

Lay Attitudes about Optimism in the Face of a Pandemic



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“We just need more optimism. There is good news out there, and we’re not getting it.”

Senator Rand Paul to Dr. Anthony Fauci during a Senate Hearing, June 30th, 2020

Do people actually desire optimism from friends, family, and political leaders in the face of a crisis? Or do they want realism, or even pessimism? Do these preferences shift for different forecasters and types of outcomes?

Method

- 5 preregistered studies in April 2020
- Total $N = 584$ MTurk participants
- **6 roles:** Average person in the United States, close friend, family member, public policy official who helps make national decisions about pandemics, a political leader, and the self
- **7 outcomes:** contracting COVID-19, being hospitalized because of COVID-19 symptoms, a vaccine for COVID-19 becoming available < 12 months, warmer weather reducing the spread of COVID-19, a shortage of respirators, a treatment to help COVID-19 symptoms becoming available < 3 months, and careers and education returning to normal by September

Main prescription measure:

How should the average person in the United States estimate their own likelihood of **contracting COVID-19**?

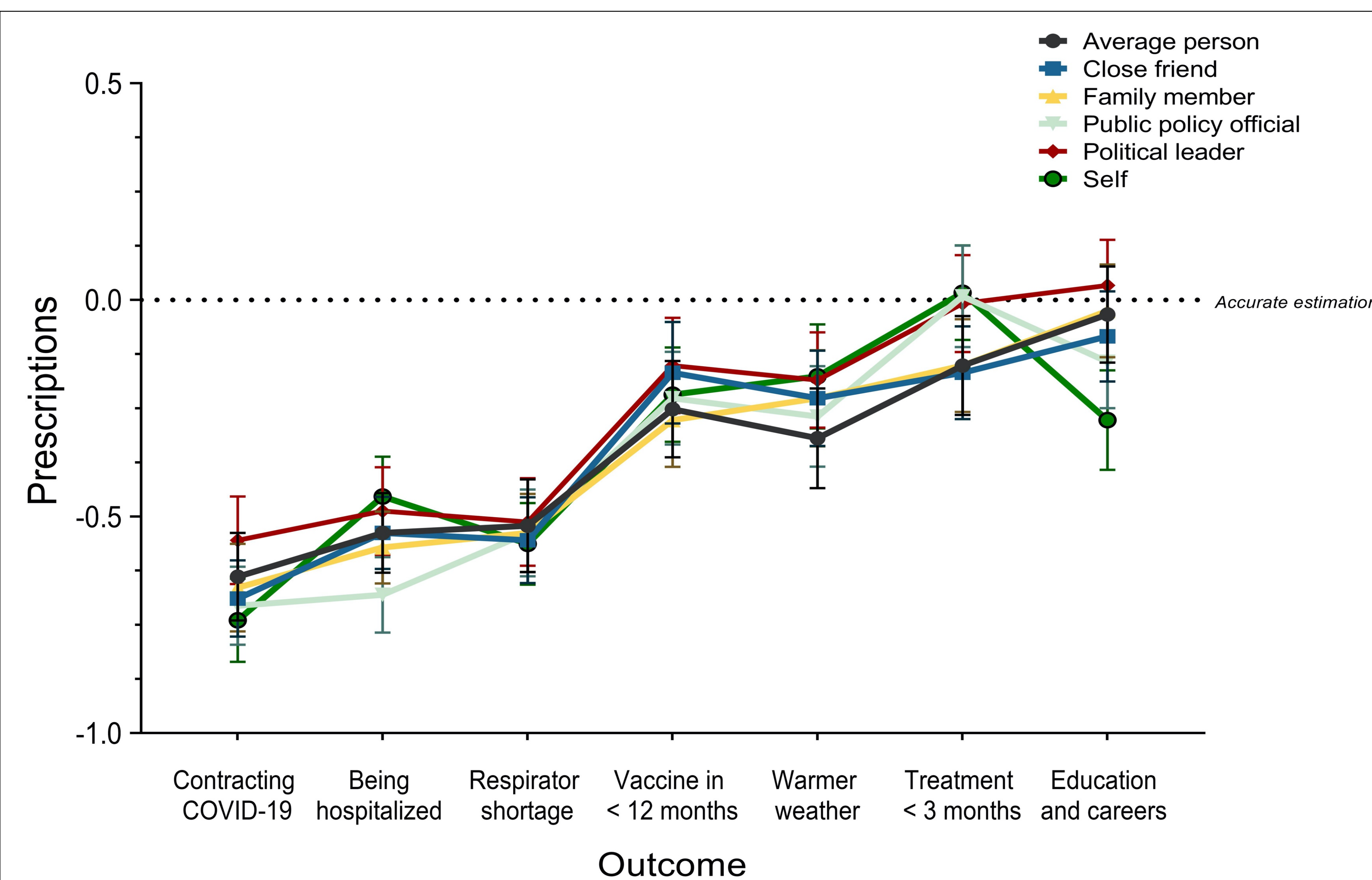
In other words, what way of thinking would be advisable?

The average person should _____ their own likelihood of contracting COVID-19.

Underestimate Slightly underestimate Accurately estimate Slightly overestimate Overestimate

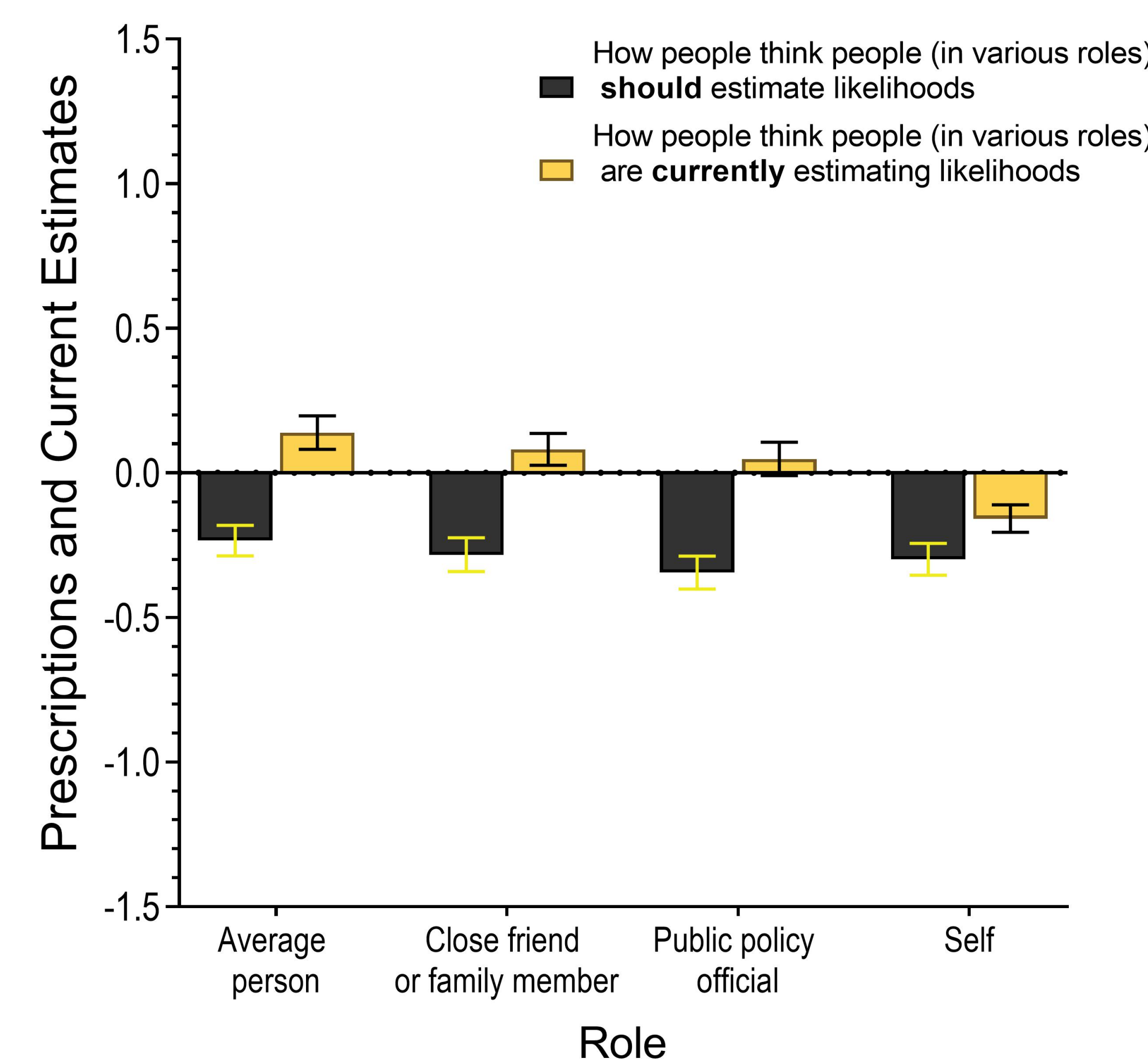
Overview of Findings

For all figures, means above 0 reflect optimism, 0 reflects accuracy, and means below 0 reflect pessimism.

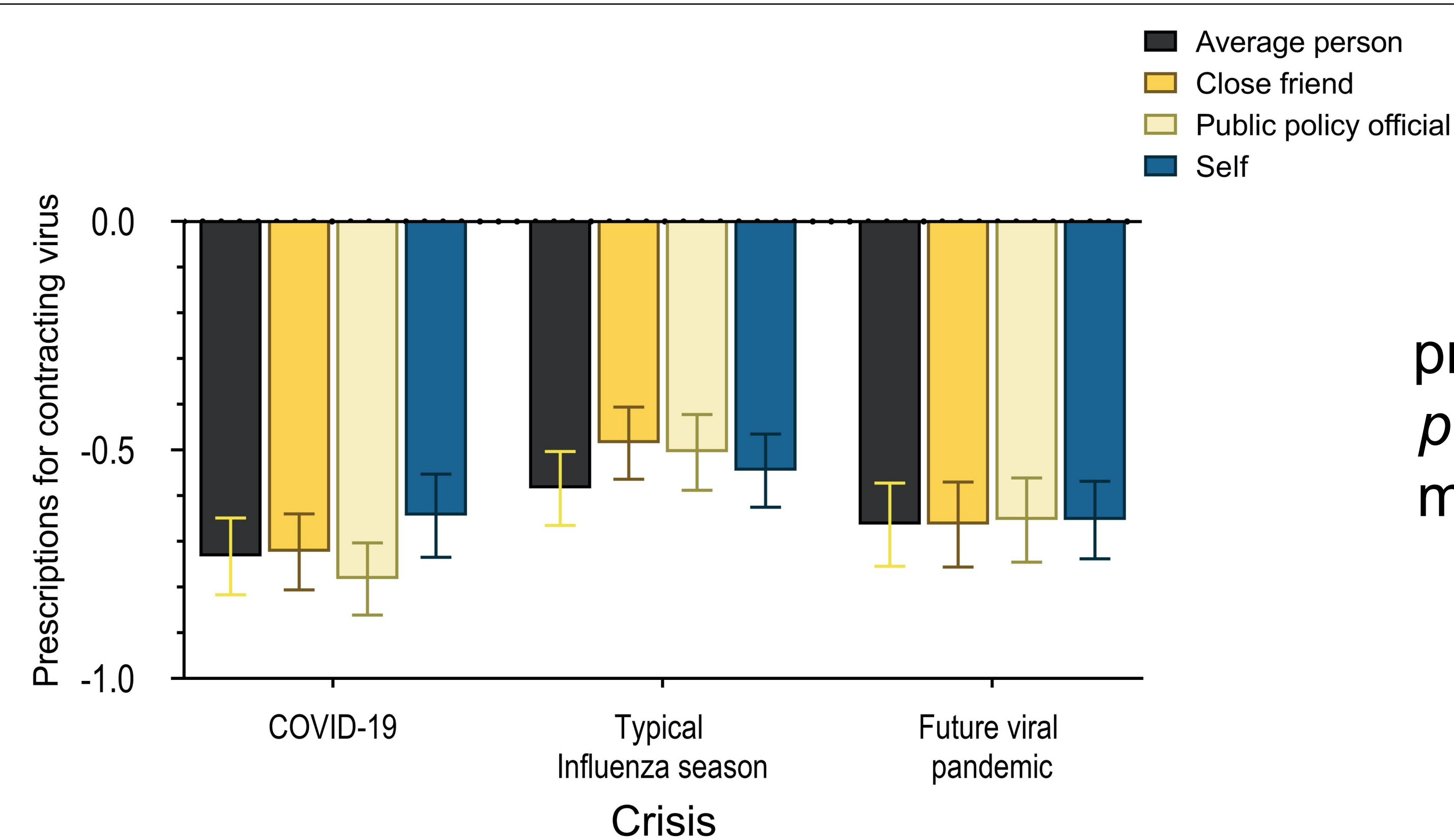
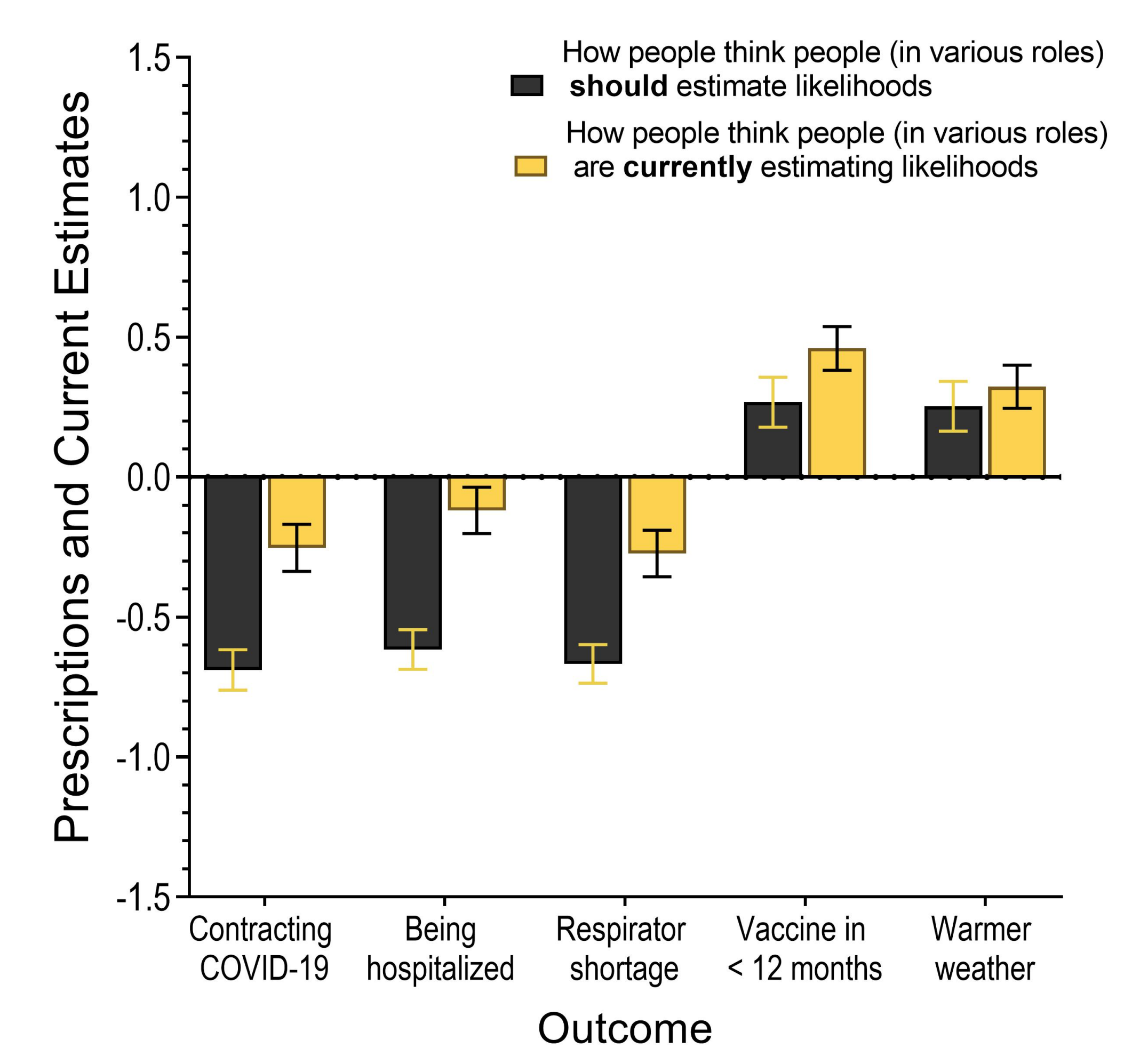


Participants in Study 1 ($N = 122$) prescribed pessimism overall. They did not give different prescriptions as a function of who they were prescribing for, $F(3.83, 448.24) = 1.34, p = .244, \eta_p^2 = .011$, but they did give different prescriptions as a function of the different outcomes, $F(2.19, 256.34) = 11.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .091$.

These results replicated in Study 2 ($N = 153$).



Participants in Study 3 ($N = 102$) thought that every role **should** be pessimistic, but that only the participants themselves were **currently** being pessimistic, $F(3,294) = 4.68, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .046$. Additionally, they said that people should be more pessimistic than they currently are about the three outcomes of contracting COVID-19, hospitalization, and a respirator shortage.



Participants in Study 4 ($N = 106$) answered prescriptions for COVID-19, a typical flu season, and a hypothetical future pandemic. They prescribed pessimism for all three, $F(2,200) = 4.75, p = .010, \eta_p^2 = .045$, but said that people should be more pessimistic about contracting COVID-19 than contracting the flu ($p = .019$), and similarly pessimistic about contracting a virus during a hypothetical future pandemic.

Conclusion

- People think others should be pessimistic about crisis-related outcomes, meaning they should overestimate negative outcomes and underestimate positive ones.
- This does not depend on the valence of the outcome or the forecaster’s role.