



# Egocentrism and focalism in unrealistic optimism (and pessimism)<sup>☆</sup>

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Received 1 August 2002; revised 21 April 2003

## Abstract

People tend to overestimate their comparative likelihood of experiencing a rosy future. The present research suggests that one reason for this error is that when people compare their likelihood of experiencing an event with that of the average person, they focus on their own chances of experiencing the event and insufficiently consider the likelihood of the average person experiencing the event. As a consequence, people tend to think that they are more likely than the average person to experience common events and less likely than the average person to experience rare events. This causes unrealistic optimism in the case of common desirable events and rare undesirable events, but *unrealistic pessimism* in the case of rare desirable events and common undesirable events (Studies 1 and 2). Study 2 further suggests that both egocentrism and focalism underlie these biases. These results suggest that unrealistic optimism is not as ubiquitous as once thought.

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**Keywords:** Unrealistic optimism; Unrealistic pessimism; Risk perception; Social comparison; Social judgment; Heuristics and biases

In the late 1970s Neil Weinstein asked 258 students to compare their chances of experiencing several events—some desirable (e.g., live past 80, own home) and some undesirable (e.g., heart attack before age 40, lung cancer)—with that of the average person. If participants were accurate in their assessments, they should, on average, have rated themselves as just as likely to experience the event as the average person. They did not. On average, participants estimated that they were more likely than the average student to experience the desirable events and less likely than the average student to experience the undesirable events (Weinstein, 1980).

Weinstein's results were (and are) exciting because they made two very important points about human judgment. The first was that people seem to be unrealistically optimistic about the future. The second was that people seem to possess a remarkable capacity to believe what they want to believe. Each insight had a consid-

erable impact on social and personality psychology. The finding of unrealistic optimism stimulated substantial research—both theoretical and applied—examining the causes and consequences of this bias (according to a bibliography by Weinstein (1998), the number of articles on unrealistic optimism exceeds 300). As well, the implication that people are self-serving in their judgments has formed the basis of several models of human judgment (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1990; Campbell, 1986; Kunda, 1990; Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein & Klein, 1996).

We suspect, however, that there is a non-motivational component to unrealistic optimism. We submit that when people compare their likelihood of experiencing an event with that of the average person, they focus on their own likelihood of experiencing the event (how likely am I to live past 80?) and insufficiently consider the chances of the average person experiencing the event (how likely is *the average person* to live past 80?). As a consequence, the answer to the question “How likely am I to experience the event in comparison with the average person?” is based far more on people's assessments of their own chances of experiencing the event than on their assessment of the average person's chances of experiencing the event.

<sup>☆</sup> We thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. This research was supported by Research Grant 1-2-69853 from the University of Illinois Board of Trustees awarded to Justin Kruger.

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We base our predictions, at least in part, on several recent findings in the judgment literature in which an analogous tendency has been demonstrated in other social comparisons. For instance, when people compare their abilities with those of their peers, they focus far more on their own abilities than on their peers' abilities (Kruger, 1999). Similarly, people's assessments of how happy they are compared with others tend to be based on their own life satisfaction, with little regard to the life satisfaction of the average person (Diener & Fugita, 1997; Klar & Giladi, 1999). In much the same way, we argue—and for much the same reason—people tend to base their predictions of their comparative likelihood of experiencing an event more on their own chances of experiencing the event than on their peers' chances of experiencing the event. Indeed, part of Weinstein's original account of unrealistic optimism emphasized the egocentric tendency of individuals to fail to adequately consider the risks (or lack thereof) facing the comparison group (Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein & Lachendro, 1982).

This suggests that the tendency to see one's own future as more or less rosy than the average person's ought to depend on the rarity of the event in question. When considering common events, events such as owning a home or living past 80, the tendency to focus on one's own likelihood of experiencing the event when making social comparisons is likely to leave people with the impression that they are more likely to experience the event than the average person. Most people, after all, will own their own home sometime in their lifetime (at least in the United States), and most have a reasonable shot at seeing 80. Of course, the same (by definition) is true of the average person. However, if people ignore this latter fact, then they are likely to overestimate their comparative likelihood of experiencing the event—not merely because it is desirable, but because it is common. If so, then the reverse ought to be true of desirable events that are rare. Whereas people should be unrealistically optimistic about their relative chances of owning a home or living past 80, they ought to be unrealistically *pessimistic* about their chances of, say, owning an *island* or living past 100—despite the fact that the latter may be just as desirable (if not more) than the former.

A similar, albeit mirror, logic applies to events that are rare. If people focus on their own likelihood of experiencing an event when making comparative predictions, then they ought to see themselves as less likely than the average person to experience rare events. In the case of undesirable events, this implies unrealistic optimism. People are likely to underestimate their comparative likelihood of getting lung cancer or having a heart attack before age 40 not only because those events are undesirable, but because they are rare. If so, people may be unrealistically pessimistic about the far more com-

mon events of, say, getting the *flu* or having one's heart *broken* before age 40—despite one's wishes to the contrary.

The existing literature provides some support for these assertions. A number of researchers have found that event rarity is a reliable predictor of unrealistic optimism (Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001; Price, Pentecost, & Voth, 2002; Weinstein, 1987, 1980; Weinstein & Lachendro, 1982). However, in none of these studies was egocentrism found to engender systematic unrealistic pessimism. One exception is a recent study by Blanton, Axsom, McClive, and Price (2001), who found unrealistic pessimism in participants' comparative predictions of how they would cope with several negative events should they occur, and provided an egocentric account not unlike the one offered here and by Kruger (1999). However, these researchers did not investigate the role of egocentrism in predictions about whether the events would *occur*, the focus of the present research.

## Study 1

Participants in Study 1 compared their likelihood of experiencing 28 events with that of the average person. Half of the events were desirable and half were undesirable, and of these, half were common and half were rare. In addition to making direct social comparisons, participants also provided separate estimates of their own and the average person's likelihood of experiencing the event.

We predicted, first, that when directly comparing themselves with the average person, participants would tend to see themselves as more likely than the average person to experience the common events and less likely than the average person to experience the rare events—regardless of event desirability. Second, we predicted that participants' comparative ratings would be predicted far better by their assessment of their own likelihood of experiencing the event than by their assessment of the average person's likelihood of experiencing the event.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty University of Illinois students (24 women, 25 men, and 1 unidentified) enrolled in an introductory course in psychology earned partial course credit for participating.

### Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire in which 28 events were described. For each event, participants compared their likelihood of experiencing the event in comparison with the average person from their course

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