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Pers Soc Psychol Bull 2009; 35; 160 originally published online Dec 5, 2008;
DOI: 10.1177/0146167208327050

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Expectations for Others' Outcomes: Do People Display Compassionate Bracing?

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Although people generally are optimistic about the future, they will lower their predictions to brace for bad news when confronting a challenge to their predictions. Three studies examined whether this shift in predictions for self-relevant outcomes extends to predictions for others' outcomes. That is, the authors explored whether people display "compassionate bracing." Results reveal that participants did not brace for friends even when their friend faced imminent feedback (Study 1) and even when the outcome was highly important to the friend (Study 2). Participants braced for friends only when the friend's performance had self-relevant implications (Study 3). The authors discuss the implications of these findings for communication and relationship health.

Keywords: *optimism; expectations; risk judgments; bracing; relationships*

Imagine a close friend recently interviewed for a dream job. As you hear your friend's phone ring with the news of the interview results, are you feeling hope or dread? Moreover, how do your feelings compare with how your friend is feeling? The answers to these questions have implications for our understanding of how people make predictions and how well people anticipate and respond to the emotional experiences and needs of others. Past work shows that people anticipate and brace for undesired *self-relevant* outcomes by adjusting their expectations downward to prepare for the emotional impact of those outcomes (Shepperd, Ouellette, & Fernandez, 1996; K. M. Taylor & Shepperd, 1998). However, this work is silent regarding the possibility that people might emotionally prepare for the outcomes

of others. The present research extends past work to examine if and when people might emotionally prepare for others' undesired outcomes as they do for their own.

Bracing for Bad News

In general, people appear optimistic in their personal predictions (S. E. Taylor & Armor, 1996), particularly when feedback is unavailable or not expected until much later. However, people will shift their predictions downward, "bracing" for possible bad news, when they anticipate feedback in the near future (Carroll, Sweeny, & Shepperd, 2006). For example, participants in one study predicted their score on an exam at four points in time: 1 month before the exam, immediately after completing the exam, 50 minutes before receiving their grades, and moments before receiving their grades (Shepperd et al., 1996). Whereas participants were optimistic (predicting higher scores than they actually received) 1 month prior to the exam, they became realistic in their predictions at Times 2 and 3 and pessimistic (predicting scores lower than those actually received) at Time 4. Other studies have found similar results in a

Editor's Note: Dr. David A. Dunning served as guest action editor for this article

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PSPB, Vol. 35 No. 2, February 2009 160-171

DOI: 10.1177/0146167208327050

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variety of domains ranging from predictions of starting salaries to predictions of medical test results (Gilovich, Kerr, & Medvec, 1993; Sanna, 1999; Shepperd et al., 1996; K. M. Taylor & Shepperd, 1998).

Bracing represents a type of preparedness. Preparedness represents “an adaptive goal state of readiness to respond to uncertain outcomes” (Carroll et al., 2006, p. 64). Preparedness in some situations involves being ready to take advantage of possible opportunities for improvement, expansion, and profit that avail themselves. However, in other situations preparedness involves being ready to respond to misfortunes, obstacles, and other undesired outcomes that may arise. Bracing reflects an attempt to prepare for negative outcomes by avoiding or reducing negative emotions such as disappointment. Emotional responses to negative outcomes depend in large part on how outcomes compare with expectations. Unexpected positive outcomes produce elation, whereas unexpected negative outcomes produce disappointment (van Dijk & van der Pligt, 1997; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000). Bracing prepares people for potential negative outcomes by increasing the probability of unexpected positive outcomes (and, thus, elation) and reducing the probability of unexpected negative outcomes (and, thus, disappointment; Shepperd & McNulty, 2002).

Do People Brace for Others?

But sometimes expectations or outcomes pertain to a friend or loved one rather than the self. Do people prepare for undesirable outcomes that may happen to others? That is, do people brace for others’ outcomes as they do for their own? One might assume that the answer is yes, that people care about their friends and loved ones and share in their joys and tribulations and should feel elation when their friends experience triumphs and anguish when their friends suffer setbacks. In waiting for the results of a friend’s job interview, it seems reasonable to expect that people would prepare for possible disappointment and shift their predictions downward. The same should be true when waiting to hear whether a friend tested positive for a disease, whether a daughter is admitted to her first choice in colleges, or whether a son gets the part he wants in the school play. In other words, perhaps people engage in “compassionate bracing” in response to their concern over others’ outcomes.

Although we recognize the appeal of the prediction that people brace for their friends and even acquaintances, there is reason to believe that this is not what people typically do. People brace in large part to avoid disappointment, and recent evidence suggests that people experience (or anticipate experiencing) less disappointment over friends’ outcomes than their own outcomes. In one set of studies, participants reported the

extent to which they would experience disappointment for the outcomes of romantic partners, family members, and acquaintances. Participants only anticipated disappointment to the extent that the outcomes had self-relevant implications (Carroll, Shepperd, Sweeny, Carlson, & Benigno, 2007).

The diminished experience of disappointment for friends is not surprising. Disappointment is strongly tied to outcome importance, and outcomes are almost always more important to the people experiencing them firsthand than to their friends and acquaintances. In some cases, the relationship between outcome importance and disappointment is a result of the degree of resources (time, money, effort, and emotion) invested in achieving a particular outcome (van Dijk, van der Pligt, & Zeelenberg, 1999; Zeelenberg et al., 2000), and people typically exert considerably fewer of these resources in pursuing the outcomes of others than they do in pursuing their own outcomes. Even when little or no effort is invested in an outcome, disappointment can also be a function of the desirability of an outcome (van Dijk et al., 1999) or, put another way, the undesirability of the alternative outcome. Once again, the desire for self-relevant positive outcomes (or the desire to avoid self-relevant negative outcomes) is almost always more intense than the desire for others’ outcomes.

Although we propose that people typically do not brace for the outcomes of others, we do not suggest that people never brace for the outcomes of others. Sometimes others’ outcomes have self-relevant implications. For example, a woman who awaits news of whether her spouse will be laid off from work will very likely brace for her spouse. In a sense, such bracing is as much bracing for oneself as bracing for the spouse. After all, the loss of employment can produce emotional turmoil in the family as well as dramatic changes in family income and thus one’s quality of life. We suspect that, to the extent that people are *personally* affected by another’s outcome, they will brace for others’ outcomes as they would their own.

Overview and Predictions

We conducted three studies to examine whether people brace for friends’ outcomes in the same way they brace for their own outcomes. Specifically, we examined the correspondence between personal predictions and the predictions made by friends when feedback was distant versus proximal (Study 1), important versus unimportant to their friend (Study 2), and did versus did not have self-relevant implications (Study 3). Drawing on research on bracing, we hypothesized that participants expecting imminent feedback regarding an important outcome would brace. However, in light of the reasons just described, we predicted that their friends would not

brace unless the outcome had self-relevant implications for the friends.

STUDY 1

We explored bracing for friends using an interview paradigm. Each member of a friendship pair was randomly assigned to the role of applicant or interviewer in a mock job interview. During the interview, the applicant was videotaped responding to a series of challenging questions asked by the interviewer off camera. Both participants then evaluated the applicant's performance twice: once immediately after the interview when evaluative feedback was not anticipated (Time 1), and again 15 min later, after participants suddenly learned that evaluative feedback was forthcoming in a few moments (Time 2). If people brace for their friends, then both applicants and interviewers should lower their predictions from Time 1 to Time 2. For reasons described earlier, we predicted that applicants would lower their performance predictions from Time 1 to Time 2 but that interviewers would not.

In addition to evaluating the applicant's performance, participants also provided estimates of how the average person would perform. Prior research reveals that people display comparative optimism when judging future outcomes, believing that their outcomes will be more positive than the outcomes of others (Weinstein, 1980). However, this comparative optimism diminishes when people anticipate imminent feedback (Sweeny & Shepperd, 2007; K. M. Taylor & Shepperd, 1998). Inclusion of items in which participants made performance predictions for the average person allowed us to examine whether comparative judgments of applicants and their friends were similar.

We designed the procedures so that the interviewer would play a noninfluential role in the interview, thereby minimizing the extent to which the interviewer would feel responsible for the outcome of the interview. Nevertheless, we also collected data from 16 participants to examine the extent to which interviewers might perceive themselves as responsible for the outcome of the interview. The participants read a description of the interview paradigm used in Studies 1 and 2. The scenario indicated that the participant and a friend attended a research study in which one person engaged in a mock interview on camera and the other person read the list of interview questions word for word. After reading the scenario, participants rated the extent to which the interviewer and applicant were responsible for the applicant's interview performance (1 = *no responsibility*; 9 = *full responsibility*). Participants indicated that the applicant was significantly more responsible for the

performance ($M = 7.88$; $SD = 0.72$) than was the interviewer ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.54$), $F(1, 15) = 93.46$, $p < .0001$, $d = 4.99$.

Method

Participants. Twenty-six pairs of self-defined "friends" (2 pairs of males and 24 pairs of females) participated in exchange for credit toward an experimental participation requirement in introductory psychology. We recruited pairs of friends because we expected that participants would be more concerned that their partner did well during the interview if their partner was friend than if their partner was a stranger. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Role: Interviewer vs. Interviewee) \times 2 (Time of Prediction: Time 1 vs. Time 2) mixed-model factorial design in which Role served as the between-subjects factor and Time of Prediction served as a repeated measure.

Procedure. When participants arrived, they were told that they would take part in a mock interview as part of a career center project. The experimenter explained that the career center was compiling a library of videotaped interviews for training purposes. Participants then were told that they would draw roles for the interview, one serving as applicant and one as interviewer.

Participants drew roles randomly and received instructions regarding the interview process. The interviewer's role was quite minor. The interviewer received a list of five questions (e.g., "Who is someone you admire and why?" "What are the unique assets you bring to a group?"), with explicit instructions to read these questions verbatim off camera during the interview, thereby minimizing the extent to which the interviewer might feel responsible for the applicant's performance. The participant role was far more substantial and involved producing responses to the questions in front of the camera.

The experimenter then turned on a video camera (filming only the applicant) and adjourned to an adjacent room. When the interview was complete, the experimenter explained that a judge would evaluate the performance of the applicant on five dimensions (decisiveness, expressiveness, social skills, maturity, and confidence), where 1 = *poor performance* and 9 = *excellent performance*. The participants were told that the average score of students who had been evaluated thus far was a 5 on each dimension, with an average overall evaluation of a 25.

The experimenter also explained that the interview normally would be evaluated and the results returned at the end of the session, but that they could not provide

evaluative feedback for this interview at this time because the graduate student who judges the tapes was in a meeting. The purpose of this part of the cover story was to create a *no feedback* condition for the first set of performance predictions. The experimenter next separated the participants into private rooms to complete the first questionnaire and then left with the videotape, ostensibly for evaluation by the graduate student at some later time.

Embedded in the questionnaire were items asking participants to predict (in counterbalanced order) the performance of the applicant and the typical student at their university on the same five dimensions that the graduate student would ostensibly use. Participants responded to the following item: "Your/your partner's performance during the interview will be evaluated on the dimensions below using the scales provided. Please estimate the rating you think you/your partner will receive on each dimension." Thus, participants reported a prediction of the graduate student's evaluation, not their personal evaluation of the applicant's performance. It is also noteworthy that the experimenter emphasized that participants' responses would be confidential and not seen by their partner. In this way, we attempted to ensure that friends would be honest in their evaluation of the applicant and not report optimism in an attempt to be encouraging or supportive for their friend.

After participants completed this first questionnaire, the experimenter returned, collected it, and distributed a second questionnaire. In addition to a number of filler items, the second questionnaire contained a measure of relationship closeness and trust comprising 6 items from Rubin's (1973) Liking scale (e.g., "If my friend were feeling bad, my first duty would be to cheer him (her) up" and "I feel that I can confide in my friend about virtually everything") and 16 items from Rubin's (1973) Trust scale (e.g., "I feel completely secure in facing unknown new situations because I know my friend will never let me down" and "Even in familiar circumstances, I am not totally certain my friend will act in the same way twice"). Participants also reported how long they had known each other. After working on the second questionnaire for a few moments, participants overheard through a closed door a conversation between the experimenter and the graduate student who was to evaluate the interview tape. The gist of the conversation, which was entirely fabricated, was that the graduate student had returned early from the meeting and could now evaluate the tape. Fifteen minutes later the experimenter then entered the interview room with a manila folder and announced that the graduate student had returned early from his meeting, evaluated the tape, and brought the evaluation to the session. The purpose of this part of the cover story was to create a

feedback condition for the second set of performance predictions.

The experimenter then asked participants to complete the first questionnaire again, stating that a little distance from the interview often gives people a new perspective on how it went. The experimenter explained that participants could see the evaluation after recompleting the first questionnaire. Once again, interviewers were told that their responses would be completely private and unavailable to their friend (the applicant). After they had completed it, the experimenter returned and thoroughly debriefed participants.

Results and Discussion

Predictions for the applicant. Did applicants predict a worse performance evaluation at Time 2 than they predicted at Time 1? Were the interviewers' predictions for their friends (the applicants) similar to the predictions of the applicants? Figure 1 displays the performance predictions made by applicants and interviewers at Time 1 and Time 2. The predictions for the applicants appear as solid lines, whereas the predictions for the average person appear as dashed lines. We hypothesized that applicants would lower their predictions from Time 1 to Time 2 but that interviewers would not. Because we had a priori predictions, we analyzed the data using a series of planned comparisons (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). Consistent with prior research, applicants lowered their personal performance predictions from Time 1 ($M = 26.5$; $SD = 6.22$) to Time 2 ($M = 25.6$; $SD = 5.43$), $F(1, 50) = 7.11$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.75$. In contrast, and as hypothesized, the interviewers did not lower their predictions across time. If anything, they showed a nonsignificant trend toward raising their predictions about their friend's performance from Time 1 ($M = 29.5$; $SD = 6.60$) to Time 2 ($M = 30.0$; $SD = 6.38$), $F(1, 50) = 2.63$, $p = .12$, $d = 0.46$.

Figure 1 reveals two additional findings regarding the predictions for the applicant that merit attention. First, the predictions of the interviewers were higher than the predictions of the applicants at both Time 1, $F(1, 50) = 2.91$, $p < .09$, $d = 0.47$, and Time 2, $F(1, 50) = 7.37$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.75$. Second, recall that we told participants that the average applicant's evaluation was a 25. Applicants' predictions of their own performance were not different from the base rate of 25 at either Time 1, $t(25) = 1.20$, $p > .24$, $d = 0.48$, or Time 2, $t(25) = 0.54$, $p = .59$, $d = 0.22$. However, interviewers' predictions of the applicants' evaluation were greater than 25 at both Time 1, $t(25) = 3.47$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.39$, and Time 2, $t(25) = 4.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.61$. When viewed together, these findings suggest that the applicants were not being pessimistic in their predictions in an absolute sense but only

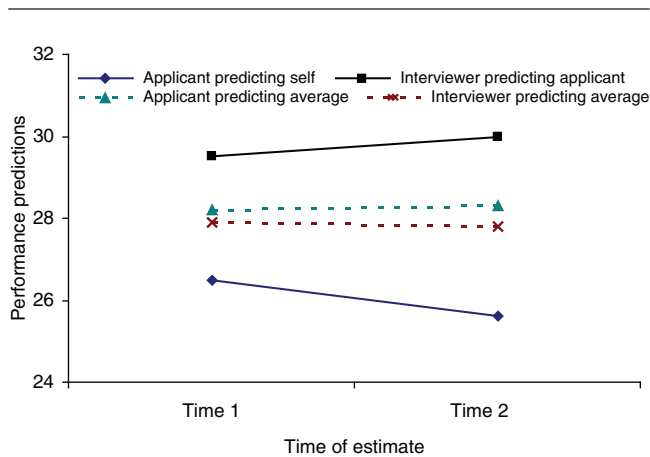


Figure 1 Performance ratings made by applicants and interviewers at Time 1 and Time 2.

TABLE 1: Predictions at Time 2 Compared With Time 1

	Lower at Time 2	No Change	Higher at Time 2
Applicants	17	4	5
Interviewers	5	10	11

relative to their prior predictions and the inflated predictions of their friends.

Our findings revealed that applicants lowered their personal performance predictions as the moment of truth drew near but that their friends (the interviewers) showed no change in their predictions for the applicant. Means, however, provide no indication of the variability in responding. It is possible that interviewers did lower their predictions for their friend's performance as the moment of truth drew near, but this shift was obscured by the responses of a few outlier interviewers who were very optimistic. To explore this possibility, we categorized participants according to whether they raised, lowered, or remained unchanged in their predictions from Time 1 to Time 2. A chi-square analysis confirmed that applicants and interviewers differed in the frequency with which they lowered their predictions from Time 1 to Time 2, $\chi^2(2, N = 52) = 35.67, p < .0001$. As evident in Table 1, the pattern of mean frequencies confirmed our predictions. The vast majority of applicants lowered their personal performance predictions at Time 2, whereas few interviewers lowered their predictions of how the applicant would perform at Time 2.

Predictions for the applicant relative to the average participant. Prior research reveals that people typically predict that their outcomes will be more positive than the outcomes of others (Weinstein, 1980) but that this

comparative optimism diminishes when feedback is imminent (Sweeny & Shepperd, 2007; K. M. Taylor & Shepperd, 1998). Did our applicants show a similar pattern in their interview predictions? And did interviewers show a corresponding shift from comparative optimism in their predictions for the applicant?

Regarding the predictions of applicants, Figure 1 reveals no evidence for comparative optimism at Time 1 or Time 2. Moreover, whereas statistical analyses revealed no difference at Time 1 between applicants' personal performance predictions and their predictions for the average applicant ($M = 28.2; SD = 3.34, F(1, 24) = 2.23, p > .13, d = 0.48$), applicants predicted at Time 2 that they would perform worse than the average applicant ($M = 28.3; SD = 3.65, F(1, 50) = 7.90, p < .01, d = 0.78$). In short, we found no evidence for comparative optimism in applicant performance predictions but instead found evidence for comparative pessimism when feedback was imminent. Regarding the predictions of interviewers, Figure 1 reveals surprising evidence for comparative optimism for their friend. Specifically, although interviewers did not differ in their performance predictions for their friends ($M = 29.5; SD = 6.60$) and the average person ($M = 27.9; SD = 3.47$) at Time 1, $F(1, 50) = 1.77, p > .18, d = 0.33$, the interviewers did predict that their friends ($M = 30.0; SD = 6.38$) would perform significantly better than the average person ($M = 27.9; SD = 3.44$) at Time 2, $F(1, 50) = 5.09, p < .03, d = 0.59$.

Figure 1 again reveals two additional findings regarding the predictions for the average person that merit attention. First, the predictions made for the average person by interviewers and applicants do not differ at either Time 1 or Time 2, both $F_s(1, 50) < 0.22$, both $p_s > .63$, both $d_s < 0.14$. Second, recall that we told participants that applicants on average received an evaluation of 25. Although the applicants' predictions of their own performance did not differ significantly from this base rate, their predictions of the average student's performance were significantly greater than 25 at both Times 1 and 2, both $t_s(25) > 4.62$, both $p_s < .0001$, both $d_s > 1.85$. Interviewers' predictions about the average applicant's performance were also significantly greater than 25 at both Times 1 and 2, both $t_s(25) > 4.22$, both $p_s < .001$, both $d_s > 1.69$.

Ancillary analyses. As noted earlier, participants completed measures of friendship closeness and trust. These measures allowed us to examine whether relationship closeness might moderate bracing for others, such that people might brace for an applicant who was a close friend even if they would not brace for an applicant who was not a particularly close friend. Neither measure moderated interviewer's predictions of the applicants' performance.

Indeed, correlation analyses revealed no relationship between these measures and interviewers' predictions regarding the applicants' performance, all $ps > .27$.

Summary. The results suggest that applicants and their friends anticipated different performance evaluations both immediately after the performance and in the face of impending feedback. First, applicants viewed their performance less positively than their friends did immediately after the performance. More important, at the moment of truth, applicants lowered their personal performance predictions, whereas their friends predicting on their behalf did not change their predictions. The difference in predictions between applicants and their friends produced differences in comparative judgments. Applicants showed comparative pessimism in their predictions whereas their friends showed consistent comparative optimism on the applicants' behalf. Thus, people braced in absolute and comparative predictions for themselves but not for friends.

STUDY 2

Study 1 provides preliminary evidence that people brace only for self-relevant outcomes. However, an alternative explanation is possible. Perhaps the interviewers did not think that the interview feedback was important to applicants. As mentioned earlier, important outcomes might prompt a greater tendency toward compassionate bracing for friends' outcomes. It may be that applicants saw the outcomes as important, which led them to prepare for possible bad news by shifting their expectations downward. In contrast, interviewers may not have believed that the outcome was important to the applicant, which would lead to less compassionate bracing. The primary purpose of Study 2 was to test this alternative explanation for the findings in Study 1. A second purpose of Study 2 was to replicate the findings of Study 1 using a slightly different design that manipulated feedback as a between-subjects variable rather than a within-subjects variable.

Method

Participants. Sixty-eight pairs of friends (7 pairs of males and 61 pairs of females) participated to fulfill a psychology experimental participation requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Interviewer vs. Applicant) \times 2 (Feedback vs. No Feedback) between-subjects factorial design. In addition, interviewers (but not applicants) received an additional importance manipulation.

Procedure. The procedures of Study 2 were similar to those of Study 1. When participants arrived, the experimenter provided the career center cover story, and participants underwent the same interview procedures used in Study 1. After the interview was completed, the experimenter took the interviewer to a separate room. Participants then separately completed measures of relationship closeness and relationship trust, as well as several filler items. After 15 min, the experimenter entered the applicant's room and explained the dimensions on which the applicant would be evaluated.

In the Feedback condition, the experimenter explained that the graduate student had evaluated the performance and that the evaluation was in the manila envelope held by the experimenter. In the No Feedback condition, the experimenter explained that, although a graduate student was to evaluate the tape, the interview did not record because of a technical problem with the camera. The experimenter apologized and asked that the applicant complete one last questionnaire. In both conditions, the experimenter gave the applicant a questionnaire containing the same rating scales used in Study 1 to predict the applicant's and typical student's performance and an item asking the applicant to rate the importance of the outcome ("It is important that I receive a good interview evaluation"; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 9 = *strongly agree*).

The experimenter then entered the interviewer's room and explained the dimensions on which the applicant would be evaluated. The interviewers received the same feedback manipulation as the applicants and were assigned to the same condition (either Feedback or No Feedback) as their friend. The experimenter then distributed a questionnaire for interviewers to complete. At the top of this questionnaire were seven items ostensibly completed by the interviewer's friend (the applicant). The first five items measured anxiety, and the remaining two items reflected ratings of the importance the applicant attached to the interview evaluation and how disappointed the applicant would be if she/he received a poor evaluation. To avoid suspicion based on handwriting, these items were in a format that allowed the experimenter to simply circle the appropriate number.

In the *high importance condition*, the completed responses suggested that the applicant was anxious about the interview evaluation (ratings of 6 out of 7 for each item), viewed the evaluation as highly important (7 out of 7), and would be very disappointed by a poor evaluation (7 out of 7). In the *low importance condition*, the completed responses suggested that the applicant was not anxious about the interview evaluation (ratings of 2 out of 7 for each item), viewed the evaluation as unimportant (1 out of 7), and would be not disappointed by a poor evaluation (1 out of 7).

The experimenter explained to the interviewer that the applicant had just completed those items and that the interviewer was to complete the rest of the questionnaire, which included filler items pertinent to the cover story, a manipulation check for the importance manipulation (“It is important to my friend in this study that he/she receives a good interview evaluation”; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 9 = *strongly agree*), and the rating scales to predict the applicant’s and typical student’s interview performance. The experimenter then left the room after explaining that their responses would be completely confidential and unavailable to their friend (thereby reducing the likelihood that interviewers would display optimism in an attempt to be encouraging or supportive). When both participants had completed their second questionnaire, the experimenter united and debriefed them.

Results and Discussion

Predictions for the applicant. Did applicants expecting feedback predict that they would perform worse than applicants not expecting feedback? How did the predictions of interviewers compare with the predictions of applicants? Figure 2 displays the performance predictions made by applicants and interviewers in the Feedback and No Feedback conditions. Again, the predictions for the applicant appear as solid lines, whereas the predictions for the average person appear as dashed lines. Recall that the Feedback manipulation in Study 2 is equivalent to the Feedback Timing Manipulation in Study 1. Thus, we hypothesized that applicants in Study 2 would predict a better performance in the No Feedback condition than in the Feedback condition but that interviewers’ predictions would not differ based on condition. With this in mind, what is most evident in Figure 2 is how similar the pattern of means is to that depicted in Figure 1. Consistent with Study 1, an examination of the predictions applicants provided for their own performance reveal that applicants made lower personal performance predictions in the Feedback condition than in the No Feedback condition. In contrast, the interviewers’ predictions did not differ between the Feedback and No Feedback conditions.

Again, because we had a priori hypotheses, we analyzed the data using a series of planned comparisons (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). Analysis using the pooled error term ($MSE = 47.1$) revealed that applicants’ personal predictions were lower in the Feedback condition ($M = 24.7$; $SD = 7.9$) than in the No Feedback condition ($M = 27.7$; $SD = 4.7$), $t(130) = 1.77$, $p = .08$, $d = 0.31$. In contrast, interviewers’ predictions in the Feedback ($M = 32.0$; $SD = 6.0$) and No

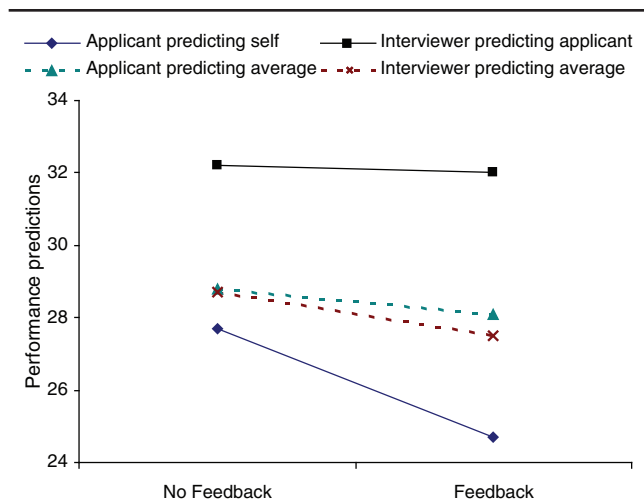


Figure 2 Performance predictions made by applicants and interviewers in the Feedback and No Feedback conditions.

Feedback ($M = 32.2$; $SD = 8.3$) conditions did not differ, $t(130) = .01$, $p > .89$, $d = 0.00$.

Figure 2 again reveals two additional findings regarding the predictions for the applicant. First, the predictions of the interviewers were significantly higher than the predictions of the applicants in both the No Feedback and Feedback conditions, all $t_s(130) > 2.69$, all $p_s < .01$, all $d_s > .47$. Second, recall that we told participants that the average applicant’s evaluation was a 25. Applicants’ predictions for their own performance were not different from the base rate of 25 in the Feedback condition, $t(33) = .19$, $p > .84$, $d = 0.07$, but were significantly greater than the base rate in the No Feedback condition, $t(32) = 3.33$, $p = .01$, $d = 1.18$. Interviewers’ predictions for the applicants’ evaluations were greater than the base rate in both the Feedback condition, $t(33) = 6.86$, $p < .0001$, $d = 2.39$, and the No Feedback condition, $t(33) = 5.07$, $p < .0001$, $d = 1.77$. These findings are virtually identical to the findings in Study 1, with the exception of applicants’ optimism compared with the base rate in the No Feedback condition.

Outcome importance and predictions. One key purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether interviewers would lower their predictions for their friend (the applicant) if they believed the outcome was important to their friend. If the results of Study 2 were because of the failure of interviewers to recognize that their friend viewed the feedback as important, interviewers in the Low Importance condition should make higher performance predictions than interviewers in the High Importance condition when feedback was imminent but show no difference in predictions from interviewers in the High Importance condition when not expecting feedback. This pattern of results would parallel previous studies

showing that people shift away from optimism at the moment of truth only for important outcomes.

We first examined the effectiveness of the importance of manipulation on interviewers' perceptions of how important it would be for their friend to receive a good interview evaluation.¹ Results confirmed that interviewers rated a good evaluation as more important to the applicant in the High Importance condition ($M = 7.7$; $SD = 1.88$) than in the Low Importance condition ($M = 2.6$; $SD = 2.27$), $t(65) = 9.89$, $p < .0001$, $d = 2.38$. Thus, our importance manipulation was successful.

The success of the manipulation aside, analysis of outcome importance revealed no support for the notion that interviewers provided lower predictions for the applicant only when they believe the applicant valued the outcome. Indeed, we found a marginally significant tendency for interviewers to predict a *higher* evaluation in the High Importance condition ($M = 33.7$; $SD = 7.3$) than in the Low Importance condition ($M = 30.6$; $SD = 6.7$), $t(65) = 1.76$, $p < .09$, $d = 0.45$.

Predictions for the average participant. As in Study 1, we explored how the expectations applicants and interviewers had for the applicants' performance evaluation compared with their expectations for the performance of the average participant. Consistent with Study 1, Figure 2 reveals comparative pessimism rather than comparative optimism in the applicants' predictions. Analyses revealed that applicants predicted performing worse than the average applicant ($M = 28.1$; $SD = 4.99$) in the Feedback condition, $t(33) = 2.40$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.59$, but not in the No Feedback condition ($M = 28.8$; $SD = 4.14$), $t(32) = 1.01$, $p > .30$, $d = 0.31$. In short, we again found no evidence for comparative optimism in applicants' performance predictions but instead found evidence for comparative pessimism. Regarding the predictions of interviewers, examination of Figure 2 reveals evidence for comparative optimism for their friend. Specifically, interviewers predicted that their friend would perform better than the average person in both the Feedback condition ($M = 27.5$; $SD = 4.36$), $t(33) = 3.60$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$, and the No Feedback condition ($M = 28.7$; $SD = 6.43$), $t(32) = 2.80$, $p < .005$, $d = 0.69$.

Figure 2 again reveals two additional findings regarding the predictions for the average person. First, the predictions made by interviewers do not differ from the predictions made by applicants in either the Feedback or the No Feedback condition, both t s < 1 , both p s $> .58$. Second, we told participants that applicants on average received an evaluation of 25. Applicants predicted that the average applicant's performance was significantly greater than 25 in both the Feedback condition, $t(34) = 3.61$, $p < .001$, and the No Feedback condition, $t(32) = 5.28$, $p < .0001$. Interviewers also predicted that the

average applicant would receive an evaluation significantly greater than 25 in both the Feedback condition, $t(33) = 3.35$, $p < .005$, and the No Feedback condition, $t(32) = 3.28$, $p < .005$.

Ancillary findings. As in Study 1, our individual difference measures of relationship importance (i.e., relationship trust and closeness) did not moderate the interviewers' predictions of how the applicants performed. Correlation analyses revealed that neither friendship closeness nor friendship trust predicted evaluations of the applicant in either the Feedback or No Feedback condition, all p s $> .15$.

Summary. In sum, the results replicate the findings of Study 1, revealing that performers (the applicants in our study) and their friends differ in their performance predictions. Applicants, but not interviewers, made lower predictions in the Feedback condition than in the No Feedback condition. Furthermore, interviewers' predictions were higher than were the personal predictions of applicants, particularly in the Feedback condition. Comparing participants' predictions to predictions for the average person, we found comparative pessimism among applicants in the Feedback condition and comparative optimism among interviewers in both the Feedback and No Feedback conditions. Finally, the findings argue against the notion that interviewers did not brace for the applicant because they felt the applicant did not value the interview performance. Indeed, contrary to this notion, interviewers showed a trend toward predicting a higher performance when they believed their friend valued performing well in the interview than when they believed their friend did not value performing well.

Two alternative explanations deserve mention. First, one might argue that the interviewer did not perceive the outcome as important even in the High Importance condition. The data argue against this possibility. Interviewers in the High Importance condition rated their perception of the outcome's importance significantly *higher* than applicants' ratings of importance, $t(68) = 5.08$, $p < .0001$, $d = 1.23$. Second, it is possible that interviewers in both Studies 1 and 2 felt partly responsible for the applicants' performance in the interview. Perhaps a poor evaluation of the applicant was seen in part as a poor evaluation of the interviewer's interviewing skills. As we noted earlier, the minor role played by the interviewer makes this possibility seem unlikely. Moreover, pilot data revealed that independent raters ascribed relatively little responsibility to the interviewer for the outcome of the interview. Finally, we believe that responsibility for the negative outcomes should have *increased* rather than decreased the likelihood that

interviewers would shift their predictions downward. People shelve their optimism for their own outcomes (as did the applicants in both studies), so any feeling of responsibility by the interviewers should have led to a shift from optimism. It did not. In sum, it seems quite unlikely that the interviewer felt responsible for the outcome of the interview.

STUDY 3

We proposed in the introduction that people do not brace for their friends because they anticipate little disappointment over their friends' negative outcomes. We further proposed that this lack of anticipated disappointment makes sense in light of the relative unimportance of friends' outcomes compared with self-relevant outcomes. However, when the friend's outcome has self-relevant implications, we suspect that people will display pessimism on behalf of their friend at the moment of truth. In such instances, bracing for the friend is tantamount to bracing for oneself. Study 3 examined this possibility using a simplified experimental design that examined only predictions for friends (vs. both self- and other-predictions) and manipulated whether the friend's poor performance would or would not have aversive consequences for the person making the performance predictions. We retained only the friend prediction condition and dropped the self-prediction condition for two reasons: (a) it is now well established that people brace for their own outcomes, and (b) we were primarily interested in whether people brace for a friend's outcome by predicting a worse performance from their friend when the outcome would have self-relevant consequences. We predicted that participants would predict a poorer performance from their friends when they, rather than their friend, would experience an aversive consequence as a result of a poor performance.

Method

Participants. Sixty-four pairs of friends (15 pairs of males and 49 pairs of females) participated to fulfill an introductory psychology experimental participation requirement.

Procedure. When participants arrived, they were escorted to separate rooms and told that the study examined the effects of punishment on performance. The experimenter privately explained to both participants that their friend would be taking a test and that either they (*high self-relevance*) or their friend (*low self-relevance*) would have to consume hot sauce for each wrong answer on the test. The experimenter made clear

to participants that their friend would not know which condition they were in when they completed the test. Participants were then shown sample items from the test and were allowed to taste a small amount of the hot sauce. Pilot testing suggested that the hot sauce was perceived as a highly aversive punishment, and most participants confirmed this belief during debriefing. Participants then completed measures of relationship closeness and relationship trust whereas their friend ostensibly completed the test.

After a few minutes, participants were told that their friend had completed the test and that it soon would be scored. Participants then received a questionnaire that included items asking them to estimate (from 0 to 50) the score their friend and the average student would receive on the test. Unlike Studies 1 and 2, participants in Study 3 were not given an objective standard for an average performance on the test. On completion of this questionnaire, all participants were reunited and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

From the initial pool of 128 participants, we omitted from analyses data from 16 participants because they disclosed during the debriefing that they did not believe anyone would have to consume hot sauce.

Predictions for the friend. Did participants make lower predictions when they believed that they personally would suffer should their friend perform poorly on the test? As predicted, participants estimated a significantly lower performance for their friend in the High Self-Relevance condition ($M = 39.5$; $SD = 6.1$) than in the Low Self-Relevance condition ($M = 42.2$; $SD = 4.6$), $t(109) = 2.56$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.49$.

Predictions for the average participant. As in Studies 1 and 2, we explored how the expectations participants had for the friend's performance compared with their expectations for the performance of the average student. Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, participants were comparatively optimistic for their friends. Specifically, participants predicted that their friend would perform better than the average person in both the High Self-Relevance condition ($M = 34.1$; $SD = 7.3$), $t(56) = 5.50$, $p < .0001$, $d = 1.65$, and the Low Self-Relevance condition ($M = 35.5$; $SD = 5.0$), $t(52) = 8.47$, $p < .0001$, $d = 1.03$.

Ancillary findings. Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, correlation analyses once again revealed that neither friendship closeness nor friendship trust predicted performance estimates for the friend in either the High Self-Relevance or Low Self-Relevance condition, all $ps > .69$.

Summary. In sum, Study 3 reveals that participants estimated a worse test performance from their friend when they would suffer the negative consequences of a poor performance than when their friend would suffer the negative consequences. Comparing participants' predictions for their friend to their predictions for the average person, we found comparative optimism in both the High Self-Relevance and Low Self-Relevance conditions.

The simplified design of Study 3 did not allow us to examine whether the lower performance predictions among participants in the High Personal Relevance condition reflects bracing. For example, it is possible that the Low Personal Relevance instructions prompted higher performance predictions rather than High Personal Relevance condition prompting lower performance predictions. Although this alternative interpretation is possible, it seems unlikely. Indeed, it is hard to imagine why participants in the Low Personal Relevance condition might raise their performance predictions.

It is noteworthy that Study 3 is not the first to examine perceptions of a partner in an outcome dependency situation. Previous work on outcome dependency finds that people were optimistic about a partner's abilities, particularly when they stood to lose if their partners performed poorly (Klein & Kunda, 1992). Importantly, our study differs from the prior work in two important ways. First, whereas the prior research examined perceptions prior to performance, our research examined perceptions after performance (yet before participants received feedback). Evidence suggests that people move away from optimism in their predictions as the moment of truth draws near, and the closer the moment of truth the more likely people are to brace. In our study, performance was over and the moment of truth was at hand. In the prior research, the performance had not yet occurred and thus the moment of truth was still some distance away.

Second, evidence suggests that people brace in anticipation of losses but not in anticipation of gains. For example, participants in one study learned of a tuition billing error at their university. Half learned that 25% of students were undercharged and soon would receive a bill, and half learned that 25% of students were overcharged and soon would receive a refund. Only participants who learned of a possible bill braced; participants who learned of a possible refund did not (Shepperd, Findley-Klein, Kwavnick, Walker, & Perez, 2000). In our study, a poor partner performance in the High Self-Relevance condition clearly meant the loss of creature comforts—participants would have to eat the dreaded hot sauce. In the prior study, participants were competing for a \$50 prize, and a poor partner performance meant that they would not gain the prize (Klein & Kunda, 1992).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We began with a simple question: Do people brace for the outcomes of their friends as they do for their own outcomes? Consistent with our predictions, participants only displayed compassionate bracing when outcomes were self-relevant. Participants in Studies 1 and 2 did not brace for friends when confronting an actual situation in which a friend faced possible bad news that did not have self-relevant implications. Instead, they remained optimistic about their friend's evaluation even when feedback was imminent and even when it was clear that the evaluation was important to their friend and she/he would be disappointed by a poor evaluation. If anything, participants increased their predictions for their friend's evaluation when feedback was imminent (Study 1). Participants also predicted a better performance from their friend when the performance was described as important, as opposed to unimportant, to their friend (Study 2).

Our findings for comparative judgments further illustrate the asymmetry between how people and their friends evaluate the same performance. Whereas applicants displayed comparative pessimism in their predictions, predicting that they performed worse than average when feedback was imminent, interviewers displayed comparative optimism on behalf of their friends even when feedback was imminent.

Study 3 provides preliminary support for the idea that people will brace for others when the outcome has self-relevant consequences. Specifically, participants in Study 3 estimated that their friend performed worse when they personally would suffer a negative outcome as a consequence than when their friend would suffer a negative outcome as a consequence. Although this finding may seem surprising, we noted in the introduction that bracing in part reflects an attempt to regulate possible disappointment. People's failure to brace for others when not expecting self-relevant consequences may reflect their awareness that they will not experience much disappointment if the outcomes are bad.

We did not assess disappointment in the present studies because we have found it extremely difficult to assess bracing and disappointment in the same study. The act of bracing appears to eliminate the very process (i.e., anticipated disappointment) that gives rise to bracing. In short, once people have braced they no longer anticipate experiencing disappointment, which makes it difficult to examine the causal relationship between disappointment and bracing. However, in other research that has focused exclusively on disappointment we have shown that people are aware of the link between their expectations and subsequent disappointment (Sweeny & Shepperd, 2008). Moreover, we find that people

generally anticipate less disappointment over others' outcomes than their own outcomes (Carroll et al., 2007). Finally, this latter research also showed that to the extent others' outcomes have strong self-relevant implications, people anticipate just as much disappointment over these unexpected negative outcomes as they do over their own unexpected negative outcomes (Carroll et al., 2007).

Two alternative explanations deserve mention. First, perhaps the friends in our studies were not close enough friends to induce compassionate bracing. We suggested in the introduction that people might brace for others out of caring and concern for their friends' outcomes. By this argument, people should brace most for their closest friends. However, the data argue against this compassionate bracing hypothesis. Our studies included friend pairs ranging from acquaintances (friends for 1 month) to lifelong friends (friends for more than 24 years). In fact, approximately half of participants across all three studies had been friends for a year or more. Furthermore, in none of the experiments did our measures of relationship importance (i.e., friendship closeness and friendship trust) moderate evaluations of the friends' performance. Thus, we found no support for compassionate bracing.

Second, perhaps friends braced privately but reported optimism in a show of support. People may juggle other demands from their friends, such as being optimistic and encouraging, that could undermine their willingness to report pessimistic expectations. Although the norm to be supportive may be partly responsible for our findings, particularly the finding that friends' ratings were consistently higher than applicants' ratings even when feedback was not imminent, for several reasons we believe that the norm to be supportive cannot entirely account for friends' failure to brace. We made every effort to ensure participants that their responses would be confidential and not seen by their friend, and participants indicated no suspicion about the procedures or the confidentiality of their responses. Furthermore, if friends were in fact concerned with the possibility of disappointment but were reluctant to express pessimism publicly, we might have expected friends to be realistic (thus preparing for disappointment while avoiding overly negative expectations) rather than wildly optimistic. Finally, as noted in the introduction, people do not anticipate disappointment over friends' outcomes (Carroll et al., 2007), and without anticipated disappointment it seems unlikely that participants had reason to brace even privately.

Implications

Our findings have an important theoretical implication. One explanation for the downward shift in expectations as

the moment of truth draws near is that people experience an increase in accountability pressures (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). When facing impending feedback, people feel more accountable for their judgments, and their accountability concerns prompt more careful consideration and scrutiny of available information. The greater scrutiny leads people to be more accurate, or at least less optimistic, in their predictions. Yet Studies 1 and 2 found no evidence for a shift from optimism in predictions for a friend's outcome as the moment of truth drew near. The absence of any shift even in the face of imminent feedback suggests that accountability pressures were playing no role in participants' predictions. Because accountability concerns played no role in the predictions for a close friend, it is difficult to argue that they play any role in personal predictions. Of course, we did not assess the extent to which people were experiencing accountability pressures in our studies. Yet it is hard to imagine that participants were not experiencing greater accountability pressures when they made their second predictions for their friend. The more likely explanation is that accountability concerns are not responsible for the shift from optimism as the moment of truth draws near.

The general lack of correspondence between expectations and emotions of people and their friends in anticipation of possible bad news has ramifications for relationship health. On the negative side, a person expecting and desiring optimism from a friend might feel annoyed and discouraged if the friend instead voices caution or pessimism. Expressions of pessimism can produce declines in feelings of intimacy and closeness (Gable & Reis, 2001) and may amplify the impact of an undesired outcome on relationship quality (Notarius & Markman, 1994).

In contrast, the sharing and reinforcement of positive affect between two people predicts enhanced feelings of intimacy and perceptions of closeness (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000). Although indirect, this research suggests that the expression of optimism by a friend may inspire shared positive affect in the short term and improve the long-term viability of the relationship. Furthermore, sometimes people deliberately solicit hopeful, positive responses from close others. A young man experiencing relationship trouble may not want to hear that his romantic relationship is doomed but instead that all is well and that his own bracing is unwarranted. Friends may be in the perfect position to offer such reassurance because their view of the future is untainted by concerns with disappointment.

On the other hand, it can be frustrating when friends respond to personal worries about a forthcoming outcome by being blithely optimistic. The graduate student preparing for her qualifying exams may not want to

hear, "I'm sure you will do fine!" when she voices her anxiety to family and friends. Although such optimism may come with the best of intentions, it suggests a trivialization of personal feelings and a failure to appreciate the potential impact of the feared negative outcome. Thus, people may need to adjust their expectations for close others' outcomes based on the other person's needs and desires and not based on a need to personally prepare for the bad news.

Coda

Anticipating and preparing for one's own potential negative outcomes is demanding enough in its own right. If people were also attentive to the many experiences of those around them, they would very likely be overwhelmed. We propose the possibility that people may become insensitive to negative outcomes (or potential negative outcomes) that have few or no self-relevant implications. People have a general need for preparedness, but this need does not seem to extend to preparing for self-irrelevant outcomes. By directing preparedness efforts solely toward one's own opportunities and potential setbacks, people may be better able to marshal their energy toward social support for close others rather than wasting energy personally preparing for others' potentially negative outcomes. Thus, people may fail to brace for others' outcomes because it would be maladaptive to do so.

NOTE

1. We included importance as a variable in the analysis of the interviewer responses but not in the analysis of the applicant responses because applicants did not receive the importance manipulation.

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Received March 25, 2008

Revision accepted August 12, 2008