

**FAILING TO ACT:
REGRETS OF TERMAN'S GENIUSES***

NINA HATTIANGADI

VICTORIA HUSTED MEDVEC

THOMAS GILOVICH

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

ABSTRACT

The regrets reported by Terman's intellectually gifted subjects were analyzed to determine the nature of their regrets, whether they are the same as those reported by the general population, and whether they stem predominantly from errors of omission or commission. A 1986 survey of these subjects in their advanced years (mean age = 74) asked them to specify what they would do differently if they could live over again. An analysis of their responses indicated that, like the population as a whole, they harbor many more regrets of inaction than regrets of action. The implications of these findings for a proposed temporal pattern to the experience of regret is discussed.

The author Jessamyn West has this advice for those plagued by regret: "Groan and forget it" [1]. Unfortunately, in our society regrets are not so easily dismissed. When the aim of a society is "having it all," reality invariably falls short. From mistaken choices and forsaken opportunities, regret is born.

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Until recently [2-6], there were few empirical investigations and little conceptual analysis of the experience of regret. The most prominent treatment of regret relegated it to a corollary of economic decision theory: The anticipation of future regret was seen, sensibly enough, as a critical determinant of current choices [7, 8].

However, more recent research on the subject of counterfactual thinking, or how people imagine alternatives to reality, has expanded the investigation of regret [9, 10]. Much of this work has centered on the distinction between regrets of omission and commission. Regrets of commission stem from actions people wish they had not taken—e.g., getting married too soon, investing in a disastrous business venture, losing one's temper at the wrong time. Regrets of omission, in contrast, stem from actions people wish they had taken but did not—e.g., not getting a college degree, not learning a foreign language, not spending more time with one's children. Numerous experiments reported in this literature have shown that people appear to regret negative outcomes that stem from actions taken more than identical outcomes that stem from actions foregone [11-13]. Losing money by trading one stock for another strikes most people as more painful than losing the same amount by "standing pat" and failing to make a transaction [12]. This effect is thought to derive from the ease with which people can "undo" the outcome by imagining a compelling alternative state of affairs: It is typically easier to imagine not doing something one has done than to imagine doing something one has refrained from doing [10, 14].

As compelling as some of these empirical demonstrations might be, the central finding nevertheless conflicts with a powerful intuition derived from everyday experience. When people are asked about the biggest regrets in their lives, they typically mention things they *failed* to do. This can be verified by consulting one's own circle of friends and acquaintances, or by considering the comments of numerous observers over the years. Henry James, for example, claimed that "I don't regret a single 'excess' of my responsive youth—I only regret, in my chilled age, certain occasions and possibilities I didn't embrace" [15]. Similarly, Ogden Nash stated that "it is the sin of omission, the second kind of sin, that lays eggs under your skin" [16]. Perhaps most familiar of all is John Greenleaf Whittier's contention that "of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'it might have been'" [17].

To reconcile these observations from everyday life with the research on counterfactual thinking, Gilovich and Medvec have proposed that there is a systematic time course to the experience of regret [2-4, 18]. Regrets of action are more vexing initially, but regrets of inaction persist for a longer time and are ultimately more pronounced. Support for this idea was obtained in several studies that compared the amount of regret generated or anticipated at different temporal vantage points from the time of the critical event. Actions were consistently judged to be more painful in the short term, whereas inactions were judged to be more problematic in the long run.

The existence of such a temporal pattern is also supported by studies in which people were asked to review their lives and identify what they would do differently if they could live over again [19, 20]. Because such a question tends to induce people to consider their regrets from a temporally distant perspective, we would expect a preponderance of regrets of omission. Although none of these studies were designed to examine the action/inaction distinction specifically, they nonetheless appear to provide rather clear support for this idea. A wide majority of responses dealt with things that people wished they had done; very few with things they wished they had not done. For example, by far the most common regret was an inaction—that they did not get enough education. Other common regrets centered around not spending enough time with the family, not being more assertive, and not taking more risks.

The present study sought to extend these findings by examining the regrets of a particularly interesting group of participants—the well-known and much discussed "geniuses" recruited and studied by Lewis Terman. In 1921, Terman initiated his *Genetic Studies of Genius* at Stanford University to test hypotheses about intellectually gifted children. He recruited 1470 children from throughout California, all with IQ's above 140. In the seventy-five years since Terman initiated his longitudinal study, these participants have been contacted repeatedly. The focus of the present study was a 1986 questionnaire that asked them about what they would do differently if they had the opportunity to live over again.

Would these participants, like their less gifted counterparts, tend to regret things they failed to do in their lives? Although Terman's participants have been extensively studied over the years [21-25], we know of no previous report of the nature of their regrets. More important to our interest in the omission/commission distinction, an analysis of responses to the 1986 questionnaire permits a more informative assessment than analogous past studies of the degree to which people regret inactions more than actions. In particular, Terman's participants were asked to specify *in their own words* what they would do differently; in contrast, previous investigators had their participants check off regrets from a pre-existing list [19; see also 20]. We hypothesized that Terman's participants, all elderly at the time of the investigation and therefore likely to be temporally distant from the source of their regrets, would tend to report more regrets of inaction than regrets of action.

METHOD

Participants

The 1986 questionnaire was administered to the surviving cohort of Terman participants. There were 720 respondents, 381 men and 339 women, with an average age of seventy-four years.

Procedure

The 1986 questionnaire was the ninth in a series of follow-ups charting the life course of Terman's gifted participants [26]. Along with questions from previous sessions dealing with achievements and life circumstances, the researchers added a new query: "Now, looking back over your whole life, what choices would you make differently if you had the opportunity to live it again?" Four lines were provided for the participants' responses. [This question was also asked in the 10th follow-up survey in 1991. Unfortunately, the data from 1991 are not yet available from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.] Many of the participants ($n = 215$) mentioned only a single change they would make in their lives. Some presumably mentioned more than two, but only the first two responses of each participant were coded by the original investigators.

The free responses listed by participants were coded by the Terman researchers into eighty-two categories dealing with numerous topics such as education, career, marriage, social life, finances, children, relationships, personal traits, and decisions.

Our goal was to investigate the frequency with which participants stated that they would do something they had failed to do (thus correcting a regrettable omission) versus not do something they had done (thus correcting a regrettable commission). To examine this question, we had eight judges familiar with the action/inaction distinction independently assign each of the eighty-two categories into one of four types—actions, inactions, both, or neither. Their assessments, made before examining the data, proved to be highly reliable (Spearman-Brown index = .99). Categories were assigned to one of the four groups if at least six of the eight judges agreed. By using this criterion of 75 percent majority agreement, all categories were unambiguously assigned to one of the four groups.

Twenty-six of the eighty-two categories were assigned to the "neither" group and were therefore irrelevant to our concern with regrets of omission and commission. Most of these were responses that do not qualify as regrets, such as "I don't dwell on what might have been," "I am satisfied with my choices," and "I would make different mistakes." Others referred to circumstances beyond the person's control (e.g., "would choose different parents" or "would be born when opportunities for women were greater"). An additional fourteen categories were designated "both." For these it was impossible to determine if the pre-existing category dealt with a regret of action, inaction, or both. Because the original categories were created by the Terman group without the action/inaction distinction in mind, the existence of several such ambiguous categories is not surprising. Examples of categories in this group included "should have studied different subjects in college" (does the respondent regret studying what he or she studied, or not studying what he or she might have studied instead?) and "should have chosen different mate" (does the respondent regret being with his or her chosen mate, or not being with a "lost love?").

Of the remaining forty-two categories, twenty-eight were judged to refer to regrets of omission and fourteen were judged to be regrets of commission. The categories designated as inactions, actions, and "both" are listed in Table 1. Based on our past research [2-4], we hypothesized that participants would be more likely to describe regrets from the inaction categories than from the action categories.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the number of subjects whose first response fell into each of the relevant categories. A number of participants ($n = 138$) did not respond to the critical item. Of those who did complete this item, 237 gave a response that fell into the "neither" group; most of these consisted of statements that the participant had no regrets (e.g., "would make no changes"). [This is higher than the 4 percent of participants in previous research who reported having no regrets [19]. This could be because the Terman participants do indeed have fewer regrets, or, equally plausibly, it could be due to a methodological difference between the two studies. Participants in previous research responded by checking off applicable statements from a list supplied by the investigators; Terman's participants had to write out their responses word for word. The latter is obviously more taxing and may have discouraged more participants from responding.] An additional 118 responses fell into the "both" group that were equivocal as to whether they referred to regrets of action or inaction (e.g., "should have reared children differently").

As for the responses that could be unambiguously scored on the action/inaction dichotomy, the results were as predicted. Many more responses dealt with regrets of inaction ($n = 186$) than regrets of action ($n = 41$). Assuming a chance model in which regrets of action and inaction are equally likely, this disparity is highly significant, $z = 19.2$, $p < .00001$. This effect holds true for both males ($z = 12.4$, $p < .00001$) and females ($z = 14.9$, $p < .00001$). It also holds true when the regrets mentioned *second* were analyzed: For these, ninety-eight involved regrets of omission and eighteen involved regrets of commission, $z = 14.8$, $p < .00001$.

One potential problem with this analysis stems from the unequal number of action and inaction categories. Because there were twice as many of the latter, it stands to reason that significantly more of the regrets would belong to categories of regrettable omissions. Of course, because the Terman group's taxonomy was based on the participants' free responses, this asymmetry undoubtedly reflects the pattern of participants' actual responses, and thus is hardly troubling. Nevertheless, a random distribution across these categories would result in two regrets of omission for every regret of commission. Thus, to rule out any such concern and to test our data against a much stricter null hypothesis, we recomputed the relevant statistics using a base-rate of 67 percent inactions and 33 percent actions. Even when evaluated against this standard, the observed 186 to 41 ratio of inactions to actions is highly significant. This is true for both the first ($z = 4.8$, $p < .0001$) and

Table 1. Regrets of Terman's Subjects^a

Regret	<i>n</i>
<i>Inactions</i>	
Should have completed college or graduate school; should not have interrupted education	39
Should have attended college; needed more education	21
Should have worked harder; not wasted college time; been more motivated	17
Should have pursued a career or a professional interest; should have aimed higher in career	16
Should have been more assertive; more selfish in developing own abilities	15
Should have emphasized social relationships	13
Should have prepared for a professional career or avocation	11
Should have tried harder to be married and/or have a family	10
Should have had a goal for self; should have had more choices of own	07
Should have spent more time in family relationships	07
Should have married earlier; married too late	03
Should have taken up a sport or exercise regimen	03
Should have been more involved in cultural pursuits and community affairs	03
Should have married again after first husband's death or after divorce	02
Should have pursued a career when children were older (women subjects)	02
Should have traveled more	02
Should have paid more attention to finances; should have saved more	02
Should have had more children; had too few children	02
Should have spent more time with children and/or grandchildren when they were young	02
Should have moved to a preferred location	02
Should have found an occupation/career; should have had paid employment	01
Should have divorced	01
Should have been more assertive in marriage	01
Should have paid more attention to social/non-work life	01
Should have had children earlier; had children too late	01
Should have insisted children finish college	01
Should have been more affectionate to relatives	01
Should have planned better when reentering work force	00
Total:	186

Table 1. (Cont'd.)

Regret	<i>n</i>
<i>Actions</i>	
Shouldn't have married so early	12
Shouldn't have smoked; should have conquered alcoholism earlier	07
Shouldn't have stressed work so much	06
Shouldn't have had teachers/peers know I was a Termiter; should have avoided Terman Study	04
Shouldn't have managed finances badly; made wrong investments; judgment was bad	03
Shouldn't have divorced	03
Shouldn't have made love and sex so important in choice of partner or in love relationships	02
Shouldn't have married	02
Shouldn't have retired so early	01
Shouldn't have returned to parents' home when marriage failed	01
Shouldn't have paid so much attention to finances	00
Shouldn't have had children so early	00
Shouldn't have had as many children	00
Shouldn't have emphasized academic achievements so much	00
Total:	41
<i>Both</i>	
Should have chosen different occupation/career	37
Should have studied different subjects in college; should have had different major	29
Should have chosen different mate	14
Should have been less self-centered, more giving; more understanding; more outgoing	09
Should have gained more self-confidence; better self-image	09
Should have delayed admission to university or high school	07
Should have had more fun, been more flexible	04
Should have chosen different college	03
Should have reared children differently	02
Should have prepared for a career in college; needed different kind of education	01
Should have retained our own or family home	01
Should have continued to work when children were young (women subjects)	01
Should have recognized mother/son relationship of husband before marriage	01
Should have pursued own interest without so much concern to contribute financially	00
Total:	118

^aOnly the first regret mentioned by each subject is included in this table.

second ($z = 4.0, p < .001$) regrets mentioned, and individually for both men ($z = 2.7, p < .01$ and $z = 2.7, p < .01$ for first and second regrets, respectively) and women ($z = 4.1, p < .0001$ and $z = 3.0, p < .005$).

When we move beyond this action/inaction dichotomy, what is it exactly that these participants regret most? The most common responses are the same as those uncovered in surveys of less selective samples [19, 20]. By far the most common regret, both here and in other samples, is not getting enough education. That this would be true of the Terman participants is particularly interesting, given that they far exceed the national average in terms of educational attainments. (For example, nearly 70% of the Terman participants graduated from college, compared to an 8% graduation rate in their cohort [24] and approximately a 20% graduation rate today [27]). The next most frequently-mentioned regrets were also the same as those uncovered in previous surveys—not being more disciplined and not being more assertive.

DISCUSSION

Those involved in the Terman project have uncovered a number of ways in which the intellectually gifted are just like the rest of us. They are just as vigorous, they experience the same success in marriage, and they exhibit psychopathology to roughly the same extent as the general population [24, 25]. Our research has uncovered yet another domain in which the intellectually gifted are rather normal. They have the same regrets and would make the same changes as nearly everyone else if they could live over again. They would seek out more opportunities to advance their education, they would pursue their educations with greater discipline, and they would go about their lives in a more assertive fashion. In general, they, like the population as a whole, would choose to undo those things that they have not done but wish they had, rather than those things they have done but wish they had not.

It is this latter finding that was the focus of our interest when we began this research. As anticipated, the Terman participants' responses indicated more regret over inactions than over actions. This is consistent with both everyday observation and with the results of the few existing empirical investigations of people's real-life regrets [19, 20; see also 5 for a review]. However, the present findings stand in marked contrast to the results of experiments on counterfactual thinking that have found that people regret negative outcomes that result from commissions more than identical outcomes that stem from omissions [11-13].

In order to reconcile these discrepant findings, we have previously proposed that the experience of regret follows a systematic time course [2-4]. In the short term, people are more troubled by their regrettable commissions because it is generally easier to undo an action by mentally "taking it back" than to undo an inaction by inserting a new action into an ongoing behavioral sequence. Nevertheless, over time, numerous psychological mechanisms come into play that serve to

reduce the sting of a regrettable action but to bolster the pain of a regrettable failure to act (see [2] for a full discussion of these mechanisms). In the long run, then, it is a person's inactions that are the most problematic. That was certainly the case with the Terman participants, as a vast majority of their regrets dealt with previous failures to act.

It is particularly noteworthy that even this unusually accomplished group of participants would tend to regret not "trying harder" at several of life's tasks—not getting enough education, not aiming higher in the workforce, not being more disciplined, etc. Although inactions are common regrets among the general population (see [5]), one might have been tempted to believe that things would be different for this group. After all, these subjects ". . . in overwhelming numbers have fulfilled the promise of their youth in their later life achievements" [25]. The Terman participants obtained much more education than their counterparts in the population as a whole [25], and yet they still regret not getting enough education. Likewise, they have achieved great career success, with more than 85 percent of the employed male respondents holding professional and managerial positions [25]. Still, they regret not working harder at their careers.

Although these individuals accomplished a great deal, they still wish—like many of us—that they had accomplished more. This is consistent with Brickman and Campbell's contention that life places everyone on a "hedonic treadmill" [28; see also 29]. Because individuals quickly adapt to nearly all stimuli, including their accomplishments, ever greater triumphs are required to generate the same level of satisfaction. Graduation from high school may be satisfying, but only for so long. Soon additional accomplishments, such as going to college, are needed to maintain the same hedonic state. If someone fails to take this additional step, he or she is likely to regret it. Moreover, if the individual goes to college but fails to graduate, he or she is likely to regret not getting a degree. If the person does graduate, he or she may regret never obtaining an advanced degree. With each accomplishment comes a new goal, and an additional candidate for regret if it is not attained. Thus, as people grow old and look back on their lives, even the most gifted and accomplished are likely to regret things undone.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Prof. Thomas Gilovich
 Department of Psychology
 Cornell University
 Uris Hall
 Ithaca, NY 14853-7601