CURRENT RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF EXHIBITING OPTIMISM

ABSTRACT

The present experiments examined how people exhibiting an optimistic outlook on the future are judged. The research tested and compared social acceptance of exhibiting optimism for oneself (Study 1) and comparative optimism (Study 2) in the professional and friendship domains separately and without comparison to pessimism. Results showed that optimism (for self and comparative) is socially accepted but it is more accepted in the professional domain than in the friendship domain. In the discussion, we suggest that optimism could be useful for social functioning.

INTRODUCTION

Optimism for Oneself

Self-optimism consists of thinking that one has a greater probability of experiencing positive events (e.g., getting a good job) than negative ones (e.g., having financial problems). To exhibit such a positive outlook on the future may be beneficial. Several correlational studies have examined the consequences of exhibiting self-optimism for social judgments in friendship or in professional domains. In the studies (Brissette, Scheir & Carver, 2002; Geers, Reilly & Dember, 1998; Norem, 2002; Raïkkönen, Matthews, Flory, Owens & Gump, 1999) concerning exclusively the friendship domain, participants reported both their outlook on the future and responded to questions concerning their social acceptance. Results showed that the more people reported optimism, the more they reported friendship relations and social support (Brissette et al., 2002). Moreover, they reported more long lasting friendship relations than less optimistic people (Geers et al., 1998). These results suggest that optimism is correlated with good friendship relations; however, it is possible that optimistic people reinterpret the reality about their friendships to enhance their self-image (Brissette et al., 2002). Thus, optimism is sometimes combined with self-deception, which is not very adaptive for attaining friendship support (Norem, 2002). In other words, exhibiting optimism is not always a way to be socially accepted in the friendship domain. Similarly, Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage and McDowell (2003) showed weak links between self-enhancement, as expressed by optimistic outlook, and social acceptance as indicated by friendships.

Other studies investigated the benefits of optimism for professional acceptance. In these studies, authors examined the relations between optimism and personality traits typically used to characterize a good leader (Dolbier, Soderstron & Steinhardt, 2001; Hickman, Watson & Morris, 1996; House & Shamir, 1998). Results showed that optimism is associated with the definition of a good leader (House & Shamir, 1998) and that it positively correlates with leadership (Dolbier et al., 2001; Hickman et al., 1996). Moreover, leaders exhibit more optimism than others (Dember, 2001; Wunderley, Reddy & Dember, 1998). Although optimism is independent from cognitive ability (Cantor & Norem, 1989; Showers, 1992), it may be a typical criterion for social judgments in the professional domain.

Concerning studies where the two domains of social acceptance are not distinguished, Carver, Kus and Scheier (1994) manipulated three levels of outlook on the future exhibited by fictitious targets (pessimistic *vs*. uncertain *vs*. optimistic outlook on the future) and asked participants to evaluate their desire to do something (indicating social acceptance) with the target. Results showed that the optimistic target was more socially accepted than the uncertain or the pessimistic target. However, the social acceptance of an optimistic outlook was observed only in comparison with a pessimistic outlook, but this does not address the social acceptance of optimism itself. Furthermore, some research shows that optimism and pessimism are not extremes on the same continuum (Peeters, Czapinski & Hoorens, 2001).

Considering all studies, exhibiting an optimistic perception about the future is socially accepted on the one hand in the friendship domain and on the other hand in the professional domain. One could conclude that an optimistic response is globally favorable and socially accepted, but that

does not indicate whether it is more valued in one domain compared to the other. Moreover, the majority of these results are from correlational studies in which the two domains were either not taken into account or were considered separately. In fact, in the friendship domain we note a possible disadvantageous link between optimism and self-deception (Norem, 2002; Taylor et al., 2003), which has not been observed in the domain of professional judgment. Given these results, it is important to examine whether exhibiting self optimism in and of itself provides social benefits, without a comparison to pessimism, and whether these benefits result for both friendship and for professional judgments.

Domains of Social Acceptance

The interest of investigating social acceptance in the professional and friendship domains separately was motivated moreover by many results in the personality judgment literature showing two distinct dimensions close to the friendship and professional domains of judgment. Since the publication of Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum's work (1957), at least two dimensions are known to be involved in personality judgments. These two dimensions are differently defined and operationalized. The first dimension often refers to a friendship judgment (e.g., *desirability* in Dubois, 2002; *warmth* by Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002; *value* by Osgood et al., 1957; *other-profitability* by Peeters, Cornelissen & Pandelaere, 2003; *social desirability* by Rosenberg, Nelson & Vivekananthan, 1968). The friendship dimension corresponds to the attractiveness or likeableness of persons. It reflects the affective value they arouse. Someone valued on this dimension is said to have everything needed to be appreciated, to be attractive or warm, or to be desired as a friend. The second dimension refers to the professional domain (e.g., *social utility* in Dubois, 2002; *competence* by Fiske et al., 2002; *dynamism* by Osgood et al., 1957; *self-profitability* by Peeters et al., 2003; *intellectual desirability* by Rosenberg et al., 1968). The second dimension corresponds to people's qualities, especially in professional or in competence domains (e.g., sports). Someone valued on the professional dimension is said to have everything needed to succeed, to be competent and ambitious, or to deserve a high salary. Despite the differing conceptualizations and operationalizations, this body of research consistently presents two recurrent distinct dimensions in personality judgments, sometimes even being independent.

Overview and Hypothesis

In the present studies, participants assessed the social acceptance of more or less optimism in both the friendship and the professional domains. We used a within-participants design, as in previous research (e.g., Helweg-Larsen, Sadeghian & Webb, 2002; pilot study). The targets exhibited either weak, moderate, or strong optimism. Thus, we focused on the social benefits of optimism itself, without a comparison to a pessimistic outlook on the future. Targets exhibited self-optimism in study 1 and comparative optimism in study 2.
Insofar as optimism can be combined with self-deception, which is not actually adaptive for reaching friendship goals (Norem, 2002), we proposed the exploratory hypothesis that optimism may be less socially accepted in the friendship domain than in the professional domain.

METHOD (STUDIES 1 AND 2)

The two experiments were very similar, thus we present their methods together in the following section.

Participants and Design

28 participants (16 females and 12 males) in study 1, and 27 participants (17 females and 10 males) in study 2, were recruited in the street to take part in an experiment. In order to protect anonymity and to assure discretion in this individual context, we did not seek to obtain socio-economic information including age. However, we checked that all the participants were at least 20 years old.

The experimental design used for the both studies involved two within-participants factors: 3 (Level of target's optimism: strong vs. moderate vs. weak) X 2 (Domain of social acceptance: friendship vs. professional). The dependent variable was the social acceptance (friendship and professional) of the target. A manipulation check measure assessed the perceived level of targets' optimism.

Materials

Targets' Portraits

We presented completed questionnaires (i.e., targets' portraits) of the target's outlook on the future to participants. We told them that these questionnaires (portraits) had been filled out by other participants during a previous experiment. In study 1 concerning self-optimism, the questionnaire presented 15 events rated as highly likely, likely, or equally likely as unlikely (for positive events; for negative events, unlikely replaced likely in the first two ratings), in order to represent high, moderate, and neutral levels of optimism. In study 2 concerning comparative optimism, the questionnaire presented these 15 events rated relative to average persons of the same age and sex. They were rated as being much more likely for the target than for others, more likely for the target than for others, or equally likely for the target and for others (for negative events, unlikely replaced likely). Four events represented the friendship domain, four were relative to the professional domain, and the seven remaining represented neither of these domains. Seven of the events were positive, and eight were negative. Most had been used in previous research (e.g., Weinstein, 1980).

In order to create the three levels of optimism (i.e., strong vs. moderate vs. weak), the targets exhibiting strong optimism were highly optimistic about eight of the events, moderately optimistic about five events, and neutral about two events. The targets exhibiting moderate optimism were highly optimistic about one event, moderately about eight events, and neutral about six events. Finally, the targets exhibiting weak optimism were moderately optimistic about four events and neutral about eleven events. The highly optimistic, moderately optimistic, and weakly optimistic target responses were associated with specific events randomly, distributing them equally across event category (i.e., friendship domain, professional domain, or neither) and valence (positive or negative). Previous pre-tests confirmed that the three levels of optimism were judged in accordance with the manipulation.

Dependent Measures

Participants judged each target on ten questions (presented in Appendix 1). Half of the questions corresponded to the domain of friendship; the other half to the professional domain. Most of the questions were similar to the questions of Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) and we also added other specific questions to assess each domain. The questions were presented in random order. We analyzed participants' responses using two scores: one for "friendship acceptance" (Cronbach's alpha = .92 in study 1; Cronbach's alpha = .84 in study 2), the other for "professional acceptance" (Cronbach's alpha = .83 in study 1; Cronbach's alpha = .86 in study 2). Friendship acceptance and professional acceptance were significantly correlated ($r = +.63$, $p < .001$ in study 1; $r = +.48$, $p < .001$ in study 2).

In order to check that the participants perceived the target's level of optimism according to the manipulation, participants rated the level of optimism exhibited by each target. Participants rated each target's personal outlook on the future (study 1) or the perception of the target's future compared to the target's perception for another person (study 2). This question was presented at the end of the questionnaire. For all questions, participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*entirely*).

Procedure

We presented the three targets' portraits (highly optimistic vs. moderately optimistic vs. weakly optimistic) in random order. The participants read them and filled out the questionnaire about the targets. After the experiment, which lasted about 20 minutes, the participants were debriefed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION STUDY 1: SELF-OPTIMISM

Manipulation Check

As expected, results showed that the strongly optimistic target was perceived as the most optimistic ($M = 10.11$; $SD = 1.37$), the moderately optimistic target was perceived as significantly less optimistic ($M = 7.32$; $SD = 1.66$) and the weakly optimistic target was perceived as the significantly least optimistic ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 2.05$), $F(2, 54) = 128.98$, $p < .01$; *Eta-squared* = .83.

Social Acceptance of Targets

The analysis of variance revealed a main effect for target level of optimism, $F(2, 54) = 4.27$, $p < .05$; *Eta-squared* = .09. The moderately optimistic target was the most socially accepted ($M = 6.62$; $SD = 1.66$) and its mean was significantly greater than that of the weakly optimistic target ($M = 5.25$; $SD = 1.92$). However, the strongly optimistic target's mean social acceptance ($M = 6.26$; $SD = 2.48$) did not differ significantly from the other two ($p < .05$).

A significant interaction effect between target level of optimism and domain of social acceptance supported our hypothesis, $F(2, 54) = 16.03$, $p < .01$; *Eta-squared* = .06 (Table 1). The most optimistic targets were the most socially accepted in the professional domain. In contrast, these

targets were not the most socially accepted in the domain of friendship where targets exhibiting moderate optimism were the most socially accepted. In addition, the level of optimism that participants attributed to targets (i.e., manipulation check measure) significantly correlated with professional acceptance ($r = +.56$, $p < .001$; *R-squared* $= .31$), whereas it did not correlate with friendship acceptance ($r = +.02$, *ns*).

Table 1. Mean (Standard Deviation) of Social Acceptance of Targets as a Function of Target's Level of Optimism and Domain of Social Acceptance, $F(2, 54) = 16.03$, $p < .01$.

Level of optimism	Friendship	Professional
Weakly optimistic targets	5.27 a (2.41)	5.24 a (1.72)
Moderately optimistic targets	6.28 b (2.18)	6.95 c (1.36)
Strongly optimistic targets	5.13 ab (3.13)	7.39 c (2.26)

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Despite the general tendency, consistent with the previous literature, that targets exhibiting self-optimism are globally more socially accepted, we observed that the most optimistic target was the most socially accepted only for the professional domain. On the contrary, the strongly optimistic target was judged less favorably in the friendship domain.

STUDY 2: COMPARATIVE OPTIMISM

Comparative optimism (Weinstein, 1980) results from a comparison between one's own and an other's future. It consists of thinking that one will experience more positive and fewer negative events than others. In so far as a recent article has shown links between self and comparative optimism (Radcliffe & Klein, 2002), our next aim was to reproduce and extend our first exploratory results to comparative optimism. Comparative optimism has received little research attention with regard to social acceptance. However, in the study by Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002), participants evaluated their desire to engage in friendship relations (e.g., to have the person as a friend) and in a task-oriented relationship (e.g., to work with the person on a class group project) with specific targets exhibiting a comparative pessimistic *vs*. neutral *vs*. comparative optimistic outlook on the future. The global score of social acceptance of the targets therefore involved both types of assessments which were not distinguished at theoretical or empirical levels. Using such a measure, Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) showed that exhibiting a pessimistic outlook on the future is more socially rejected than exhibiting an optimistic outlook on the future. Nevertheless the global social acceptance of optimism is not directly observed and is based on the social rejection of pessimism because the judgment of the optimistic target did not differ from that of the *neutral* target. Our aim was to test and to compare the social acceptance of comparative optimism for the friendship and professional domains without comparison to a comparative pessimistic target. Similarly to self-optimism, we suggest that the more the target is comparatively optimistic, the more he or she is accepted in the professional domain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDY 2: COMPARATIVE OPTIMISM

Manipulation Check

As expected, results showed that the strongly comparatively optimistic target was perceived as the most optimistic ($M = 10.16$; $SD = 1.29$), followed by the moderately comparatively optimistic target ($M = 7.20$; $SD = 1.73$) and finally by the weakly comparatively optimistic target ($M = 4.31$; $SD = 2.30$), $F(2, 52) = 128.11$, $p < .01$; *Eta-squared* = .83.

Social Acceptance of Targets

In this study on comparative optimism, we found results that paralleled those for self-optimism in Study 1. The analysis of variance revealed a main effect for targets' level of comparative optimism for the ratings of social acceptance, $F(2, 52) = 4.09$, $p < .01$; *Eta-squared* = .10. The weakly comparatively optimistic target ($M = 5.39b$; $SD = 1.69$) was significantly less socially accepted than the other targets. However, the difference between the moderate one ($M = 6.68a$; $SD = 1.54$) and the strong one ($M = 6.55ab$; $SD = 2.14$) was not significant [2].

The general tendency that targets exhibiting comparative optimism are globally socially accepted is qualified by an interaction effect between target level of optimism and domain of social acceptance that supported our hypothesis, $F(2, 52) = 22.86$, $p < .001$; *Eta-squared* = .07 (Table 2). The targets exhibiting moderate comparative optimism were the most socially accepted in the domain of friendship, and the strongly optimistic target was weakly socially accepted. Once again, the more the targets were comparatively optimistic the more they were socially accepted in the professional domain. Moreover, the level of optimism the participants attributed to targets (i.e., manipulation check measure) significantly correlated with professional acceptance ($r = +.50$, $p < .001$; *R-squared* = .25), whereas it did not correlate with friendship acceptance ($r = +.12$, *ns*).

Table 2. Mean (Standard Deviation) of Social Acceptance of Targets as a Function of Target's Level of Optimism and Domains of Social Acceptance, $F(2, 54) = 16.03$, $p < .01$.

Level of optimism	Friendship	Professional
Weakly optimistic targets	5.33 a (2.02)	5.45 a (1.96)
Moderately optimistic targets	6.26 b (2.13)	7.10 c (1.46)
Strongly optimistic targets	5.32 ab (2.81)	7.77 d (1.83)

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$, except subscripts c and d, which differ at $p = .053$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

All effects obtained in our experiments show that both self-optimism (study 1) and comparative optimism (study 2) are equally socially accepted. This corroborates the observed links between self and comparative optimisms (Radcliffe & Klein, 2002) and suggest that social acceptance requires an optimistic outlook on the future but does not necessarily require using a self-presentational process to exhibit one's future as better than others' (Schlenker, 1980).

The first goal of these experiments was to examine the social acceptance of exhibiting different degrees of optimism. We observed that the moderately optimistic target (both studies) or the strongly optimistic target (study 2) was generally socially accepted. Nevertheless, the means were quite close to the midpoint of the scales when the two domains of social acceptance were not distinguished. It is noteworthy that Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) obtained similar means to the ones we observed using both a within-participants design (pilot study) and a between-participants design (studies 1 and 2). It is therefore unlikely that the within participants design used in the present study was responsible for the reported effects. Two aspects of our studies support the idea that optimism itself is socially accepted: First, we avoided comparing the social acceptance of optimism with that of pessimism or that of a neutral or uncertain outlook on the future; and secondly, three levels of optimism were compared. Furthermore, such results are not incompatible with the idea that people who exhibit a pessimistic outlook on the future are socially rejected because they are seen as depressed (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2002). The hypothesis that people exhibiting a highly optimistic outlook are judged competent because they are also seen as non-depressive should be investigated (Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001).

The second goal was to examine the social acceptance of exhibiting optimism for the friendship and professional domains as two distinct domains of judgment. Previous research suggest that exhibiting optimism is not necessarily the best way to be socially accepted in the friendship domain, especially in longer term relations (Norem, 2002; Taylor et al., 2003) whereas it seems beneficial in the professional domain (Dolbier et al., 2001). Our results support the existence of two domains (friendship and professional) in judgments about persons exhibiting optimism. On both types of assessments, they support the hypothesis that exhibiting optimism is more socially accepted in the professional domain than in the friendship domain.

For the friendship domain, the targets expressing moderate optimism were the most socially accepted. We can think that people attribute self-deception to those who express high optimism, and therefore not value them on friendship (Norem, 2002). Another explanation could be that exhibiting moderate optimism is highly representative of people's outlook on the future. Indeed, when we pre-tested the optimism of events used for the portraits, people generally expressed moderate self- and comparative optimism. Thus, the moderately optimistic target could be the one whose response is most standard and through a mere exposure effect, is most liked (Zajonc, 1968). Alternatively, this standard level of optimism could be a prescriptive norm (Dubois, 2002). Then, people expressing more or less optimism would not correspond to this expected response and would be less liked.

For the professional domain, the most socially accepted target was the one with the highest level of optimism. It is only for this domain and this target that social acceptance differs from neutral on the scale (cf. Tables 1 and 2). The moderately optimistic target is not the most valued despite its greater representativeness relative to the others. The more a target exhibits optimism, the more it reaps social benefits in the professional domain—This result is highly consistent with the previously observed correlation between optimism and leadership (Dolbier et al., 2001; Hickman et al., 1996; House & Shamir, 1998), potentially indicative of better cognitive strategies for optimistic persons. However, Cantor and Norem (1989) and Showers (1992) showed that pessimism predicted cognitive performances better than optimism. Nevertheless, participants in

our studies may have valued optimistic targets more because they perceived them as having more ability to succeed. Further experiments should be conducted to examine this explanation. Yet another explanation of our results could come from research finding that optimism, similar to the feeling of having power, is associated with risky choices in professional domains (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). In fact, optimism facilitates making risky investments, and thus investments for the creation of new economic markets (Bougheas, 2002), thereby assuring the durability of free-market economic organizations. We therefore suggest that the social acceptance of exhibiting optimism arises more from its allowing for adaptation to a given social functioning than from its likeableness. This interpretation fits particularly well with the concept of *social utility*, defined by Dubois (2002) as adopting the fundamental rules which assure the durability of the social and economic system to which people belong.

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APPENDIX 1 : Questions of Social Acceptance, Studies 1 and 2
Would you be willing to confide in this person?
Would you like this person to become your best friend?
Do you think that this person has everything needed to be loved?
Would you like to meet this person for dinner?
Do you think this person is useful to a company ?
Would you hire this person?
Would you want to work with this person if you needed a collaborator?
Would you entrust important files to this person?
Do you think that this person has everything needed to succeed professionally?
Manipulation check measure:
Do you think that this person is positive about his/her future?
(Study 2: Do you think that this person is more positive about his/her future than about others' future?)

APPENDIX 2: ANOVA for the Manipulation Check, Study 1

	df	MS	*F*	*p* level
Level of target's optimism	2	255.512	128.979	0.000
Error	24	1.981		

APPENDIX 3: ANOVA Matrix for the Manipulation Check, Study 2

	df	MS	*F*	*p* level
Level of target's optimism	2	230.825	128.115	0.000
Error	52	1.802		

APPENDIX 4: ANOVA for the Dependent Variable, Study 1

	df	MS	*F*	*p* level
Domain of acceptance (D)	1	39.404	14.502	.0007
Error	27	2.717		
Level of target's optimism (L)	2	27.901	4.268	.0190
Error	54	6.538		
D x L	2	19.167	16.029	.0000
Error	54	1.196		

APPENDIX 5: ANOVA for the Dependent Variable, Study 2

	df	CM	*F*	*p* level
Domain of acceptance (D)	1	52.526	11.527	.0022
Error	26	4,557		
Level of target's optimism (L)	2	27.306	5.093	.0095
Error	52	5.361		
D x L	2	19.058	22.855	.0000
Error	52	.834		

APPENDIX 6: Correlation Matrix, Mean and Standard Deviations (SD) for Study 1

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Optimism	7.17	1.27	--		
2. Friendship Acceptance	5.56	1.77	.02	---	
3. Professional Acceptance	6.53	1.34	.56*	.63*	--

* indicates a significant correlation at *p* < .001 level.

APPENDIX 7: Correlation Matrix, Mean and Standard Deviations (SD) for Study 2

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Optimism	7.22	1.46	--		
2. Friendship Acceptance	5.64	1.72	.12	--	.
3. Professional Acceptance	6.77	1.23	.50*	.48*	--

* indicates a significant correlation at *p* < .001 level.

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