



## Biases in social comparisons: Optimism or pessimism? ☆

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### ABSTRACT

Social comparisons typically lead to two kinds of biases: A comparative optimism bias (i.e., a tendency for people to view themselves as more likely than others to be the beneficiaries of positive outcomes) or a comparative pessimism bias (i.e., a tendency for people to view themselves as less likely than others to be such beneficiaries); rarely are people fully calibrated in terms of how they compare to others. However, there is little systematic research on the factors that determine *when* a comparative optimism versus pessimism bias will occur, how they can be attenuated and whether such attenuation is always desirable. In this paper, we report four studies which demonstrate the following key results: First, we show that *perceived level of control* over the outcome drives whether a comparative optimism or pessimism bias will occur (Study 1). Second, an increase in *perceived similarity* between self and a comparison target person attenuates the comparative optimism bias in domains that people view as highly controllable (Study 2a) and attenuates the comparative pessimism bias in domains that people view as less controllable (Study 2b). Finally, we show that people are willing to work harder when they experience more comparative optimism in higher control scenarios and when they experience less comparative pessimism in lower control scenarios, illustrating that motivating people to strive harder for positive outcomes can result from exacerbated or attenuated bias, depending on the context (Study 3).

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The tendency for people to be comparatively optimistic about themselves, to the point of being unrealistic, has been well-documented. People tend to believe that good things are more likely to happen to oneself relative to the average person (e.g., having a gifted child; Weinstein, 1980) and that bad things are less likely to happen to oneself relative to the average person (e.g., the likelihood of being the victim of a crime or contracting a disease; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003; Weinstein, 1980). This bias has been demonstrated across a variety of judgments including susceptibility to health risk (Keller, Lipkus, & Rimer, 2002; Lin, Lin, & Raghuram, 2003; Luce & Kahn, 1999; Menon, Block, & Ramanathan, 2002; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Raghuram & Menon, 1998), evaluation of personal characteristics (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Sam-

uelson, 1985; Weinstein, 1980), and odds of winning in competitive situations (Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003).

Recent research has also demonstrated a comparative pessimism bias—the tendency for people to believe that certain positive outcomes are more likely to happen for others than for themselves and that certain negative outcomes are more likely to happen for themselves than for others (Higgins, 1987; Lin et al., 2003). While understandably demonstrated in the case of depressives who tend to see themselves in a more negative light (Keller et al., 2002; Lin et al., 2003), this pessimism bias has also been demonstrated in the realms of skill assessment (Kruger, 1999), competitive situations (Windschitl et al., 2003), and games of chance (Lin, Lin, & Raghuram, 2004).

But under what circumstances does the comparative optimism versus pessimism bias occur? The literature is relatively silent on this issue and has focused on demonstrating only one of these biases at a time; that is, the evidence supports optimism bias in some situations (e.g., Weinstein, 1980) and pessimism bias in others (e.g., Keller et al., 2002), but there is little research that explicitly examines *both* biases in the same context or domain. In fact, in a review article, Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004) highlight the importance of such research.

The focus of our paper is to determine conditions under which one might expect to observe a comparative optimism or pessimism bias with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the antecedents of such biases in social comparison. In a series of four studies, we show the following: (a) Comparative optimism is likely to occur

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when one perceives more control over the outcome and comparative pessimism is likely to occur when one perceives less control over the outcome; (b) Both these biases can be attenuated by increasing perceptions of similarity between oneself and a comparison target person (e.g., the average undergraduate); (c) The mechanism for these effects is a change in perception of one's own control in a domain and *not* a change in perception of another person's control; (d) Under specific conditions, people are motivated to work harder in order to attain a positive outcome, thus helping managers and educators to provide the right work environment and means to do better and succeed. We illustrate these effects while controlling for outcome valence (positive outcomes), comparison target (average undergraduate at the school), as well as event domain (kept constant in each study) unlike previous research that varies these constructs to demonstrate these biases.

We now present four studies. For each study, we present the theory that leads to the hypotheses, followed by the experimental methods and results. We conclude with a general discussion of the implications of our results for theory and practice.

### Study 1: Controllability as a determinant of the comparative optimism versus pessimism bias

To develop our hypotheses related to controllability and comparative biases, we first describe past illustrations of how social comparisons result in optimism and pessimism biases.

#### *Comparative optimism bias in social comparisons*

Social comparisons often have been shown to result in a comparative optimism bias. This bias was first demonstrated by Weinstein (1980), where college students evaluated their chances of experiencing positive outcomes (e.g., liking their post-graduation job, earning a large salary, living past 80 years old, having a mentally gifted child) as greater than average, and their chances of experiencing negative outcomes (e.g., having a drinking problem, being fired, getting divorced, dropping out of college) as less than average. Weinstein (1982, 1984, 1987) then further demonstrated this effect in the negative domain of health risk perceptions (see also Perloff & Fetzer, 1986); it has since become a topic of mainstream interest in psychology (Chandran & Menon, 2004; Keller et al., 2002; Lin et al., 2003; Luce & Kahn, 1999; Menon et al., 2002; Raghuram & Menon, 1998). This optimism bias can be driven by motivational reasons such as an overall desire to feel happy (Raghuram & Menon, 1998), a need to reduce anxiety associated with uncertain outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 1988), the desire to maintain or enhance self-esteem (Weinstein, 1980), or by more non-motivated reasons such as egocentrism (Kruger, 1999), focalism (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003), or the concreteness of the referent group used (Alicke et al., 1995; Klar, Medding, & Sarel, 1996; McConnell, Sherman, & Hamilton, 1994, 1997; see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004 for a review of non-motivated accounts). The effect is robust across a wide variety of health conditions (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Raghuram & Menon, 1998), mental illness (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986), and manifests regardless whether or not one has experienced a related event (Shepperd, Helweg-Larsen, & Ortega, 2003).

#### *Comparative pessimism bias in social comparisons*

Parallel to the comparative optimism bias, although empirically reported in the literature to a far lesser extent, is a comparative pessimism bias resulting in overly pessimistic views of future outcomes for the self versus others. For example, depressives are known to evaluate themselves in a more negative light due to their

lower self-esteem (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Non-depressives have also demonstrated a propensity for pessimism as well. For example, Kruger (1999) found that people can suffer from this bias in domains in which they judge their absolute skill level as low. People tend to anchor on their own inadequacy while failing to adjust for the similar inadequacy of others in areas such as telling jokes, playing chess, or juggling. Windschitl et al. (2003) found a similar effect in competitive situations such that people based their own likelihood of winning more on assessments of their own strengths and weaknesses than that of others, believing they were less likely to win when focusing on their own weaknesses.

Helweg-Larsen and Shepperd (2001) note that studies assessing comparative biases most frequently employ direct measures of comparison (e.g., ask participants to evaluate their likelihood of experiencing an event on a scale anchored at "much more likely" or "much less likely" than the average peer) because it is easier to find a bias using direct methods. Most instances documenting the pessimistic bias have used a direct comparative measure (e.g., Kruger, 1999; Windschitl et al., 2003). It remains unclear whether a pessimistic bias would emerge from indirect measures of comparative bias (e.g., compare two likelihood judgments by asking participants to estimate their likelihood of experiencing an event and the average peer's likelihood of experiencing the same event separately). In this paper, we systematically investigate the comparative pessimism bias using the less-researched indirect comparison measure.

#### *Comparative optimism or pessimism?*

What determines whether a comparative optimism or pessimism bias will manifest? The literature does not directly address this issue. Comparative optimism has been associated with perceptions of greater control such that people believe positive outcomes are more likely for themselves (vs. others) when they perceive they have more control over achieving the outcome (Harris, 1996; Weinstein, 1987; for a review see Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001; for a meta-analytic review, see Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002). This association is consistent with more recent findings on comparative optimism in direct comparative judgments where people perceive greater control over their outcomes in domains where their strengths are salient or they have high levels of skill (Kruger, 1999; Windschitl et al., 2003). Based on previous research, we posit that perceptions of greater control may lead to greater comparative optimism.

Although the literature related to the comparative pessimism bias has not explicitly considered the role of controllability, instances of comparative pessimism may well be associated with perceptions of lower control. For example, consider the Kruger (1999) below-average effect in cases of low absolute skill, the Taylor and Brown (1988) observation of depressives' natural tendency not to suffer from the illusion of control, and the Lin et al. (2004) finding of a pessimism bias for lotteries. In these instances, individuals may perceive lower control over the outcome (e.g., games of chance, low skill) or may be pre-disposed to doubt their ability to control their outcomes (e.g., depressives). Hence, we posit that in domains or situations where individuals perceive the outcome as less controllable, they will make pessimistic comparisons. Thus, our first hypothesis is formally stated as follows:

**H1a:** When an outcome is perceived as more within one's control, people will exhibit a comparative optimism bias.

**H1b:** When an outcome is perceived as less within one's control, people will exhibit a comparative pessimism bias.

This raises the question of whether these biases stem from differential perceptions of control attributed to oneself versus the

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