(Mis)Imagining Someone Else's Life:

The Role of Focalism in Feeling Envy and Pity Towards Others

by

Taylor Rothman

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Faculty Advisor: Dr. Phoebe Ellsworth

Graduate Student Advisor: Ed O'Brien

Additional Research Advisor: Dr. Sara Konrath

Author Note

Taylor Rothman, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Abstract

Envy is a destructive emotional state that arises when people encounter others who possess more desirable life circumstances than their own. Its opposite is pity, a sympathetic emotion elicited by downward social comparisons towards lower-status groups. Both reactions first require people to form impressions about what another person's life must be like. However, the social-cognitive principle of focalism suggests that our impressions may be incomplete: we might overweight representative target features (i.e., the exceptionally good circumstances of enviable others and exceptionally bad circumstances of pitiable others) at the cost of overlooking mundane moments of daily life, which likely dilutes the emotional intensity of actually experiencing either condition. Three studies support this possibility. In Study 1, participants read about an enviable (Study 1a) and pitiable (Study 1b) peer and rated what this person's daily life might be like. I found a significant positive correlation between focusing and the experienced emotion. In Study 2, I induced participants to feel envy (Study 2a) and pity (Study 2b) while imagining various people, which heightened the focalism bias compared to control. Conversely, I manipulated focalism in Study 3 by asking participants to complete a "diary" unpacking task that brought to mind dull everyday moments that another person likely encounters (e.g., eating/sleeping). As expected, defocusing reduced envy (Study 3a); unexpectedly, however, it did not reduce pity (Study 3b). Thus, while my results largely confirm a link between focalism and social emotions, this link may be stronger for envy than pity. Implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: envy, pity, social emotions, perspective taking, everyday life, focalism

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What is your reaction to a person, who is just like you, except that this person is exceptionally rich and famous—do you envy them? What about exceptionally poor and alone—do you pity them? As social beings, we cannot escape the wrath of these perceptions. It is a constant barrier that interpersonal interactions require us to cross. My thesis centers around this issue. In particular, I explore how people form impressions of both highly desirable others (i.e., the people we envy) and highly undesirable others (i.e., the people we pity), and when such impressions may be biased. My framework and hypotheses are derived from the existing literature on one such bias: the principle of focalism.

The Focusing Illusion

Generally, the principle of focalism states that we overestimate how much we will think about the occurrence in question (the focal event) and underestimate the extent to which other events will also influence our thoughts and feelings. According to Wilson and Gilbert (2005), people often base their decisions on affective forecasts, which are predictions about their emotional reactions to future events. In doing so, people show an impact bias, in that they overestimate the intensity and duration of their emotional reactions. A factor of impact bias is focalism, which is also the reason that people make incorrect affective forecasts. These biases result in people thinking about the focal event in a vacuum, untouched by the consequences of the many mundane events that will also inevitably fill their lives.

However, there are ways to minimize these focalism errors, such as by reducing how much people think about the event, which causes people to reframe the event, and by triggering affective reactions that compete with the original ones from the event (Wilson, Wheatley,

Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). Additionally, people have a tendency to rely on information that is easily accessible to them, without putting much effort into thinking about alternative explanations, outcomes, and situations that are less accessible. Making people go beyond what is easily accessible to them, by having them think about the many other events that will occur alongside the focal one, should theoretically reduce the consequences of focalism.

A specific defocalization technique, known as the diary method, is an effective way to reduce the focalism bias (Wilson et al., 2000). In Wilson et al.'s (2000) study, the diary manipulation consisted of having approximately half the participants receive a questionnaire in which they were asked to think about a specific day later in the semester and estimate what they would be doing that day by filling in 24 blanks, one for each hour of the day. Their results consistently supported the focalism hypothesis. At first, college football fans overestimated the extent to which the outcome of a game would influence their overall happiness, exemplifying the durability bias. However, after completing the defocalizing diary manipulation, the bias was greatly reduced. The reminder that one's day would also be filled with mundane activities helped correct the durability bias by changing how much people anticipated the game would dominate their thoughts. These findings have considerable practical applications, especially in reducing anxiety for upcoming stressful or undesirable events.

This current paper seeks to extend this idea of the focusing illusion—people's tendency to inflate the value of extreme life circumstances by neglecting the prevalence of the more mundane moments involved—to *other*-oriented social emotions. Although prior work on focalism has shed much light on how people think about their own experiences (e.g., affective forecasting errors when thinking about the future: Wilson et al., 2000; the overweighting of accessible information in evaluative judgment: Schwarz, Kahneman, & Xu, 2009; Suh, Diener,

& Fujita, 1996), less work has extended these principles to how people think and feel about *others*. I examined two particularly common and related emotions: envy and pity.

Envy: A Brief Review

What would your life be like if you were rich? In love? Living in a sunny beach town? As outlined above, many people focally believe that their happiness and wellbeing would greatly improve under such conditions. Reality, however, tells a different story. Although people who experience positive life changes typically do report better quality of life in the short term, this boost tends to fade and return to baseline over time (e.g., see Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). One reason why major life events such as these often fail to have lasting emotional impact is because our attention gradually shifts to the mundane experiences of daily life, distracting us from the big events (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). Even the best among us cannot escape long lines and a poor night's sleep, and yet, these everyday incidents exert enormous influence over how we feel in daily life. As Schkade and Kahneman (1998) poignantly note, "Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it" (p. 345).

Here I seek to extend this principle to the social emotion of envy[1]. Envy is generally viewed as an unpleasant affective state in which people make upward social comparisons, wanting what others have that they objectively lack (Hill, DelPriore, & Vaughan, 2011; Parrott & Smith, 1993; Smith & Kim, 2007). People become envious about countless things. For example, people may experience envy when thinking about others who are more successful, intelligent, or attractive than they are; or for reasons such as loss of affection, rejection, suspiciousness, insecurity, and anxiety over time (Wade & Weinstein, 2011).

In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Smith and Kim (2007) found that the subjective perception of envy is related to feelings of resentment, hostility, and inferiority. Envy has also been linked to maladaptive attention patterns, so that envy elicited by a target leads to increased attention and later memory retention for specific information about that target (Hill et al., 2011). According to the theory of situated cognition, our thought processes are "tuned" to meet the requirements of the current task and context (Schwarz, 2007). Following this same idea, attention and memory appear to be adaptively tuned to meet an individual's needs in response to feelings of envy, for example, by increasing focus on the target and its environment (Hill et al., 2011). Such increased focus can bias judgments, making one feel more envious than is warranted. Furthermore, enhancing memory for one stimulus makes people less able to focus on other stimuli. Overall, it appears envy can lead to considerable negative consequences.

However, although much is known about envy and its causes and consequences, less literature has distinctly examined the role that focalism may play in envy. According to Correia (2012), the influence of negative emotions (such as envy) can cause people to focus too much on the negative aspects of an issue, resulting in inaccurate conclusions about the situation. Noting the relationship between desirable life circumstances and focalism, Schkade and Kahneman's (1998) study found that people focused too much on stereotypically positive contexts of other people (e.g., that they live in California), failing to consider other life circumstances that are not particularly special (e.g., that they spend most days in an office). Hence, when thinking about enviable others, people may be especially likely to exhibit the focusing illusion, that is, they may neglect the routine experiences that others inevitably encounter. Accordingly, these systematic errors in thought can have significant consequences if individuals act upon them (Wilson et al.,

2000). Basing life decisions on such erroneous beliefs and expectations can lead to a life filled with choices that undermine, instead of maximize, one's social and emotional wellbeing.

By the same logic and on a more comforting note, Wilson et al.'s (2000) defocalization technique may work to attenuate the effects of negative emotions, such as envy. For example, people tend to get envious when thinking about someone in their field who is more successful than them. In relation to the focalism illusion, this situation would be interpreted by the fact that we are envious because we are only focusing on the successful moments in that person's career. We only remember them at the peak of their success, oblivious to all the bad events that also happened over the course of their career. Conversely, to reduce envy, people might instead work to defocalize the situation by turning their attention toward alternative outcomes.

Together, these studies and ideas led to my first set of hypotheses: that (i) envy may be directly associated with the focusing illusion, (ii) inducing envy may exacerbate the focusing illusion, and (iii) implementing the diary defocusing task may help attenuate feelings of envy. Before turning to the actual studies, however, next I examine the converse social emotion of pity.

Pity: A Brief Review

Pity is a mixed affective state in which people make downward social comparisons directed at people who experience negative outcomes without control over their occurrence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Harris & Fiske, 2006). It is worth noting that while this is the definition I have chosen to use in this current paper, it is just one of several definitions of pity. Dijker (2001) found pity to be a function of the object's perceived vulnerability and level of suffering. We pity people who we believe are less capable than ourselves. In addition, participant's levels of pity were influenced by age-related, sex-related, and postural vulnerability cues, suggesting that people's appearance influences the arousal of pity (Dijker, 2001).

Generally, pity arises when people encounter others who possess less desirable life circumstances than their own, whether it be doing poorly academically, struggling financially, or having a disability.

In order to understand the potential prosocial and negative consequences of pity, it is important to distinguish the different dimensions of the emotion. Some theorists reason that pity is an altruistic emotion because it motivates people to alleviate the suffering of others (Dijker, 2001). Similarly, pity has been described as an empathy-related emotion: feeling pity for someone embodies a sense of compassion and emotional understanding (Wilmer, 1968). In their meta-analysis, Eisenberg and Miller (1987) found a positive relationship between empathy-related emotions, such as pity, and both prosocial and cooperative behavior. While the social definition of pity itself implies an emotional distance between the person who pities and the person being pitied, it nevertheless can prompt certain helping-oriented behaviors.

However, there is also literature that discusses the negative dimensions of pity. Boleyn-Fitzgerald (2003) notes the difference between compassion and pity, stating that compassion requires one to feel *with* someone, while pity only requires one to feel *for* someone. In this view, pity is more emotionally distant; it does not fully require someone to empathetically understand the other. Additionally, pity may arise when someone's suffering is met with fear. In this case, Boleyn-Fitzgerald (2003) further suggests that the attempt to alleviate another's discomfort is motivated by the effort to alleviate one's own discomfort. Ultimately, pitying may be a form of negative social judgment, frequently making pitied others feel isolated and inferior from the subjective perceptions of the person pitying them.

Furthermore, Fiske et al.'s (2002) study found that prejudicial stereotypes towards specific groups are differentiated by two emotional responses: pity and envy. In regards to envy,

high-status, competitive groups that are high in competency, but low in warmth elicit *envious prejudice* (Fiske et al., 2002). Pity prompts *paternalistic prejudice*, which targets low-status, noncompetitive groups that are low in competency, yet high in warmth, such as elders or those with a disability (Fiske et al., 2002). According to Fiske et al. (2002), people perceive out-groups as deserving of pity when they experience negative outcomes outside of their control. However, such pity also justifies subordination and treatment of inferiority, which works to promote the status quo and maintain the existing systems of privilege (Fiske et al., 2002). Even seemingly positive stereotypes come at the cost of being perceived negatively by others, a prejudicial attitude that may fuel negative overt behavior towards pitied others. Recognizing the maintaining conditions of pity might allow people to work to correct these biased perceptions.

Together, these studies led to my second set of hypotheses: that (i) pity, like envy, may be directly linked with focalism, (ii) inducing pity may enhance focalism, and (iii) implementing the diary defocusing task may attenuate pity in a corresponding way to how it may reduce envy. In other words, the emotion of pity may result from people's tendency to inflate the value of negative life circumstances in pitied others by neglecting the prevalence of the more mundane moments involved in the pitied person's life.

Importantly, there has been relatively little research conducted around the emotion of pity, especially compared to the work on envy and how it potentially might relate to focalism. This lack of research may be due to current literature's mixed results as to whether pity can be classified as a positive or negative emotion. While pity used to maintain a mostly positive connotation, delineating the expression of sorrow for another's suffering and the capacity for moral conscience, a more recent usage of pity suggests a condescending and negative connotation toward those seen as "pathetic" (Geller, 2006). Hypothesizing that the same

perceptual biases that underlie envy also pervade pity, similar defocalization techniques proposed to reduce envy should also reduce pity, in the hopes of tempering these negative connotations. For example, having people complete the diary manipulation for someone they know who is exceptionally poor or unintelligent may reduce the stigma of pity by reminding them that their days may be filled with similar mundane activities.

Of course, to the extent that reducing pity proves to have antisocial effects (e.g., in reducing empathy towards those who actually do need it), the diary defocusing task might serve as a detrimental tool. Research into the relationship between pity and focalism is thus especially important for several reasons. First, pity is at the root of many prejudicial attitudes, such as paternalistic stereotypes, which maintain the negative status quo of these group's subordination, inferiority, and compliance (Fiske et al., 2002). Secondly, pity towards those viewed as lower-status may lead to hostility and dehumanization towards these groups of people, feeding a vicious cycle of abuse (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Lastly, pity has important practical implications as it has the capacity to lead to both harmful and prosocial consequences in many different domains (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2000; Wilmer, 1968). Identifying the focal mechanisms that increase and reduce pity would allow professionals and laypeople alike to learn to regulate and harness the different dimensions of pity, amplifying its positive correlates while attenuating its negative ones.

The Present Research

In this paper, I sought to extend the principle of focalism to both envy and pity. In terms of envy, I examined whether upward social comparisons are driven by the biased perception that envied others experience few neutral or negative moments, with a corresponding overestimation of the positive. For example, just as people fail to appreciate the impact of a future mundane life

when they contemplate buying a dream car, they may envy others who own one for precisely the same reason. By the same logic with pity, I examined whether downward social comparisons are driven by the biased perception that pitied others experience few neutral or positive moments, with a corresponding overestimation of the negative.

To test these ideas, I explored how closely envy and pity are linked with focusing tendencies (Study 1a, envy; Study 1b, pity); whether manipulating people to feel envy and pity can increase focalism (Study 2a, envy; Study 2b, pity); and whether implementing a defocusing task can reduce the experienced emotions (Study 3a, envy; Study 3b, pity).

Study 1: More Focusing, More Emotion

In Study 1, I implemented a correlational design to help establish the general link between the focusing illusion and experienced envy (Study 1a) and experienced pity (Study 1b). I predicted that focusing and the emotions would be positively associated.

Study 1a Method

Participants. I recruited 162 undergraduates (M_{age} = 18.70; 47.5% female; 71.6% Caucasian, 14.8% Asian, 3.1% Black/African American, 10.5% Other) at a large Midwestern university to participate in exchange for subject pool credit.

Procedure. Participants were invited into the laboratory in private individual sessions to complete a study ostensibly about imagination. First, they read the following description of "Student X", a fictional character who possessed various enviable circumstances:

> Student X, an undergraduate here at your school, keeps a busy social life with lots of friends and very little time alone. Student X also maintains a strong GPA while being able to save some energy for going to the gym and staying in good physical shape. To this point, a number of people regard Student X as rather attractive.

After reading about Student X, participants responded to 5 focusing-related questions and 5

envy-related questions, which were presented in random counterbalanced order. Then, they

reported demographic information and were debriefed.

The 5 focusing items, prefaced with the phrase "If you had Student X's life…", were:

"How many problems would you have in general?" (1 = *none at all* to 7 = *a lot*); "How easily

would good things come to you?" (1 = *not easily* to 7 = *very easily*); "How often would you be in

a bad mood?" (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*); "How bothered would you be by little annoyances?" (1

= *not at all* to 7 = *very much*); and "How often would you experience negative events?" (1 =

never to 7 = *always*). These questions were based on previous studies that highlight specific

components of the focusing illusion (e.g., underestimations of bad mood and perceptions that life

is easy: Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006).

The 5 envy items were as follows: "How envious do you feel of Student X's life

overall?" (1 = *not very envious* to 7 = *very envious*); "How much jealousy do you feel from

reading about Student X?" (1 = *none at all* to 7 = *a lot*); "How much do you want Student X's

life?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*); "How happy do you feel when imagining yourself with

Student X's circumstances?" (1 = *not very happy* to 7 = *very happy*); and "How inferior do you

feel to Student X?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*). As with the focusing items, these questions

were based on previous work that specifies individual elements of envy-related affect (e.g.,

feeling inferior: Parrott & Smith, 1993).

Study 1a Results and Discussion

The focusing questions (α = .71) and envy questions (α = .84) were collapsed into

composite scales. Envy items were not recoded because they are in the same direction. I did

recode the focusing items, however, with higher scores indicating more focalism.

As expected, the more focusing tendencies that participants exhibited ($M = 4.59$, $SD =$ .79), the more envious they felt towards Student X ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.31$), $r = .23$, $p = .003$. When examining the influence of demographic variables on this relationship via regression, I found a marginal effect of ethnicity ($p = .10$) and significant effects of age ($p = .033$) and sex ($p = .006$), such that non-Caucasian, younger, and female participants reported greater envy than Caucasian, older, and male participants. These results conceptually replicate previous studies on group-level differences in the prevalence of envy-related emotionality (e.g., Hill & Buss, 2008; Salovey & Rodin, 1991). Importantly, however, the relationship between focusing and envy remained highly significant when controlling these variables, $\beta = .25$, $p = .001$. Envying others thus appears to be strongly associated with the perception that those in question experience many more positive than negative or neutral events, in line with traditional accounts of focalism.

Study 1b Method

Participants. I recruited 80 Amazon Turk participants ($M_{age} = 31.79$; 48.8% female; 71.3% Caucasian, 10.0% Asian, 10.0% Black/African American, 8.8% Other) to complete an online study in exchange for $0.10.

Procedure. The procedures were identical to Study 1a. However, participants read a different scenario about "Student X" that involved various pity-inducing circumstances:

> Student X keeps a quiet social life with few friends and lots of time alone. Student X also maintains a weak GPA yet has little energy for going to the gym and staying in good physical shape. To this point, a number of people regard Student X as rather unattractive.

After reading about Student X, participants responded to 5 focusing-related questions and 5 pity-related questions, which were presented in random counterbalanced order. Then, they reported demographic information and were debriefed.

The 5 focusing items were identical to Study 1a. The 5 pity items were as follows: "How much help do you want to give Student X?" (1 = *a little bit of help* to 7 = *as much help as possible*); "How much pity do you feel for Student X?" (1 = *not much* to 7 = *very much*); "How sorry do you feel for Student X overall?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*); "How much sympathy do you feel from reading about Student X?" (1 = *none at all* to 7 = *a lot*); and "How sad do you feel when imagining yourself with Student X's circumstances?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*). As with the focusing items, these questions were based on previous work that specifies individual elements of pity-related affect (e.g., feeling sorry and sympathetic: Harris & Fiske, 2006).

Study 1b Results and Discussion

The focusing questions (α = .81) and pity questions (α = .85) were collapsed into composite scales. Pity items were not recoded because they are in the same direction. As in Study 1a, I did recode the focusing items, with higher scores indicating more focalism. Focalism was recoded to be in line with pity, such that higher scores on the focalism scale corresponded with higher levels of pity.

As expected, the more focusing tendencies that participants exhibited (M = 5.38, SD = .93), the more pity they felt towards Student X (M = 4.96, SD = 1.23), r = .26, p = .021. When examining the influence of demographic variables on this relationship via regression, I found no effects of gender (p = .93), age (p = .45), or ethnicity (p = .94), and the relationship between focusing and pity remained significant when controlling these variables, β = .27, p = .018. I chose to use "Student" language in the pity scenario with this study population in order to be consistent with Study 1a, and for the life conditions to make sense (e.g., "bad GPA"). The non-student population is likely not a problem because the effect remains when controlling age.

Pitying others thus appears to be associated with the perception that those in question experience many more negative than positive or neutral events, in line with the focusing illusion. As expected, these patterns are identical in the converse way for envy (i.e., envy is associated with the perception that those in question experience many more positive than negative or neutral events). In the next study, I sought to extend these correlational links in an experimental design that directly manipulated emotions.

Study 2: Emotion Exacerbates Focusing

In Study 2, I manipulated feelings of envy (Study 2a) and pity (Study 2b) to examine their cause-and-effect relationship with focusing tendencies. I predicted that inducing people to express either emotion would actually cause them to exhibit a greater focalism bias.

Study 2a Method

Participants. I recruited 66 undergraduates (M_{age} = 19.03; 45.5% female; 65.2% Caucasian, 13.6% Asian, 13.6% Black/African American, 6.1% Other) at a large Midwestern university to participate in exchange for subject pool credit.

Procedure. Participants completed a laboratory study in private individual sessions ostensibly about judgment and multitasking. They were asked to imagine 6 different enviable others, who otherwise were described as being very similar to the participant in nearly every way (people tend to feel envy for similar—not dissimilar—others: Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004): someone who lives in a sunny city, an exceptionally rich person, an exceptionally famous person, an exceptionally popular person, an exceptionally attractive person, and an exceptionally smart person. No other details were provided. These domains were chosen because prior studies have used them to show the focusing illusion (e.g., overestimating life satisfaction when

imagining life in sunny California: Schkade & Kahneman, 1998). For each target, participants

responded to the same 5 focusing items from the first study.

Before making any ratings, however, participants were randomly assigned to one of two

conditions (ns = 33). In the *neutral* condition, participants were presented with the following

instructions: "Take an objective perspective towards what is described. Try not to get caught up

in your feelings and emotional reactions when imagining each person's life. Try to remain

objective and detached when thinking about each person." Conversely, participants in the *envy*

condition were instructed: "Take an envious perspective towards what is described. Consider

your feelings and emotional reactions when imagining each person's life. Embrace the envy

triggered when thinking about each person." This manipulation was adapted from a large

literature on emotional empathy, in which researchers assess the consequences of empathic

feelings by instructing participants to "take an empathic perspective" and "embrace the empathy"

(versus taking a neutral, detached stance) while completing a task (e.g., Toi & Batson, 1982).

As a manipulation check at the end of the study, all participants rated how much they

experienced 7 different feelings while rating the targets: envy, happiness, sadness, anger, fear,

surprise, and guilt (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Finally, they reported demographic

information and were debriefed.

Study 2a Results and Discussion

First, the manipulation worked. Envy participants did not significantly differ from neutral

participants on experienced happiness ($p = .42$), sadness ($p = .15$), anger ($p = .10$), fear ($p = .32$),

surprise ($p = .26$), or guilt ($p = .18$). However, they did experience significantly more envy ($M =$

4.30, $SD = 1.67$) than neutral participants ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(64) = -3.77$, $p < .001$, $d =$

0.92. This significant finding for envy could be due to experimental demand.

For the primary analysis, the 5 focusing items were collapsed and recoded for each of the 6 targets—as in Study 1—with higher scores indicating greater focusing on this global composite index (α = .76). As expected, envy participants exhibited significantly more focusing tendencies (M = 4.67, SD = .56), inflating the value of positive life circumstances by neglecting the prevalence of everyday neutral and negative experiences, than did neutral participants (M = 4.41, SD = .48), $t(64)$ = -1.98, p = .052, d = .50: see Figure 1). Moreover, Univariate ANCOVA analyses with sex, age, and ethnicity added simultaneously as covariates revealed that the effect of the envy manipulation on focalism remained highly significant when controlling these demographic variables, $F(1, 65)$ = 5.39, p = .02, η = .08; neither sex (p = .30), nor age (p = .20), nor ethnicity (p = .45) exerted an effect.

Thus, as expected, participants who were randomly assigned to express envy were more likely to neglect the everyday neutral and negative experiences in the lives of enviable others, compared to control participants.

Study 2b Method

Participants. I recruited 31 undergraduates (M_{age} = 18.84; 51.6% female; 61.3% Caucasian, 12.9% Asian, 12.9% Black/African American, 12.9% Other) at a large Midwestern university to participate in exchange for subject pool credit.

Procedure. The procedures were identical to Study 2a. However, participants were asked to imagine 6 different pitiable others: someone who lives in a town that is known for bad weather all year round, an exceptionally poor person, a person not famous or known for anything positive, an exceptionally unpopular person, an exceptionally unattractive person, and an exceptionally unintelligent person. For each target, participants responded to the same 5 focusing items.

Before making any ratings, however, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (*ns* = 15). In the *neutral* condition, participants were presented with the following instructions: "Take an objective perspective towards what is described. Try not to get caught up in your feelings and emotional reactions when imagining each person's life. Try to remain objective and detached when thinking about each person." Conversely, participants in the *pity* condition were instructed: "Take a pitying perspective toward what is described. Consider your feelings and emotional reactions when imagining each person's life. Embrace the pity triggered by thinking about each person." This manipulation mirrors the one that I used in the prior study.

As a manipulation check at the end of the study, all participants rated how much they experienced 7 different feelings while rating the targets: pity, happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and guilt (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*), as in Study 2a. Finally, they reported demographic information and were debriefed.

Study 2b Results and Discussion

First, the manipulation worked. Pity participants did not significantly differ from neutral participants on experienced happiness (p = .22), anger (p = .57), fear (p = .65), surprise (p = .77), or guilt (p = .39). While the difference between pity and neutral participants on sadness (p = .063) is not significant, it is near-significant, which suggests that this experiment did indeed manipulate the construct of pity (versus other pity-related emotions, such as contempt). However, pity participants did experience significantly more pity (M = 5.19, SD = 1.22) than neutral participants (M = 3.53, SD = 1.68), $t(29)$ = -3.14, p = .004, d = 1.13. Again, this significant finding for pity could be due to experimental demand.

For the primary analysis, the 5 focusing items were collapsed and recoded for each of the 6 targets, with higher scores indicating greater focusing on this global composite index (α = .62).

As expected, pity participants exhibited significantly more focusing tendencies ($M = 4.67$, $SD =$ .32), inflating the value of negative life circumstances by neglecting the prevalence of everyday neutral and positive experiences, than did neutral participants ($M = 4.25$, $SD = .54$), $t(29) = -2.58$, $p = .015$, $d = .95$: see Figure 2). Moreover, Univariate ANCOVA analyses with sex, age, and ethnicity added simultaneously as covariates revealed that the effect of the pity manipulation on focalism remained highly significant when controlling these demographic variables, $F(1, 30) =$ 7.59, $p = .011$, $\eta = .23$; neither sex ($p = .26$), nor age ($p = .15$), nor ethnicity ($p = .61$) exerted an effect.

Note that this alpha is relatively low, and as can be seen in Figure 2, the effect appears to be strongest specifically for three targets: the person who lives in a bad weather city ($M_{control} =$ 3.77, $SD_{control} = .73$; $M_{pity} = 4.83$, $SD_{pity} = .49$; $t(29) = 4.71$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.70$), the person who is unknown ($M_{control} = 3.75$, $SD_{control} = 1.09$; $M_{pity} = 4.54$, $SD_{pity} = .82$; $t(29) = 2.29$, $p = .03$, $d =$ .82), and the person who is unintelligent ($M_{control} = 4.05$, $SD_{control} = .87$; $M_{pity} = 4.45$, $SD_{pity} = .81$; $t(29) = .74$, $p = .20$, $d = .48$). This observation suggests that the emotion-focalism link may be stronger for particular domains. I return to this point in the General Discussion.

These results expand upon Study 1 by providing experimental evidence for a cause-and-effect relationship between emotion and the focusing illusion. Participants who were randomly assigned to express envy were more likely to neglect the everyday neutral and negative experiences in the lives of enviable others, whereas participants who were randomly assigned to express pity were more likely to neglect the neutral and positive experiences for pitied others.

Study 3: Decreasing Emotion By Defocusing

In Study 3, I extended the findings of the first two studies in a number of important ways. First, I tested for bidirectional effects, that is, whether manipulating focusing can cause changes

in emotion (rather than manipulating emotion as in the prior study). I specifically assessed whether manipulating people to *de*focus can decrease emotion. Second, participants thought about enviable and pitiable others in their own lives rather than fictional targets, to further boost real-world relevance. Third, participants specified how they perceived good, bad, and neutral events in the lives of others, to explore how focusing actually operates to influence emotion. Finally, I included measures of trait envy and trait empathy to test if their relationship to focalism is limited to a particular subgroup (e.g., people who are naturally very emotional).

In Study 3, participants were induced to "defocus" their thoughts while thinking about enviable others (Study 3a) and pitiable others (Study 3b). I predicted that defocusing would lead people to feel less emotion towards others, and that this reduction would be driven by changes in perceptions of how often the others in question experience positive, negative, and neutral events.

Study 3a Method

Participants. I recruited 160 undergraduates (M_{age} = 18.61; 67.5% female; 66.3% Caucasian, 15.0% Asian, 7.5% Black/African American, 11.3% Other) at a large Midwestern university to participate in exchange for subject pool credit.

Procedure. Participants completed a laboratory study in private individual sessions ostensibly about how people form impressions of others. They were randomly assigned into one of two conditions. Participants in the *control* condition (n = 81) were asked to think of a real person in their actual lives (i.e., not a celebrity or public figure) about whom they felt envious. They wrote this person's initials and then listed up to 5 reasons for their envy. Common responses included getting good grades, finding an easy time making friends, and having wealthy parents. Then, they were asked to rate "How envious do you feel of this person's life overall?", from 1 (*I'm not very envious*) to 9 (*I'm extremely envious*).

Participants in the *diary* condition ($n = 79$) followed the same procedures, except they completed a "diary" task before making the rating. Similar manipulations have been used in a handful of previous studies beyond Wilson et al. (2000) to successfully induce defocusing (see Ayton, Pott, & Elwakili, 2007; Hoerger, Quirk, Lucas, & Carr, 2009, 2010; Sevdalis & Harvey, 2009). In the task, participants were asked to imagine a realistic, average day in the envied other's life. They were asked to generate lists of at least one likely activity for each hour within a 24-hour period, starting with 6:00 AM - 7:00 AM. Hence, the goal of the task was to bring to mind the many inevitably mundane moments that the envied other encounters during a typical day (e.g., sleeping, eating, commuting), which should therefore reduce envious feelings if envy is indeed driven by focalism bias. After this task, diary participants rated the same envy item as participants did in the control condition.

Next, all participants were asked to estimate what percentage of the envied other's life is filled with good moments, neutral moments, and bad moments, adding up to 100%. They also completed the 8-item Dispositional Envy Scale[2] (Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999; $\alpha = .86$). A sample item is, "Frankly, the success of my neighbors makes me resent them." Each question was rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Finally, participants reported demographic information and were debriefed.

Study 3a Results and Discussion

Reducing envy. As expected, reducing focalism decreased feelings of envy. Diary participants experienced significantly less envy ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.87$) than did control participants ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.99$), $t(158) = 2.98$, $p = .003$, $d = .47$. Moreover, Univariate ANCOVA analyses with sex, age, and ethnicity added simultaneously as covariates revealed that the effect of the diary manipulation on envy remained significant when controlling these

demographic variables, $F(1, 159) = 8.97$, $p = .003$, $\eta = .06$; neither sex ($p = .17$) nor age ($p = .78$)

exerted a significant effect. Ethnicity, however, did have an unexpected effect ($p = .02$), such that

Caucasians reported the highest envy regardless of condition. Although this result conflicts with

the ethnicity pattern observed in Study 1, I suspect that any differences by ethnicity in my studies

should be viewed with caution given the small sample sizes of my non-Caucasian participants.

Future research might fruitfully explore potential ethnic differences beyond the scope of the

current paper.

Interestingly, the effectiveness of the "diary" task in reducing *experienced* envy did not

depend on participants' *dispositional* envy. There were no differences in trait scores between

control ($M = 2.19$, $SD = .80$) and diary participants ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .81$), $t(148) = -.64$, $p = .52$, d

$= .11$. Condition, trait envy, and the condition × trait interaction were thus entered as predictors

of experienced envy via regression. Although there was an effect of trait such that more envious

people indeed felt more envy ($\beta = .64$, $p = .008$), the interaction was *not* significant ($\beta = -.29$, $p =$

$.23$). Thus, the diary manipulation may be effective regardless of people's initial propensities to

feel envious—which suggests a potential fix for envy-related problems in general, not limited to

a particular subgroup.

Mediation. In line with my proposed framework, the diary manipulation also led to

downstream differences in perceiving the envied other's life. Defocusing did not lead diary

participants to infer a greater proportion of negative moments ($M = 14.94\%$, $SD = 9.32\%$) than

control participants ($M = 16.14\%$, $SD = 7.67\%$), $t(158) = .89$, $p = .38$, $d = .14$. However, diary

participants did perceive a decrease in positive moments ($M = 41.94\%$, $SD = 16.95\%$) compared

to control participants ($M = 55.27\%$, $SD = 18.71\%$), $t(158) = 4.72$, $p < .001$, $d = .75$, and a

corresponding increase in neutral moments ($M = 42.87\%$, $SD = 16.97\%$) compared to control

participants ($M = 28.59\%$, $SD = 16.34\%$), $t(158) = -5.42$, $p < .001$, $d = .86$. Hence, defocusing

brought to mind the mundane moments in otherwise exceptional circumstances, as reflected in

people's increased estimates of neutral and decreased estimates of positive events.

Accordingly, these differences fully mediated the effect of the diary manipulation on

experienced envy. To simplify my test for mediation, I created a difference score by subtracting

neutral estimates from positive estimates, comprising a "life events" index.[3] Diary participants

thought their envied others led less pleasant and more mundane lives ($M = .94$, $SD = 32.57$)

compared to control participants ($M = 26.68$, $SD = 34.29$), $t(158) = 5.22$, $p < .001$, $d = .83$.

Regression-based mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986: see Figure 3) showed that

condition significantly predicted envy ($\beta = -.23$, $p = .003$), but not when controlling perceived

life events ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .11$); conversely, perceived life events predicted envy ($\beta = .31$, $p <$

.001), even controlling condition ($\beta = .26$, $p = .002$). The indirect effect of the diary manipulation

on experienced envy, through perceived life events, was significant (95% bootstrap confidence

interval = -.70 to -.14, which excludes the value 0; see Preacher & Hayes, 2004). In other words,

mundane everyday life events brought to mind via defocusing were the precise reasons why

participants were led to feel less envy.

Study 3b Method

Participants. I recruited 65 undergraduates ($M_{age} = 18.58$; 58.5% female; 72.3%

Caucasian, 7.7% Asian, 6.2% Black/African American, 13.8% Other) at a large Midwestern

university to participate in exchange for subject pool credit.

Procedure. The procedures were identical to Study 3a. Participants in the *control*

condition ($n = 32$) were asked to think of a real person in their actual lives (i.e., not a celebrity or

public figure) that they pitied. They wrote this person's initials and then listed up to 5 reasons for

their pity. Common responses included getting poor grades, not having many friends, and

experiencing financial hardships. Then, they were asked to rate "How much pity do you feel

towards this person's life overall?", on a scale from 1 (*I don't feel very much pity*) to 9 (*I feel an*

extreme amount of pity). Participants in the *diary* condition (*n* = 33) followed the same

procedures, except they completed the "diary" task before making the rating. All participants

then completed the same three percentage estimates as in Study 3a, and also completed the 28-

item Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), which captures four distinct dimensions of

dispositional empathy on individual 7-item subscales: Empathic Concern (α = .79) measures

people's other-oriented feelings of sympathy for the misfortunes of others, and as such is a more

emotional component of empathy (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less

fortunate than me"); Perspective Taking (α = .82) is a more cognitive or intellectual component,

measuring people's tendencies to imagine other people's points of view (e.g., "I sometimes try to

understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective"); Fantasy (α

= .84) measures people's tendencies to identify imaginatively with fictional characters in books

or movies (e.g., "I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel"); and

Personal Distress (α = .81) measures more self-oriented feelings of distress during others'

misfortunes (e.g., "When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces").

Each item was rated from 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 5 (*describes me very well*). Finally,

participants reported demographic information and were debriefed.

Study 3b Results and Discussion

> **Reducing pity.** The primary hypothesis was not supported in this study: Diary

participants had a similar level of pity (*M* = 5.67, *SD* = 2.16) as control participants (*M* = 5.69,

SD = 1.60), *t*(63) = .044, *p* = .97. Adding demographic variables as covariates via Univariate

ANCOVA analyses did not change this finding: the effect of condition remained non-significant ($p = .96$), and neither sex ($p = .60$), age ($p = .38$), nor ethnicity ($p = .78$) exerted an effect. One likely explanation for this null finding is that pity and other empathy-related emotions have a strong social desirability component, in that few people would explicitly admit to not feeling bad for the misfortunes of others (see Davis, 1983). Given that participants in this study were asked to think about real people in their own lives rather than fictional targets (as in Studies 1-2), this social desirability explanation may apply. Another explanation for this null finding may be that even the mundane moments in particular types of pitied others day-to-day lives may be objectively difficult (e.g., a poor person who cannot afford a car must take the bus or rely on rides everyday). Thus, bringing to mind mundane moments for these types of people would still result in experienced pity. This highlights the possibility that severe misfortune truly is worse, and it may change the mundane details of your life more than good fortune does.

   Dispositional empathy. In terms of dispositional empathy scores, there were no Empathic Concern differences between control ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .63$) and diary participants ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .69$), $t(63) = -1.52$, $p = .13$; no Fantasy differences between control ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .87$) and diary participants ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .76$), $t(63) = -.60$, $p = .55$; and no Personal Distress differences between control ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .75$) and diary participants ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .69$), $t(63) = .79$, $p = .43$. There was, however, an unexpected effect of Perspective Taking, such that diary participants reported having significantly greater trait Perspective Taking tendencies ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .66$) as compared to control participants ($M = 3.14$, $SD = .75$), $t(63) = -2.40$, $p = .019$, $d = .58$. This finding is somewhat odd given that participants were randomly assigned across conditions; perhaps something about the extended task, such as the "diary" task itself being an act of perspective taking, put diary participants in a more cognitive or intellectual-oriented

mindset, thus changing their cognitive empathy. If so, this unexpected artifact might help explain why the diary manipulation did not lead to the primary predicted effect on the pity outcome measure. However, there was no significant interaction between Perspective Taking and condition ($p = .25$), and the null effect remains when controlling for Perspective Taking and each of the other empathy subscales (ps > .90).

  Percentage estimates. Despite this null effect, I did observe significant effects on the percentage estimates in line with the proposed framework. Defocusing did not lead diary participants to infer a greater proportion of positive moments ($M = 24.70\%$, $SD = 15.41\%$) than did control participants ($M = 27.66\%$, $SD = 14.93\%$), $t(63) = .78$, $p = .44$. However, diary participants did perceive a decrease in negative moments ($M = 27.27\%$, $SD = 20.73\%$) compared to control participants ($M = 37.03\%$, $SD = 18.37\%$), $t(63) = 2.00$, $p = .049$, $d = .49$, and a corresponding increase in neutral moments ($M = 48.03\%$, $SD = 22.11\%$) compared to control participants ($M = 35.31\%$, $SD = 16.28\%$), $t(63) = -2.63$, $p = .011$, $d = .65$. Hence, as expected, defocusing brought to mind the inevitably mundane moments in otherwise poor circumstances, as reflected in people's increased estimates of neutral and decreased estimates of negative events.

  In sum, Study 3 provides a number of important insights that may speak to potential boundaries of the role of focalism in interpersonal perception, particularly in terms of differences in perceiving undesirable (versus desirable) conditions. In terms of envy, the diary manipulation indeed led people to feel less envious of desirable others. Given that envy has been shown to produce many destructive interpersonal consequences (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011), Study 3a thus has implications for improving real-world wellbeing. In contrast, diary and control participants felt equally bad for pitied others regardless of the diary manipulation. Interestingly, I still found significant effects on percentage estimates,

meaning that the diary manipulation indeed had its predicted effect (i.e., that it brought to mind more mundane moments in pitied others' lives)—but thinking about mundane moments did *not* then reduce overall experienced pity. This finding suggests that simply knowing about a handful of negative events in someone else's life is enough to drive people to feel bad for them, even if people are made aware of neutral or positive events in their lives. In contrast, the envy studies suggest the opposite: bringing to mind neutral or negative events *does* "water down" the impressiveness of others' positive circumstances. Thus, there may be a broader asymmetry at work in how people react to good versus bad experiences in others' lives: the bad looms much larger, and is much harder to dismiss, than the good. This observation is promising, in that it suggests people's prosocial emotions (e.g., empathy and some dimensions of pity) may be more difficult to reduce than destructive social emotions (e.g., envy and jealousy).

General Discussion

Do you envy your successful friend? Do you pity your unsuccessful friend? The above studies indicate that if someone feels these emotions towards others, they do so because they exaggeratedly focus on the particularly positive and negative circumstances in the other person's life, while neglecting the inevitable mundane life events that the person will also experience. Essentially, not being able to see the full picture leads people to form biased perceptions of enviable and pitiable others. Defocusing one's thoughts by intentionally bringing to mind the many other mundane events also impacting that person's day-to-day life may help a person recognize the similarities between themselves and these others. If this is the case, defocusing could help to close the in-group versus out-group gap that can produce negative consequences.

Overall, the results from these studies indicate a relationship between social emotions and the focusing illusion. Results from Study 1, which investigated the link between focalism and

emotion, indicated a positive correlational relationship between the two variables: the more

focusing tendencies the participants exhibited, the more envy and pity they felt towards the

fictional "Student X." Results from Study 2, which used an experimental design to directly

manipulate emotion, indicated that inducing people to express envy and pity increased focalism.

Thus, experiencing these emotions leads people to overly neglect the routine experiences that

others inevitably encounter by focusing on the positive and negative aspects of the person's life.

Lastly, results from Study 3, which implemented a defocusing manipulation, found that the

"diary" task did increase estimates of neutral moments in both the envied others' life and the

pitied others' life. However, these estimates only helped to decrease envy, and did not change

overall experienced pity. In other words, after defocusing, participants were able to recognize

that the pitied others also experienced everyday mundane experiences in addition to the negative

events, yet, knowing this did not lead people to feel any less bad for the person. This asymmetry

suggests an interesting split across valence within the emotion-focalism link: more "antisocial"

emotions (like envy) may be easier to attenuate than more "prosocial" emotions (like empathy).

In general, however, the results collectively suggest a robust link between focalism and emotion.

Theoretical Insights

A bidirectional, causal relationship between social emotions and focalism suggests

various theoretical implications. While there has been prior research about how people think and

feel about themselves, almost no research has extended the principles of focalism to how people

think and feel about *others*. These studies suggest that interpersonal focalism is rooted in

differences in how people estimate the percentage of positive, negative, and neutral experiences

that others encounter. Interestingly, the main "action" in both sets of studies appeared to occur

with neutral experiences. With the envy studies, people seemed to generally believe that negative

events are unlikely to happen to others—even after defocusing. And similarly with the pity

studies, people seemed to believe that positive events are unlikely to happen to others, even after

defocusing. These valence-specific nuances help build a more precise understanding of how

focalism actually operates, highlighting which particular aspects of perceiving others drive our

evaluations of them (i.e., the unobserved power of neutral everyday moments). Indeed, at a more

general level, the felt intensity of various emotions might be just as driven by the things people

are *not* thinking about as by how much they attend to the principal event at hand.

In terms of the envy and pity literatures themselves, the current studies clearly suggest

that these emotions need not depend on *objective* differences between self and other, but merely

entail the subjective belief that they exist. To my knowledge, prior studies have not made this

point explicitly, not even in a recent thorough meta-analysis of envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). That

envy and pity actively create perceptions of inequality (as in Study 2), and are not just reactions

to objective inequality, significantly broadens the literature's scope—not only by suggesting new

domains in which pity and envy should have influence, but also how past findings interact with

other variables. For example, cultural differences in envy (Hupka et al., 1985), its relationship

with self-esteem (Salovey & Rodin, 1991), and its effects on memory and cognition (Hill et al.,

2011) may all be importantly moderated by people's focusing tendencies, as might be pity's

relationships to prejudicial attitudes and social judgments (Fiske et al., 2002; Florian et al., 2000;

Harris & Fiske, 2006), and prosociality (Batson, 2011; Dijker, 2001; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987;

Wilmer, 1968).

Practical Implications

Perhaps most important, the current findings pose novel recommendations for addressing

various real-world consequences of both envy and pity. For example, envy's destructive real-

world effects have been well-documented (Larson et al., 1999; Van de Ven et al., 2011). In turn,

one prominent theory identifies three primary coping strategies to alleviate these envious feelings

(see Salovey & Rodin, 1988): self-reliance (i.e., trying to simply persevere, resting assured that

one's feelings will pass), self-bolstering (i.e., trying to think about and emphasize one's positive

qualities), and selective ignoring (i.e., trying to avoid thinking about enviable others). These

strategies may work to the extent that one's envy is rooted in objective inferiority; if one can

never actually become a rich celebrity, redirecting attention to other things seems reasonable.

The current studies, however, suggest a more counterintuitive strategy, given that envy also

seems to stem from subjective perceptions: think *a lot* about enviable others, in order to add their

less-than-enviable banalities of everyday life into one's perception. Of course, future work

should test if this observation holds true under more naturalistic conditions, such as examining

whether the diary manipulation can help decrease envy over time via longitudinal interventions,

and whether it still works for people who suffer from serious envy regulation problems (e.g.,

certain clinical samples). Nevertheless, the fact that I found no interactions in any of my studies

with gender, age, ethnicity, and even trait envy provides initial evidence that the effects could

beneficially extend beyond the laboratory.

In terms of pity, the current findings pose novel recommendations for addressing pity's

both positive and negative real-world effects, in line with previous findings (Batson, 2011;

Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2003; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Fiske et al., 2002; Florian et al., 2000;

Wilmer, 1968). For instance, this research may have important value for health-related fields.

According to Boleyn-Fitzgerald (2003), there are potential negative consequences of pity for

both the doctor and patient. For the doctor, too much pity can lead to burnout, injustice, and

inefficiency; for the patient, being pitied implies a judgment of being pitiful. These negative

social judgments may exacerbate the patient's suffering. However, it is impractical (and arguably

immoral) for doctors not to experience any empathy or pity. Furthermore, pity has potential

positive consequences as well, such as allowing doctors to take the perspective of the patient, to

care for the patient, and to be motivated to alleviate the suffering of the patient (Eisenberg &

Miller, 1987; Wilmer, 1968). Educating doctors about the relationship between focalism and pity

gives them the tools to be able to attenuate some of the negative side effects associated with the

emotion, as well as harness its positive potential, benefiting both the doctor and patient.

Thus, the relationship between focalism and pity may have the power to promote

prosocial behaviors. The altruistic element of pity, in its empathetic power, can be harnessed to

motivate helping behavior and cooperation among groups of people, especially in young children

who are just developing perspective-taking (Florian et al., 2000). Another prosocial benefit

would be the use of the focalism-pity relationship in a therapeutic setting. The logic of focalism

can be used to help people who are struggling with emotions, such as pity or envy. For example,

there exists such a thing called "Emotions Anonymous," which is similar to Alcoholics

Anonymous, except for people who struggle to regulate their emotions (e.g., see Emotions

Anonymous, 2014). The principles of focalism, and more specifically, the process of

defocalization, can be used on people such as those in Emotions Anonymous to see if it is

possible to reduce real negative emotions with actual problematic consequences. Applying the

results from this research to actual practice would be a great starting point for future

interventions. Future research should continue to conduct and replicate experiments that

demonstrate how individuals can counteract the biased consequences reflected in the relationship

between focalism and other-oriented emotions. I hope my experiments call to the larger need in

the field of psychology to integrate basic theories informed through research into applied

theories that can be practically used to better individual's lives within the real world.

Strengths and Limitations

I believe that these studies are valuable because they go beyond how people think about

their own experiences in the future and examine how similar psychological principles (focalism)

might apply to how people think and feel about others. Additionally, they help add to the small

amount of current literature on the emotion of pity (especially compared to the envy literature),

providing valuable insight into the thought processes behind this emotion. Furthermore, the

results from these studies are especially useful because they tested the hypothesis across

correlational and experimental methods and measures. Utilizing this diverse array of tools can

allow one to feel more confident about the relationship between emotion and focusing.

However, there are possible limitations that may have had an impact on the results. At a

conceptual level, there may be many important moderators to the general effect. For example, as

can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the life domains have different levels of impact on emotion,

even though I observed the overall main effect across domains. Future work might fruitfully

explore these domain-specific differences, and examine when the focalism effect is most robust.

An additional limitation is the low external validity of my study population. Almost all of

the samples included White college students, and thus may not generalize to other populations.

Future research should sample from a larger or more diverse population.

One practical limitation is a small sample size. For instance, the sample size in Study 3b

may have been too small for there to be enough power to detect the effect, possibly explaining

the reason for the study's null effect on reducing pity. Another possibility for the insignificant

results from Study 3b, given the emotionally reactive nature of the stimuli and the self-report

method of the study, may have been the social desirability component mentioned previously. If participants have a tendency to describe themselves in a favorable light, and societal norms imply that we should feel bad for those less fortunate than us, then they may have been hesitant in admitting lower levels of pity (Davis, 1983; De Jong, Pieters, & Fox, 2010). Future work may be able to better account for social desirability by asserting the anonymity of the study more strongly to the participants, or by using randomized response models that help correct for social desirability biases (De Jong et al., 2010). Lastly, as also mentioned previously, the insignificant results found in Study 3b may be due to the type of misfortune in the pitied person's life. For example, on a daily basis it may take a disabled woman an hour to get dressed, and then hours of waiting for transportation services to take her to work. In this case, her misfortune is objectively worse, and it may change the mundane details of her life more than other types of experiences might.

Concluding Thoughts

Taken together, my research on focalism and its relation to envy and pity helps provide novel insight into our consciousness's perceptive biases that we are often blind to on a day-to-day basis. If nothing else, these findings may make us stop and think about the affective states of others and ourselves. This allows us to understand that everyone, regardless of how rich or famous they are, experiences a variety of mundane daily events, and that the way we perceive other's negative life circumstances may be inaccurate. Most importantly, it teaches us that perception is a subjective artifact created by our own consciousness, which optimistically implies that we also have the power to deconstruct the potentially hurtful perceptions we hold of others.

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Notes

1. A rich subcomponent of the envy literature seeks to disentangle envy from jealousy: jealousy

is typically viewed as stemming from the threat of losing a current possession, whereas envy

results from wanting something that one does not currently possess (e.g., see Parrott & Smith,

1993). In the current paper, I treat the two constructs as essentially interchangeable, as my

hypothesis should not theoretically depend upon this distinction.

2. The idea to include a trait scale did not arise until after I had already collected data from 10

participants. Thus, analyses including the scale are limited to $N = 150$; all others include the full

$N = 160$. Eliminating the first 10 participants does not change any result.

3. Individual mediations show similar patterns. Condition no longer predicts envy when

controlling for good events ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .067$) or neutral events ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .13$), whereas

good events ($\beta = .23$, $p = .005$) and neutral events ($\beta = -.27$, $p = .001$) still predict envy after

controlling for condition. Hence, using a difference score between these two allows for more

interpretable analyses. Bad events did not predict envy on its own ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .61$) or when

controlling for condition ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .76$), but condition still predicted envy when controlling

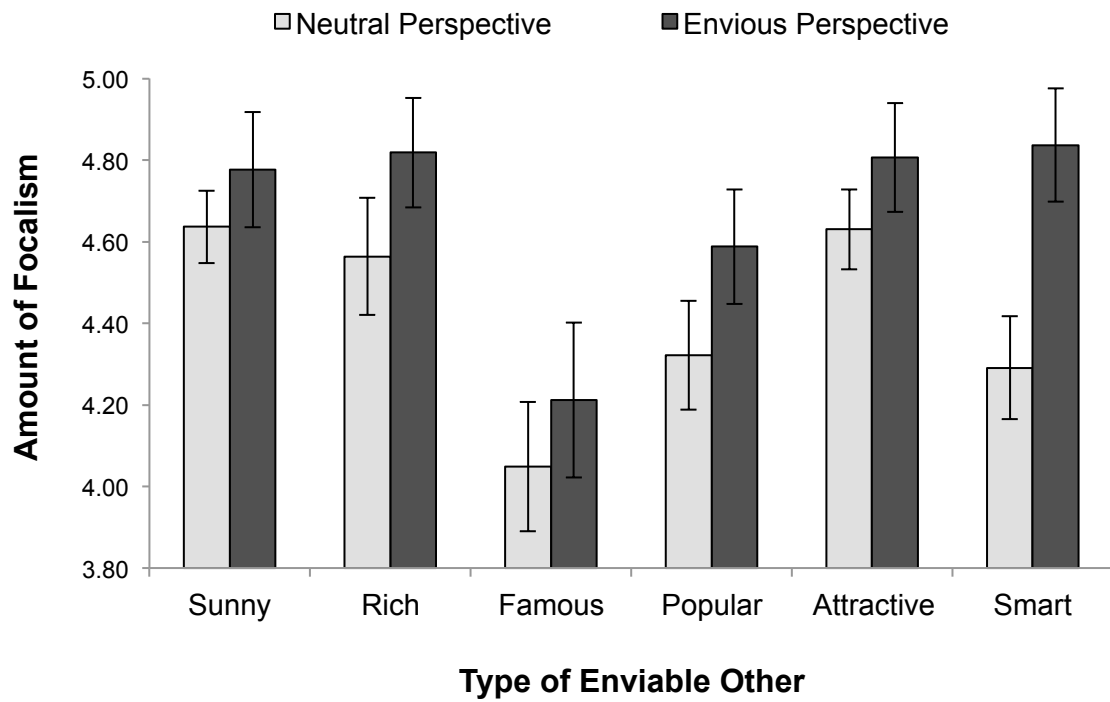for bad events ($\beta = -.23$, $p = .004$)—which is why I omitted them from the index.

Figure 1. Focalism bias when thinking about each target (Study 2a). Participants were randomly

assigned to take a neutral or envious perspective (between-subjects); I then assessed how much

focusing (i.e., inflating the value of positive life circumstances by neglecting the prevalence of

everyday neutral and negative experiences) they exhibited when thinking about different types of

enviable others (within-subjects). Higher bars represent greater focusing. Error bars ±1 standard
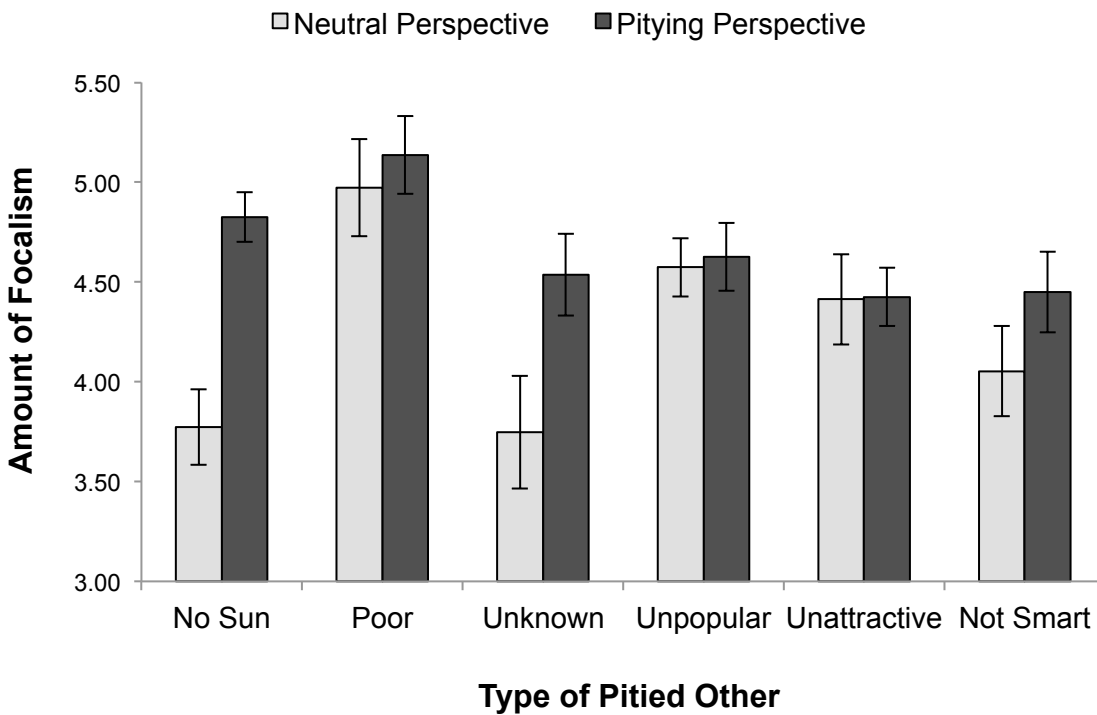
error.

Figure 2. Focalism bias when thinking about each target (Study 2b). Participants were randomly

assigned to take a neutral or pitying perspective (between-subjects); I then assessed how much

focusing (i.e., inflating the value of negative life circumstances by neglecting the prevalence of

everyday neutral and positive experiences) they exhibited when thinking about different types of

pitied others (within-subjects). Higher bars represent greater focusing. Error bars ±1 standard

error.

***p < .001
**p < .01

β = -.38***

Perceived Life Events

β = -.32***
(β = -.28**)

Defocusing Condition

β = -.21**
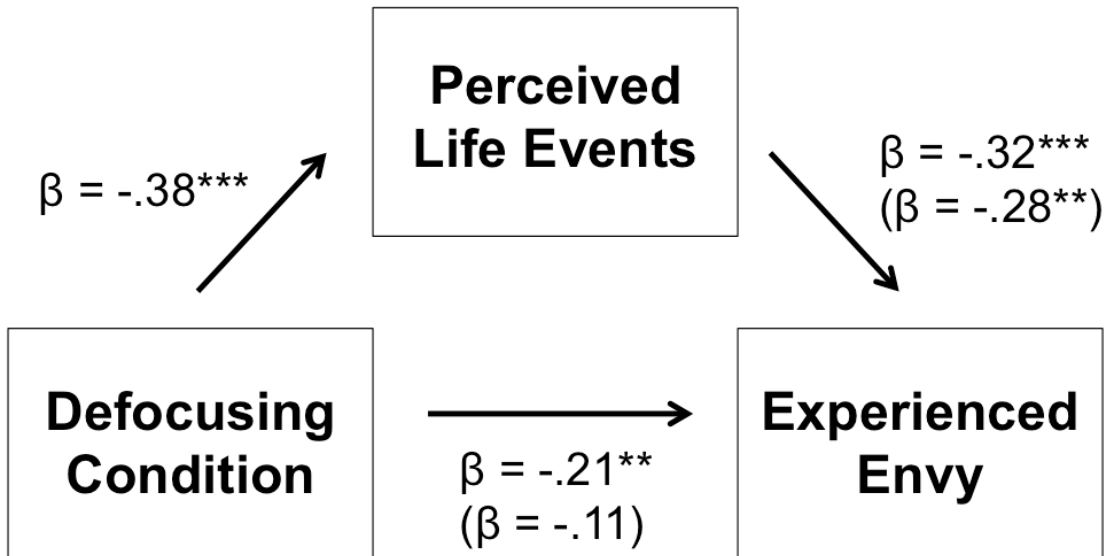(β = -.11)

Experienced Envy

Figure 3. Results of multiple regression mediation analyses (Study 3a), with condition as the independent variable (1 = diary, 0 = control), estimated proportion of life events that the envied other encounters as the mediator (positive - neutral), and experienced envy as the dependent variable. The βs in parentheses were obtained from a model that included both the independent variable and mediator as predictors of the dependent variable.