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Team allegiance can lead to both optimistic and pessimistic predictions ☆

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Abstract

Although team allegiance is usually associated with optimistic predictions about team performance, the authors hypothesized that preferences for one's group can also lead to pessimistic predictions. Upon arrival to the laboratory, groups of four participants were split into teams of two based on bogus criteria. Participants were informed that their teammate would compete against a member of the other team in a trivia game consisting of both easy (e.g., "pop culture") and hard (e.g., "50's movies") categories. They provided likelihood estimates regarding outcomes for each category. As predicted, team allegiance inflated participants' optimism about their teammate winning the easy categories, but deflated optimism about their teammate winning the hard categories. Path analyses supported the proposed account indicating that preferences for a teammate to win led to an enhanced focus on the teammate's strengths and weaknesses (and neglect of the strengths and weaknesses of the other competitor).

Keywords: Wishful thinking; Optimism; Pessimism; Predictions; Team allegiance

Competitions abound in today's society. Many competitions involve teams and/or groups of interested onlookers, such as NCAA basketball games and political elections. Because memberships in social groups are critical for people's identities, and people are motivated to protect such valued social identities (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 1981), the outcomes of competitions involving valued groups often carry substantial psychological significance (e.g., Edwards, 1973; Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992; McCall & Simmons, 1966). For example, people often affirm their social identities by "basking in reflected glory" following a successful performance of their favorite sports team (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Insofar as outcomes of competitions reflect group worth or status, group members may be motivated to view their group as likely to prevail in a competition. In other words, group members might engage in *wishful thinking*: feeling overoptimistic about a preferred future outcome as a result of the preference for that outcome (e.g., Granberg & Brent, 1983; Hogarth, 1987). Evidence that group members make overoptimistic predictions about their group's performance is well documented in both sports and political domains (e.g., Babad, 1987; Dolan & Holbrook, 2001; Granberg & Brent, 1983; Hirt et al., 1992; Markman & Hirt, 2002; Ogburn, 1934). For example, Babad (1987) examined predictions of more than 1000 soccer fans and found that 93% predicted their favorite team to win an upcoming match. Moreover, it is often the case that optimism about one's group's performance depends on the level of identification with the group (e.g., Babad, 1987; Dolan & Holbrook, 2001; Hirt et al., 1992; Markman & Hirt, 2002; Wann & Dolan, 1994).

However, evidence that group members make overoptimistic predictions about their team's upcoming performance does not necessarily constitute evidence that this overoptimism is causally linked to their immediate preferences (i.e., the result of wishful thinking). Instead, environmental influences could lead to preferences and expectations that have a shared valence or direction.

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For example, disproportionately favorable media coverage of a local team might cause people within the local region to like the team and expect it to do well. A related and more general possibility is that people's knowledge about a team might drive both their preferences for the team and their expectations regarding that team's performance (whether the team will do well or poorly in a competition). Hence, although there has been substantial research investigating the predictions of people with pre-existing team or political allegiances, it is exceedingly difficult to draw conclusions about the precise causal influences that these allegiances might have.

To our knowledge, the only research using an experimental design to provide direct evidence that team allegiance can lead to overoptimism was conducted by Price (2000). Price used a minimal-groups procedure (cf. Tajfel, 1981) to assign participants to two teams for a dart-throwing competition. After a practice round, randomly selected pairs of participants (one from each team) shot at the dart board, prior to which other participants judged the probabilities that their team member or the other team's member would come closer to hitting the bull's-eye. Participants were more optimistic in their probability judgments regarding their teammates than in judgments regarding members of the other team. These findings support the notion that team allegiance can lead to inflated optimism.

We suspected, however, that overoptimism is not the only consequence of team allegiance. In the present work, we tested the hypothesis that team allegiance could sometimes increase pessimism. That people might be pessimistic about a self-relevant outcome is not a novel idea. Previous research on defensive pessimism has suggested that some people engage in a strategy of undue pessimism in order to simultaneously motivate themselves for a future performance and also prepare for a possible disappointment regarding their performance (see Norem, 2001; Norem & Cantor, 1986). Related research on bracing for disappointment suggests that people are sometimes motivated to take a pessimistic view of a possible outcome to avoid extreme disappointment if the outcome is undesirable (e.g., Shepperd, Findly-Klein, Kwavnick, Walker, & Perez, 2000; Shepperd, Ouellette, & Fernandez, 1996). However, there are two reasons why our prediction of pessimism is novel within the context of team allegiance. First, researchers investigating the relations between allegiances and predictions have exclusively hypothesized about undue optimism, and the findings from correlational studies (e.g., those discussed above) as well as the experiment by Price (2000) have produced findings showing only positive (or null) relations between allegiance and optimism. Second, our hypothesis that team allegiance can sometimes lead to pessimism does not assume that people are strategically pessimistic to avoid disappointment. Instead, we hypothesized that pessimism (and optimism) can be a product of information-processing biases that are initially triggered by a desire for one's own team to succeed.

Our hypothesis partly originates from work investigating a cognitive bias named *focalism*. This bias has been identified as one of many non-motivated causes of above-average effects (e.g., Klar, 2002; Suls, Krizan, Chamber, & Mortensen, 2005; see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004, for a review) and shared-circumstance effects (Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003). As applied to shared-circumstance effects, a focalism account suggests that when people are asked to make a likelihood judgment about a competition outcome, they tend to evaluate the evidence—both positive and negative—relevant to the focal entity while neglecting evidence relevant to the non-focal "referent" entity. For example, if people are asked about the chances that Person A (rather than Person B) will win a trivia competition, a focalism account would suggest that people would consider the strengths and weaknesses of Person A more than the strengths and weakness of Person B. This focalism can cause probability judgments about Person A to be overoptimistic when the topic of the trivia competition is generally easy ("current events"), because Person A's strength in that category looms large. Focalism can also cause overpessimism when the topic of the trivia competition is difficult ("baroque music"), because now Person A's *weakness* in the category looms large.

For the present work, we hypothesized that the influence of focalism—resulting from specifying a focal entity in the likelihood question—could be either augmented or offset by the influence of an allegiance-based preference for one competitor to win. More specifically, we hypothesized that a preference for one competitor (e.g., a teammate) would push participants toward focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of that competitor rather than the non-preferred competitor. This preference-induced push could augment focalism (i.e., focalism tied to the specification of the target outcome) when participants are asked about the likelihood of the preferred competitor winning. However, it could fully or partially offset an effect of focalism when participants are asked about the non-preferred competitor winning.

We employed a trivia challenge paradigm that incorporated elements of the paradigms from Price (2000) and Windschitl and colleagues (2003). Participants were led to believe that their teammate would play in a trivia competition against a person from another team (hereafter called the *outgroup competitor*). The participants were shown the categories from the competition—some of which were designed to seem rather easy and some rather hard. Participants were also told that there would be one winner per category. Participants then judged, among other things, the likelihoods that their teammate or the outgroup competitor would win the various categories.

We expected that focalism alone would cause people to give high likelihood judgments for easy categories but low likelihood judgments for hard categories, regardless of whether they were asked about their teammate's or the outgroup competitor's chances of winning. However, we expected this hard/easy effect to be bigger when participants were asked about their teammate's chances, because

people's preferences and the question wording (asking about the teammate's chances) would both be pushing participants to focus on the teammate. The hard/easy effect should be smaller when participants were asked about the outgroup competitor's chances, because people's preferences would push them to focus on the teammate whereas the question wording would push them to focus on the outgroup competitor. In other words, we predicted a Category-Difficulty × Question-Target interaction. The results from the hard categories would provide evidence that having an allegiance with one competitor can, at times, deflate rather than inflate optimism. These predictions can be contrasted against an alternative prediction suggesting that an allegiance-based preference for one competitor will have a main effect influence of inflating optimism about that competitor, regardless of the category difficulty.

Method

Participants and design

Eighty-eight introductory psychology students participated in the experiment to satisfy a course requirement. The experiment consisted of a 2 (Category-Difficulty: hard vs. easy) × 2 (Question-Target: teammate vs. outgroup competitor) mixed design, with repeated measures on the first factor.

Materials and procedure

The participants arrived in groups of four and spent the first 5 min in a getting-acquainted conversation. Next, as part of a minimal-groups creation process (cf. Tajfel, 1981), participants privately rated various abstract paintings. Presumably based on these ratings, participants were provided with "abstraction attractiveness" scores, which were said to be indicative of various personality characteristics and behaviors. Participants were then ostensibly grouped into teams of two based on whether they had low or high "abstraction attractiveness" scores. In reality, the assignment of scores to participants—and hence the grouping assignment—was randomly determined.

Next, each participant read instructions that explained that his/her teammate would compete against one member of the opposing team in a trivia competition (participants were also led to believe that they would be playing against the other member of the opposing team[1]). Participants then saw a list of 20 trivia categories—10 that college students generally perceive as easy (e.g., "Pop Culture") and 10 that they generally perceive as difficult (e.g., "History of Mesopotamia;" see pre-testing described by Windschitl et al., 2003). Participants were informed that two of these categories would be randomly selected for the upcoming competition (in reality one easy and one hard trivia category were pre-selected), that each participant would answer several questions from these categories, and that there would be one winner per category for each pair of competitors who were facing off. To fuel a preference for their teammate doing well and create a shared reward structure, we informed the participants that if they or their teammate won more categories than did the members of the other team, they would each win $4, for a maximum award of $8 per person.

Next, participants responded to the main dependent measures. After reading brief instructions about how to use a probability scale, participants provided their likelihood judgments regarding each of the twenty trivia categories. Specifically, half of the participants estimated the numeric probabilities that their teammate would beat his/her outgroup competitor ("For each of the following categories, indicate what you think the likelihood is that *your teammate* will win the category [assuming it is selected for the competition]?"). The other half of the participants estimated the numeric probabilities that the outgroup competitor would beat their teammate ("For each of the following categories, indicate what you think the likelihood is that *your teammate's opponent* will win the category [assuming it is selected for the competition]?"). Participants then rated how much knowledge they had about each category as well has how much knowledge they believed their teammate and the outgroup competitor had about each category. These knowledge estimates were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *very little knowledge*, 7 = *a great deal of knowledge*). The ordering of these sets of knowledge ratings was counterbalanced across participants. Finally, participants provided answers to five questions from the two pre-selected trivia categories, their answers were scored, and appropriate compensation was provided. Participants were then debriefed and dismissed.

Results

For each participant, we calculated his/her average probability responses for the hard and easy categories separately. These composite values were submitted to a Category-Difficulty × Question-Target mixed model ANOVA (see depiction of the relevant means in Fig. 1). Not surprisingly, the main effect of category difficulty was significant, $F(1, 86) = 69.4$, $p < .01$. Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Windschitl et al., 2003), participants tended to expect a given target person to be likely to win easy categories but unlikely to win hard ones. This shared-circumstance effect can be attributed to focalism induced by question wording: participants appear to have focused primarily on the target

[1] Because this report concerns the influence of team allegiance, our description of the methods and results focus on the competition between the participant's teammate and outgroup competitor. Participants did complete dependent measures relevant to their own competition against an outgroup competitor. Results from those measures are fully consistent with those of Windschitl et al. (2003). In short, participants gave higher likelihood estimates regarding their own chances of winning ($M = 59.28$) than about their opponent's chances ($M = 52.85$) of winning easy trivia categories, but they gave lower likelihood estimates regarding their own chances ($M = 24.95$) than their opponent's chances ($M = 49.70$) of winning hard trivia categories.

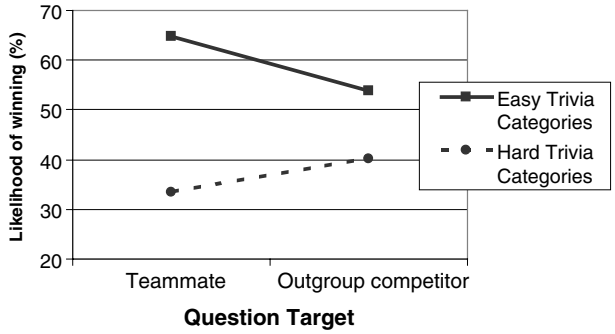

Fig. 1. Likelihood judgments as a function of category difficulty and question target. For example, the upper left data point reflects the mean of participants' responses when asked about their teammates' chances of winning easy categories.

person's knowledge (or lack of knowledge) regarding the categories and did not adequately consider the referent person's knowledge.

More important for the present paper are the remaining main effect and interaction. The question-target main effect was not significant ($F < 1$). Hence, there was no evidence for an overall wishful thinking effect in which a preference for the participant's teammate to win resulted in more optimistic predictions about that outcome. However, as we had predicted, the Category-Difficulty by Question-Target interaction was significant, $F(1,86) = 10.8$, $p < .01$. For easy categories, participants supplied *higher* likelihood judgments regarding the teammate's chances of winning (the preferred outcome) relative to judgments regarding the outgroup competitor's chances of winning ($M = 64.84$, $SD = 13.30$, and $M = 53.93$, $SD = 17.46$, respectively; $t(86) = 3.33$, $p < .01$). However, for hard categories, participants supplied *lower* likelihood judgments regarding the teammate's chances of winning relative to judgments regarding the outgroup competitor's chances of winning ($M = 33.37$, $SD = 16.80$, and $M = 40.24$, $SD = 16.11$, respectively; $t(86) = -1.95$, $p = .05$).[2]

To gain additional insight into what information participants used when making likelihood judgments, we conducted path analyses—one for each participant—that examined to what extent participants' knowledge ratings predicted their likelihood judgments. More specifically, a participant's probability judgments for the 20 trivia categories were regressed on his/her ratings of the teammate's and outgroup competitor's knowledge of those categories, producing regression coefficients representing the predictive power of those two sets of knowledge judgments. These coefficients were then averaged across participants within each of the two question-target conditions (see Fig. 2).

According to a typical focalism account (see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Windschitl et al., 2003), knowledge ratings about the target person should be more predictive of probability judgments than ratings about the referent person—although prescriptively there should be no such difference. Such a pattern is clearly visible in Fig. 2. More critically, our explanation for the influence of team allegiance also predicts that knowledge ratings about the person desired to win (i.e., the teammate) would tend, on average, to be more predictive of likelihood judgments than would knowledge ratings about the other competitor. Such a pattern is also observable in Fig. 2, albeit weaker than the overall pattern attributable to focalism (i.e., focalism tied to whether the teammate or the outgroup competitor was specified as the focal outcome). For an inferential test of this pattern, we first multiplied the coefficients representing the influence of the referent-knowledge ratings by -1 and then combined the coefficients from the two target-question conditions. Multiplying by -1 allows for a uniform interpretation in which high positive values (in either condition) reflect strong influences in a normatively appropriate direction. As expected, participants' ratings of their teammate's knowledge were substantially more predictive ($M_{\text{coefficient}} = .39$) of their probability judgments than were their ratings of the outgroup competitor's knowledge ($M_{\text{coefficient}} = .17$), $t(87) = 3.00$, $p < .01$.

It is worth emphasizing that participants were randomly assigned to teams. Not surprisingly then, the correlations between participants' ratings of their teammates' and their own knowledge ($M_r = .44$) were not significantly different from the correlations between participants' ratings of the outgroup competitor's and their own knowledge ($M_r = .43$). Also, the mean knowledge ratings regarding the hard and easy categories were approximately the same between the teammate and outgroup competitor (see Table 1). Hence, the likelihood-judgment biases participants exhibited in this experiment cannot be attributed to biases in their knowledge estimates about teammates and outgroup competitors, but rather to biases in the weight given to these two types of estimates when likelihood judgments were formed.

Discussion

This experiment revealed that team allegiance can not only inflate optimism, but it can also inflate pessimism. The experiment also supplied evidence supporting the hypothesized mechanisms for the observed influence of team allegiance. Namely, having an allegiance with one of two people in a competition caused participants to differentially weight their beliefs about the category knowledge of the two competitors when making likelihood judgments. Giving disproportionate weight to their beliefs about their teammate's knowledge led to enhanced optimism when the teammate's and outgroup competitor's knowledge was

[2] On an absolute level, participants supplied low likelihood judgments regarding both their teammate's ($M = 33.37$) and their outgroup competitor's ($M = 40.24$) chances of winning hard categories (both estimates were significantly lower than 50%, $ps < .001$). On the other hand, participants supplied high judgments regarding their teammate's chances of winning easy categories ($M = 64.84$, $p < .001$). There was a similar trend toward high judgments regarding outgroup competitor's chances of winning easy categories ($M = 53.93$), although it did not reach significance ($p = .16$).

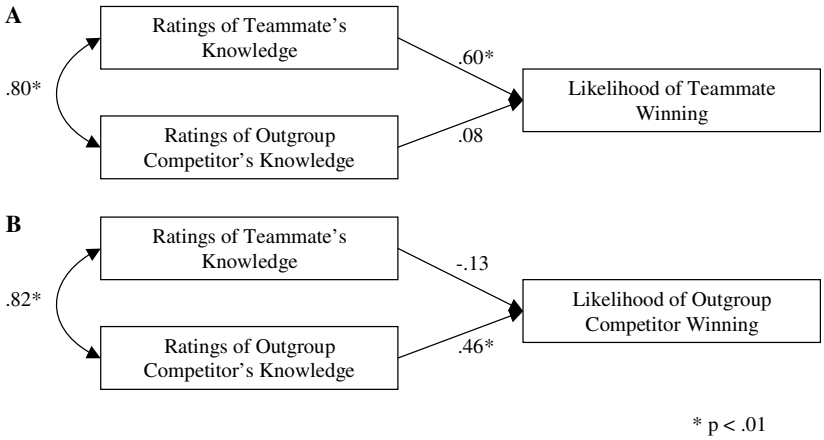

Fig. 2. For each participant, a path analysis was conducted relating his/her likelihood judgments to his/her knowledge ratings regarding the teammate and outgroup competitor. (A) Shows the average path-analysis values from participants asked to judge the likelihood that their teammate would win. (B) Shows the average values from participants asked to judge the likelihood that the outgroup competitor would win. Average correlations appear on curved arrows. Average standardized path coefficients appear on the straight arrows. An asterisk on a curved arrow indicates that the average correlation was significantly different from 0 (tested by a one-sample *t* test after r-to-z transformations). An asterisk on a straight arrow indicates that the average coefficient was significantly different from 0 (tested by a one-sample *t* test).

Table 1
Mean knowledge ratings regarding the teammate and outgroup competitor as a function of category difficulty ($N = 88$)

	Teammate	Outgroup competitor
Hard categories	2.33 (.66)	2.30 (.73)
Easy categories	5.16 (.68)	5.02 (.70)
Overall	3.75 (.50)	3.66 (.50)

Note. All ratings were made on a 1 (very little knowledge) to 7 (a great deal of knowledge) scale. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

assumed to be strong (for an easy category such as "celebrities"). However, the disproportionate weighting led to enhanced pessimism when knowledge was assumed to be weak (for a hard category such as "dates in history").

These findings call for a more complex understanding of the influences of team allegiance and outcome desirability on predictions. A wealth of correlational research has focused on how team allegiances are associated with overoptimism (e.g., Babad, 1987; Dolan & Holbrook, 2001; Ogburn, 1934). Research on the broader notion of wishful thinking has emphasized the possibility that desire for an outcome can increase optimism regarding that outcome (e.g., Hogarth, 1987). As was noted earlier, overoptimistic predictions observed in field studies are often interpreted as the result of wishful thinking (e.g., Babad, 1987; Dolan & Holbrook, 2001). We have argued, however, that such interpretations are problematic given the potential role of preexisting knowledge in creating spurious associations between preferences and expectations. Consequently, we created new team allegiances in the laboratory that were independent of any previous knowledge regarding competitors in question. Our findings indicated that although team allegiance can increase optimism, it can also lead to increased pessimism when circumstances indicate poor absolute performance (in this case on hard trivia categories). If generalized to a real-world context, these findings suggest that when conditions under which a competition takes place facilitate good absolute performance for all teams (e.g., perfect weather at a football game), these conditions will enhance an observer's optimism about the preferred team. On the other hand, if conditions point to a poor absolute performance for all teams (e.g., wind and rain at the football game), an observer could turn pessimistic about their preferred team.

There are a few potential limitations of our study that deserve mention. The first involves our manipulation of team allegiance. Given the difficulties of producing wishful thinking effects in previous research (see e.g., Bar-Hillel & Budescu, 1995), we wanted to use a team-allegiance manipulation that was suitably powerful for testing our hypotheses. Hence, we operationalized team allegiance as a compound manipulation in which team membership, shared scores on "abstraction attractiveness," and prize-money contingencies were all manipulated simultaneously. That is, members of a given team shared not only the same team membership, but they also shared similar bogus scores on "abstraction attractiveness," and their monetary earnings were partially dependent on their teammate's performances. Although these dimensions are often naturally confounded in real-world contexts, the compound nature of our manipulation does not allow us to determine from our data whether mere team formation, shared scores on "abstraction attractiveness," or shared prize money were solely or mainly responsible for the observed team allegiance effects. It will rest upon future research to establish which of these factors is most influential in contributing to team allegiance effects.

A second limitation is that our allegiance manipulation—despite its compound nature—would seem to be relatively mild compared to the power of the allegiances formed in everyday life and the impact that team outcomes can have on people. Being a member of Team A or Team B

within the context of an experiment is less involving than being a Democrat or a Republican in a presidential election year, and the desire for winning $8 probably has much less impact than does one's desire that a particular candidate is elected as president. Hence, we cannot conclude from the present study that allegiance-based preferences will always have the effects they produced in the present study. It might, in fact, be the case that other motivated processes, such as defensive pessimism or a mood-enhancing form of optimism might dominate in some situations for which the emotional stakes run quite high. With that said, there is no reason to assume that the processes mediating the results detected in this experiment will not also play a role within many or most real-world contexts.

A third limitation involves the order in which participants responded to our dependent measures. Namely, all participants first provided likelihood judgments and then rated their teammate's and outgroup competitor's knowledge. It is thus possible that participants' likelihood judgments influenced the knowledge ratings they subsequently made, rather then vice versa as our interpretation would suggest. Although such an interpretation seems less plausible given the absence of systematic mean differences in ratings of the teammate's and outgroup competitor's knowledge (see Table 1), it is nonetheless a logical possibility that should be ruled out in the future.

A fourth limitation concerns the fact that we did not give participants special incentives for accurate responding. Instead, we provided them with standard instructions about how to use the likelihood scale. The accuracy motivations of participants in our sample probably varied substantially, as is the case in most research studies. One interesting avenue for future research would be to investigate whether and how external accuracy incentives (or accountability considerations; see Tetlock & Kim, 1987) might interact with the processes shaping the key findings of our experiment. One possibility is that accuracy incentives, as a form of nondirectional motivation, would reduce the influence of directional motivations such as wishful thinking. This might result in more optimistic predictions about hard categories and less optimistic predictions about easy ones. However, accuracy incentives might also make participants generally cautious, which could translate into enhanced pessimism regardless of category difficulty. Of course, only additional research can determine whether realistic accuracy incentives would have any influence at all in this paradigm.

Although the potential limitations we have addressed identify some possible boundary conditions for the findings we have described, none of the limitations threaten our basic conclusions about whether and how allegiance-based preferences can increase or decrease optimism. Importantly, findings from our study indicate the value of considering psychological mechanisms involved in potentially "wishful" predictions. If we had not considered the role focalism plays in likelihood judgments and only used easy trivia categories for our trivia competition, no pessimism effects would have been observed. Moreover, we would not be in a position to draw inferences about the role of context in reversing the direction of team allegiance effects from increasing optimism to increasing pessimism. By hypothesizing and directly investigating the mechanisms by which such enhanced-optimism effects might occur, not only will researchers' understanding of these effects improve, but there may be more discoveries of systematic cases in which enhanced-pessimism effects also occur. Ultimately, this might facilitate an integration of the important but seemingly conflicting notions of wishful thinking and bracing for disappointment (Shepperd et al., 1996, 2000).

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