton** is a distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan. **Roy F. Baumeister** is an eminent scholar and professor of psychology at

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