

How egocentrism and optimism change in response to feedback in repeated competitions

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Abstract

People tend to egocentrically focus on how adverse or beneficial conditions in competitions affect the self, while inadequately considering the comparable impact on opponents. This leads to overoptimism for a victory in easy tasks and underoptimism in hard tasks. Four experiments investigated whether experience and performance feedback in a multi-round competition would influence egocentric weighting and optimism biases across rounds. The results indicated that egocentric weighting and optimism biases decreased across rounds. However, this apparent debiasing occurred under restrictive conditions, and participants did not generalize their learned, non-egocentric tendencies to novel contexts. The roles of differential confidence and surface/structural similarity are discussed as reasons why optimism biases were generally pervasive.

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Introduction

People appear to be generally egocentric when estimating their likelihood of winning a competition (Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003). They tend to think about whether the circumstances of the competition are favorable or unfavorable for their own performance, while giving less consideration to whether the circumstances are favorable or unfavorable for the performance(s) of their competitor(s). This egocentrism can result in overoptimism when the task in the competition is generally easy or the circumstances of the competition are generally favorable for strong performances from all competitors. However, egocentrism can result in underoptimism

when the task is generally difficult or the circumstances are unfavorable. For example, when college student participants believed they would be competing one-on-one in a trivia competition involving an “easy” category (e.g., current events, TV sitcoms), they were severely overoptimistic about winning because they primarily considered how well they could do on such a category, not how well their competitor could do (Windschitl et al., 2003). However, for a “difficult” category (e.g., European politics, home insurance facts), they were severely underoptimistic because they considered how poorly they would do on the category more so than how poorly their competitor would do. This pattern of results in which people are overoptimistic when circumstances are generally easy and underoptimistic when they are generally hard has been called the shared-circumstance effect (SCE; Windschitl et al., 2003).

Overoptimism and underoptimism can have important consequences. Overoptimism can lead to

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misallocated time, effort, or resources into a competitive endeavor (e.g., starting a business, becoming a professional athlete, waging a war) and could eventually promote various adverse effects, including psychological effects, such as disappointment, regret, frustration, or depression (Burson, Larrick, & Klayman, 2006; Camerer & Lovallo, 1999; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Moore & Kim, 2003). Underoptimism can lead to the avoidance of a potentially beneficial situation, such as when females, who were equally qualified to male counterparts in science abilities, expressed less interest in entering a lucrative science contest (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003).

Given the ubiquity of competition in everyday life—involving activities such as sports, politics, educational scholarships, war, employment—and given the potential negative effects of overoptimism or underoptimism caused by egocentric thinking, it is important to attempt to understand when and how people might avoid thinking egocentrically when in competitive contexts. In the present work, we investigated whether people can learn their own way out of egocentrism through their repeated experiences within a given type of competition. In all but one of the published studies of shared-circumstance effects (SCEs), people have made likelihood judgments about “single-play” challenges (the exception is a recently published study by Moore and Cain (2007), which is discussed later). In these “single-play” studies (e.g., Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003), participants have made likelihood judgments about the outcomes of competitions in which they are (or will be) involved. Researchers have not investigated whether participants’ experiences with a previous competition—including knowledge of its outcome—will affect participants’ next set of predictions. Given that people often participate in “repeated-play” challenges (e.g., athletes and armies often compete against the same competitor on multiple occasions and in many college courses each exam is a competition for top scores), we thought it was important to investigate the influence of repeated plays on the tendency for participants to think egocentrically and to exhibit the overoptimism and underoptimism that are characteristic of SCEs.

Before describing our specific paradigm and predictions, we will first discuss the following in the next two sections: (1) the causes of egocentrism and SCEs and (2) previous research that is generally relevant to the issue of how people might or might not effectively learn from repeated-play contexts.

Why are people egocentric?

When judging the likelihood of winning a competition, people must consider not only how their

strengths, weaknesses, and the general circumstances bode for their performance but also how their competitors’ strengths, weaknesses, and the general circumstances bode for their respective performances. We use the term *egocentrism* in a general way to refer to the idea that when people are asked about their optimism about winning, self-relevant assessments (e.g., thoughts/projections about their own performance) are weighted more heavily than competitor-relevant assessments (Kruger, 1999; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Windschitl et al., 2003). There are, in fact, numerous types of egocentrism accounts and other accounts (e.g., focalism) that articulate reasons why there may be differential weighting of self-relevant and competitor-relevant assessments under various conditions (see reviews by Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Moore, 2007). We will next discuss a subset of accounts that are most relevant to the present work.

To begin, it is helpful to distinguish accounts that suggest *irrational* reasons for differential weighting from accounts that suggest *rational* reasons. We use the term *irrational* to refer to processing biases that would hurt rather than help judgment accuracy in the relevant context and that are not apparently grounded within a broader, adaptive processing strategy. Among the accounts citing irrational processes, one type (or subtype) of egocentrism account suggests that people’s tendency to place greater weight on self-relevant information is simply due to a *chronic attention bias*, whereby people typically think more about the self than about others (see e.g., Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Windschitl et al., 2003). Examples of other irrational accounts for differential weighting include ones that concern egocentric anchoring-and-insufficient-adjustment, a generic focalism bias, or general difficulties in considering evidence about groups of competitors rather than single competitors (for a review, see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004).

The accounts that posit *rational* reasons for differential weighting suggest that self-relevant assessments carry more weight than do other-relevant assessments because we often have more information or better information about the self than others (see e.g., Ross & Sicoly, 1979). For example, a differential-confidence account described by Chambers and Windschitl (2004) suggests that although people may believe that both the self and a competitor have low skill at a hard task (or high skill at an easy task), they are more confident regarding their self-assessments (see also Kruger, Windschitl, Burrus, Fessel, & Chambers, in press; Moore & Small, 2007). Hence, when gauging their optimism about winning at the task, they give more weight to the self-assessment—yielding

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