



THE BELIEF THAT OPTIMISM IMPROVES PERFORMANCE (CHINA)

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In North American culture, people tend to expect optimism to lead to success. Formally, the optimism-performance hypothesis posits that people believe optimism improves performance (which then improves the chance of successful outcomes that depend on performance) (Tenney, Logg, & Moore, 2015). However, the degree to which optimism has a noticeable effect on causing performance to improve is likely lower than people expect (Tenney, Logg, & Moore, 2015).

The current research project tests the optimism-performance hypothesis in China. In general, the Chinese tend to be more pessimistic than Americans. Researchers have discovered the Chinese who have been exposed to a tight, self-effacing and hierarchical culture have learned to pay closer attention to transgression. (Lee & Duenas, 1995; Trandis 1995). This difference in outlook could affect our findings on optimism in China, since in traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese were expected to attribute their own success to other people as a way to show modesty and harmony with others. This tendency could make people in China more pessimistic if they are often worrying about the risks and problems that can affect their reputation. In contrast, the North Americans are more individualistic and believe that they have the power to control the outcomes in their lives (Lee & Seligman, 1997).

Because of these cultural differences in the level of optimism between the North American culture and the Chinese culture, it is worth considering a) what people of different cultures believe is the function or purpose of optimism; and b) what function or purpose optimism actually serves. From the differences in cultural outlook, it is worth considering because this will help us understand why people in North America assumed optimism would help performance more than it actually did; is this error universal, or does it stem from the fact that North American culture tends to be especially optimistic? The current research explores whether the Chinese believe that optimism will lead to better performance as well as whether optimism actually leads to better performance.

We conducted one experiment, in which 80 participants in China were recruited through social media platforms (Facebook, WeChat, & Weibo) by native Chinese volunteers. Participants were ethnic Chinese and lived in different parts of mainland China with majority from the south of China. The survey was translated to simplified Mandarin Chinese in order for the Chinese participants to be able to clearly read and write in their native language.



First, participants completed a measure of trait optimism (the LOT-R). Then participants were randomly given two of four scenarios (to prevent fatigue) in which a protagonist was applying for an award, investing in a new business, undergoing surgery, or hosting a party. After that, they were asked how much optimism they would prescribe for the protagonist across three decision phases: baseline, deliberative, and implemental (see Appendix for a description of the phases). Then they completed a Cultural Orientation measure.

The results support the optimism-performance hypothesis (see Figure 1). At each decision phase (baseline, deliberative, and implemental), the participants on average prescribed optimism for the protagonist in the scenario. Participants likely believed that if the protagonist had an optimistic mindset, it would improve the protagonist's chance of success. The pattern of results with participants in China differs somewhat from the results reported in previous research, with participants in the U.S. (see Figure 2). In the U.S., participants prescribed optimism only in the baseline and implemental phases, when it was especially clear that the protagonist needed motivation. But in the deliberative phase, when the protagonist was deciding which decision to make, participants in the U.S. prescribed accuracy, not optimism. This means the Chinese participants were even more likely to prescribe optimism across situations than the American participants. Both Americans and Chinese prescribed the most optimism during the implemental phase of the decision process.

In conclusion, the results from our experiment in China support the optimism-performance hypothesis, indicating that people across cultures believe that optimism leads to success. We plan to conduct follow-up experiments to test the robustness and replicability of the current results. We also plan to extend the current results by putting optimism to the test: will being optimistic affect performance as much as people in China expect?

One limitation of the current research is that, although the survey was written in Chinese, we used the same names that were used in the U.S. survey, and so there is a chance that our Chinese participants were giving answers based on what they believed would be helpful for American protagonists. In our next experiment, we will use Chinese names.



Exhibits

Figure 1: Prescribed Outlook as a Function of Decision Phase (China)

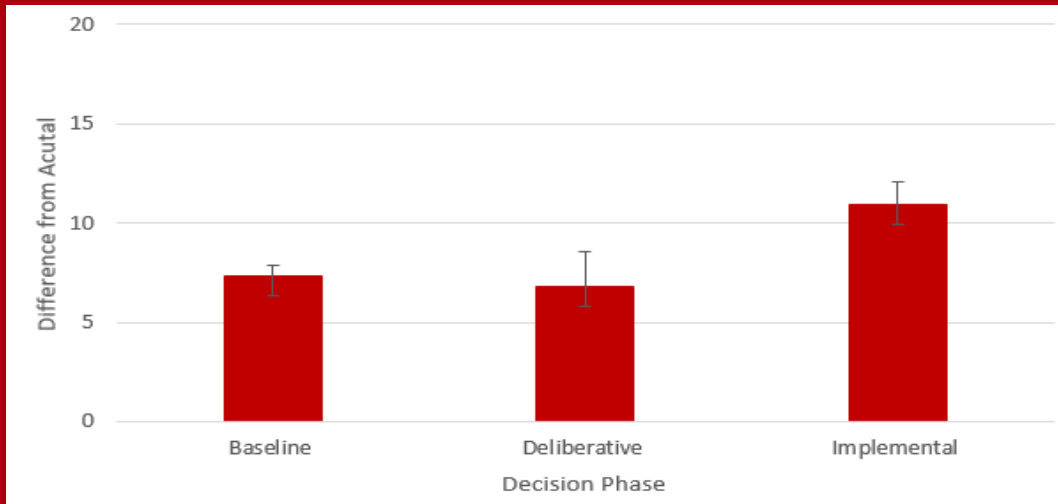
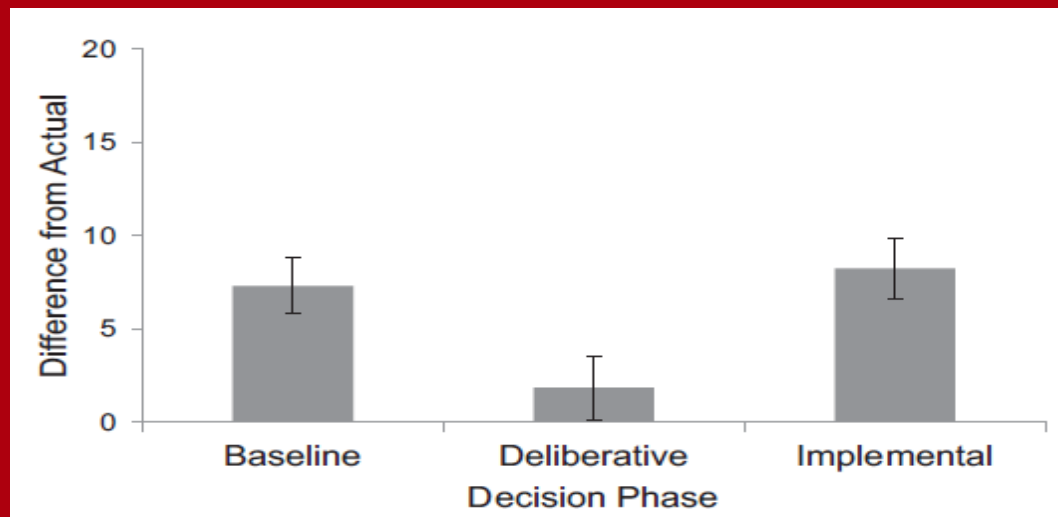


Figure 2: Prescribed Outlook as a Function of Decision Phase (United States)



(Tenney, Logg, & Moore, 2015)



Figures 1-2. Prescribed outlook as a function of decision phase, aggregated across four scenarios. Scores above zero indicate prescribed optimism; scores at zero indicate prescribed accuracy; scores below zero would indicate prescribed pessimism.

Appendix

Example Decision Phases from One Scenario

Baseline

Jane's true chance of success is 65%. What should she think is her true chance of success? (Move the slider below to indicate what she should think her chance is given that her true chance is 65%.)

Deliberative

Jane's true chance of success is 65%. **If she is going to have to make a lot of important decisions based on her chance of success (e.g., how to plan her other finances),** what should she think is her true chance of success? (Move the slider below to indicate what she should think her chance is given that her true chance is 65%.)

Implemental

Jane's true chance of success **if she works hard** is 65%. **If she is going to need motivation to work hard,** what should she think is her true chance of success **if she works hard?** (Move the slider below to indicate what she should think her chance if she works hard is given that her true chance is 65%.)

References

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