Valence Asymmetries in Generalizations

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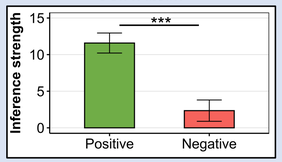
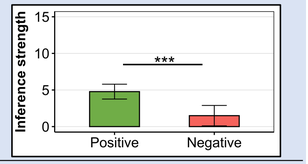
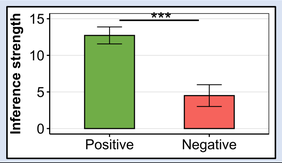
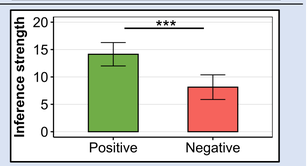
Research Question: Do people generalize positive information more than negative information?

Abstract

People generalize **positive** information more than **negative** information. Despite past evidence of a negativity bias[1], we find positivity effects when transferring information between members of the same category. People make stronger positive inferences (Study 1), are more likely to make positive inferences, and find it more acceptable to make positive inferences (Study 2). This positivity effect is robust across different targets and generalizations (Study 3).

Study 1: Inference Strength

- N = 627 (Study 1A) and N = 413 (Study 1B)
- Judgments were measured using 21-point percentile scales ranging from 0% (worst) to 100% (best).
- Participants reported baseline beliefs and were only included in analysis if their baseline was at the 50th percentile.
- Inference strength is the difference between judgments on the percentile scale and the 50th percentile.

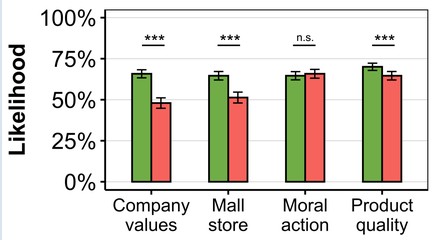
Domain	Stimulus → Target	Results
Restaurants (Study 1A)	**High-** or **low-**quality restaurant with owner from Country X → Quality of another restaurant with an owner from Country X	
Movies (Study 1A)	**Good** or **bad** movie with director from Country Y → Quality of another movie with a director from Country Y	
Salespeople (Study 1A)	A salesperson from College X who is doing **well** or **poorly** → Performance of another salesperson from College X	
Investment Bankers (Study 1B)	An investment banker from College Y who is **honest** or **dishonest** → Honesty of another investment banker from College Y	

All hypothesis tests were OLS regressions comparing inference strength by valence.

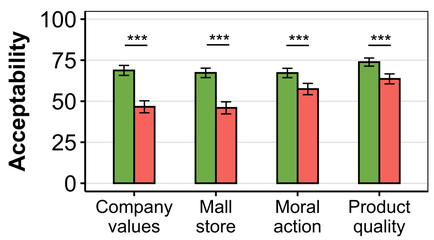
Study 2: Likelihood & Acceptability

- N = 998 in 2 (**positive** vs. **negative**) x 2 (generalization type) design
- In four scenarios, participants answered two DVs for each scenario:
  1. Likelihood: How likely is the generalization to be true, relative to the average?
  2. Acceptability: How acceptable is it to assume the generalization, relative to the average?
- Generalization types were randomized to be either upward (individual to a population) or downward (population to an individual)

Individual-to-population generalization: Given information about a single stimulus, what do people believe about the entire category?

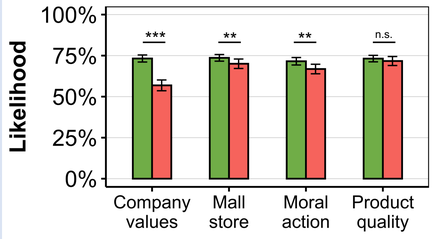


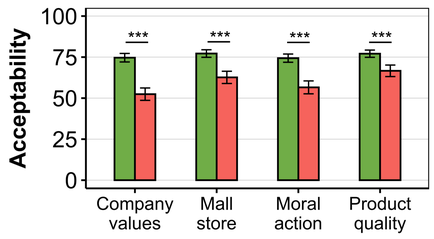
Positive attributes are more **likely** to be generalized than **negative** attributes.



Positive attributes are perceived to be more **acceptable** to generalize than **negative** attributes.

Population-to-individual generalization: Given information about the category, what do people believe about a single exemplar?

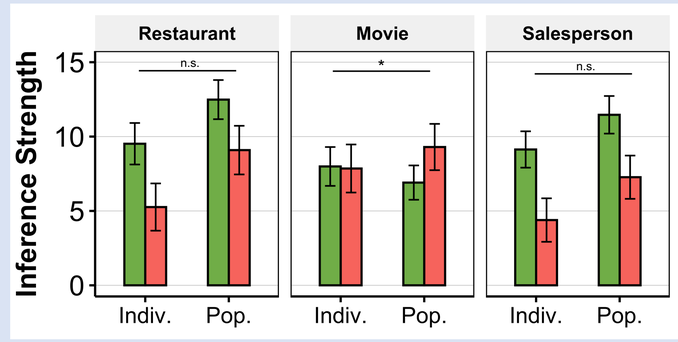




Even when given global information about the entire category, people are more **likely** (and find it more **acceptable**) to instantiate **positive** attributes than **negative** attributes for individual members.

Study 3: Inference Target

- **Hypothesis**: Positive inferences may be stronger for individuals than populations because of person-positivity bias. **Result:** Null effect.
- N = 1278 in 2 (**positive** vs. **negative**) x 2 (individual vs. population target) design
- Methods and scenarios mirrored Study 1A but randomized whether participants generalized about a broad population ("other restaurants") or a specific individual ("The Melting Pot").



People are **more** likely to make a generalization about a population than an individual, but this difference does not significantly vary on whether the generalization is **positive** or **negative**.

Discussion

Additional data (not shown) finds that trait social desirability and cognitive load do not moderate positivity effects. So, there are a couple of possible mechanisms that could still the positivity effect:

1. Positive information is seen as more similar than negative information.[2]
2. There are valence differences in attribution errors.

Therefore, negativity effects may arise in domains where negative information is more similar (e.g., DMVs).

References

[1] Rozin, P., & Royzman, E. B. (2001). Negativity bias, negativity dominance, and contagion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *5*(4), 296-320.

[2] Alves, H., Koch, A., & Unkelbach, C. (2017). Why good is more alike than bad: Processing implications. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *21*(2), 69-79.

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