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The hubris hypothesis: The downside of comparative optimism displays ☆



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ABSTRACT

According to the hubris hypothesis, observers respond more unfavorably to individuals who express their positive self-views comparatively than to those who express their positive self-views non-comparatively, because observers infer that the former hold a more disparaging view of others and particularly of observers. Two experiments extended the hubris hypothesis in the domain of optimism. Observers attributed less warmth (but not less competence) to, and showed less interest in affiliating with, an individual displaying comparative optimism (the belief that one's future will be better than others' future) than with an individual displaying absolute optimism (the belief that one's future will be good). Observers responded differently to individuals displaying comparative versus absolute optimism, because they inferred that the former held a gloomier view of the observers' future. Consistent with previous research, observers still attributed more positive traits to a comparative or absolute optimist than to a comparative or absolute pessimist.

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1. Introduction

Most people like optimists and prescribe optimism. For example, when asked to judge others, most people favor optimists over pessimists (Carver, Kus, & Scheier, 1994; Le Barbenchon, Milhabet, Steiner, & Priolo, 2008). Also, when asked to indicate what the outlook of a vignette protagonist should be on various life events, most people advocate optimism over pessimism and even over accuracy (Armor, Massey, & Sackett, 2008).

Optimism does have some advantages. Research shows that optimists—individuals holding generalized favorable expectancies for the future—are happier and better adjusted than pessimists (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Optimists, for example, approach challenges more energetically and constructively, cope more effectively with adversity, engage in healthier behaviors, and even show a stronger will to live than pessimists (Peeters, Czapinski, & Hoorens, 2001). Not surprisingly, they reap the benefits of their outlook in terms of greater academic success, larger income, and improved psychological or physical health (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). In regards to health, for instance, optimists have better immune

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function, experience less pain when afflicted by a chronic disease, and recover faster from surgery (Rasmussen, Scheier, & Greenhouse, 2009).

On the basis of such research findings, one might argue that optimism ought to be encouraged, nurtured, and even flaunted. This advice, however, may be problematic. To begin, optimism entails social drawbacks, as it risks giving off impressions of naïveté, self-indulgence, or arrogance (Hoorens, 2011; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Dufner, 2015). Moreover, optimists are likely to become disappointed when their rosy expectations are unmet (Krizan & Sweeny, 2013; McGraw, Mellers, & Ritov, 2004). Furthermore, the idea that optimism enhances task performance in others may be questionable. Participants in one set of studies forecasted their colleagues' performance on an experimental task (i.e., photograph-based age judgments), in full knowledge that the researchers had manipulated their colleagues' optimism about their performance by giving them false feedback on practice trials. Participants expected that optimism would enhance their colleagues' performance, when, in fact, optimism had no influence on performance (Tenney, Logg, & Moore, 2015). Finally, displays of optimism may entail interpersonal costs, as predicted by the hubris hypothesis (Hoorens, Pandelaere, Oldersma, & Sedikides, 2012).

The hubris hypothesis was developed to account for how and why individuals (i.e., observers) respond differently to various types of self-flattering expressions of others (i.e., claimants). It states that observers respond more unfavorably to claimants who express their positive self-views explicitly (i.e., involving direct social comparison) than to those who express them implicitly (not involving direct social comparison), because observers infer that the former hold a more disparaging view of others and particularly of observers. In this article, we extend the hubris hypothesis in the domain of optimism. We begin by distinguishing between expressions of comparative versus absolute optimism, and then describe what the hubris hypothesis predicts about them.

1.1. Comparative versus absolute optimism

Comparative optimism refers to the belief that positive events are more likely and negative events are less likely in one's future than in others' future. *Absolute optimism* refers to the belief that positive events are likely and negative events are unlikely in one's future. Comparative optimism occurs in conjunction with a variety of life events, including events that people spontaneously think of while imagining their future and events that are presented to them, among both women and men, in different ages, and across cultures (Harris, Griffin, & Murray, 2008; Hoorens, Smits, & Shepperd, 2008; Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002; Shepperd, Klein, Waters, & Weinstein, 2013; Shepperd, Waters, Weinstein, & Klein, 2015; Weinstein, 1980). It belongs to a family of self-superiority beliefs that includes the better-than-average effect (the conviction that one possesses desirable personality traits to a greater degree, and undesirable personality traits to a lesser degree, than others), the sensitive-self phenomenon (the conviction that one's emotions are more intense than others'), and the multifaceted-self phenomenon (the conviction that one has a richer personality than others; Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Hoorens, 1993; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

It has been argued that studies on comparative optimism show absolute optimism in disguise (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003). That is, participants respond to questions about the likelihood of experiencing events "compared to others" in the same way as they respond to questions about the likelihood of experiencing events happening to them. When participants believe the likelihood of experiencing an event is low, they report that it is "lower than others'," and, when they believe the likelihood of experiencing an event is high, they report that it is "higher than others."

Granted, some comparative optimism studies have used rare negative events (whose likelihood participants may perceive as low) and common positive events (whose likelihood participants may perceive as high). As such, these studies may have conflated comparative optimism with absolute optimism. However, a large and diverse literature indicates that comparative and absolute optimism have different correlates, predict risk behaviors in a different manner, and jointly predict risk behaviors better than they do separately (Davidson & Prkachin, 1997; Drace, Desrichard, Shepperd, & Hoorens, 2009; Fowler & Geers, 2015; Geers, Wellman, & Fowler, 2013; Klein, 2002; Lipkus, Klein, Skinner, & Rimer, 2005; Radcliffe & Klein, 2002; Rose, 2010; Siegler & Rimer, 2000). These findings indicate that comparative and absolute optimism are entitled to treatment as distinct concepts.

In addition, expressions of comparative optimism convey that a person thinks of others' future as less promising than her or his own, whereas expressions of absolute optimism are seemingly silent on how the person views others' future. Yet, even expressions of absolute optimism arguably rest upon social comparison (Alicke, 2007). For example, absolute claims such as 'I am a good friend' or 'I am not likely to contract HIV' are the outcomes of a process whereby the person compares the self to others and concludes that she or he outvalues most of them as a friend or is less at risk than most of them, respectively (Corcoran & Mussweiler, 2010; Hoorens & Van Damme, 2012). We tested, in the context of the hubris hypothesis to which we next turn, whether observers respond differently to comparative versus absolute optimism.

1.2. The hubris hypothesis

The hubris hypothesis purports to account for why observers respond differently to various types of self-flattering statements that a claimant makes (Hoorens et al., 2012). The hypothesis is concerned with situations involving an explicit self-superiority claim (e.g., "I am a better friend than others") and an implicit self-superiority claim (e.g., "I am a good friend"). The hypothesis predicts that, despite the fundamental similarity between the two types of claims (i.e., both involve social

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