

# People Believe Optimism Improves Performance across Cultures, But for Different Reasons

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## Background

- Do people across cultures prescribe optimism instead of accuracy? Why?
- In the US people prescribe optimism because they believe it improves outcomes, especially when they have control over the task (Tenney, Logg, & Moore, 2015; Armor, Massey, & Sackett, 2008).
- We consider whether this is true in China.
- In China, being optimistic might be beneficial regardless of whether someone seems to control the outcome.



## Study 1: Experiment

### Method

- Undergraduate students on Prolific in the US (N=421) and on campus in China (N=436)
- Vignettes manipulated the level of control the protagonists had over the task (high vs. low) and their outlook (optimistic vs. accurate vs. pessimistic).
- DV: Perceived chance of success

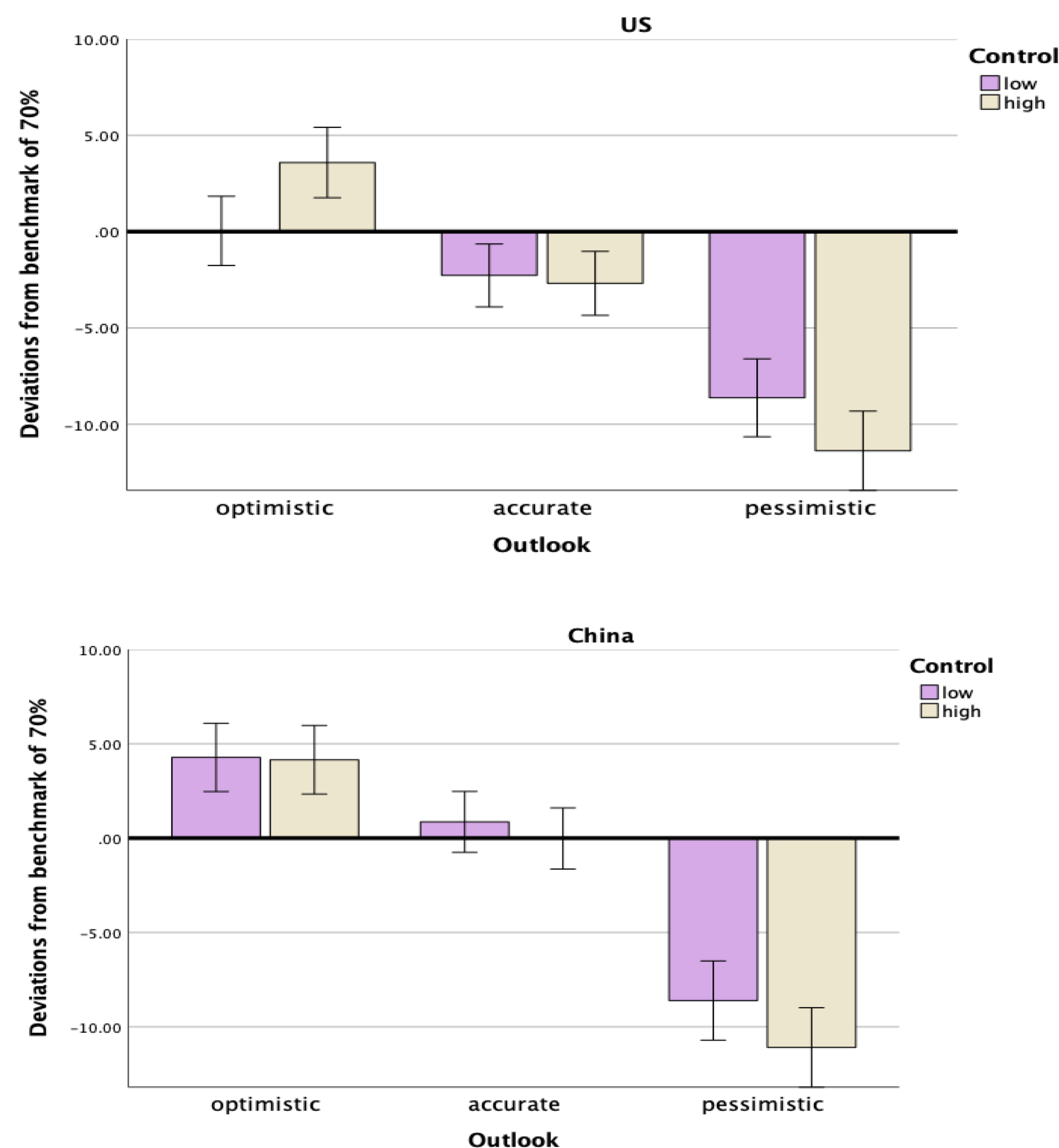
### Results

- In both the US ( $F(2, 419) = 170.85, p < .001$ ) and China ( $F(2, 434) = 158.87, p < .001$ ), an optimistic outlook increased the perceived chance of success.
- In the US, an optimistic outlook increased the perceived chance of success only if the protagonist had high control over the outcome ( $F(2, 419)=10.62, p<.001$ ).
- In China, an optimistic outlook increased the perceived chance of success regardless of control ( $F(2, 434) = 1.09, p = .337$ ).

**People prescribe optimism across cultures, though for different reasons.**

**The US understanding of optimism hinges on perceived personal control; in China it is more about interpersonal connections**

Figure 1. Optimism and the perceived chance of success



## Study 2: Interviews

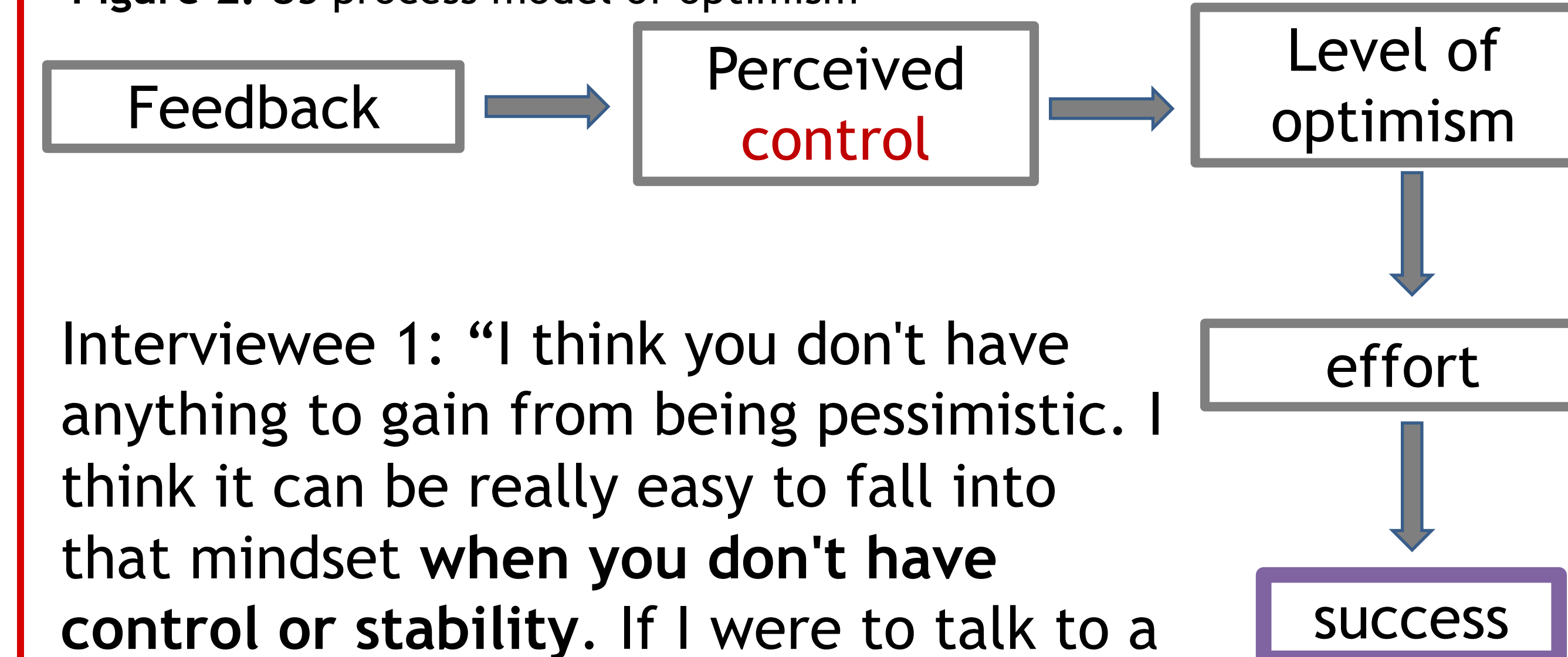
### Method

- Part and full-time employees from the US (N=13) and China (N=16).
- Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glazer & Strauss, 1967); an iterative process of conducting interviews and revising interview protocols.

### Emerging Themes

**US:** Direct control over outcome influences prescription of optimism

Figure 2. US process model of optimism



Interviewee 1: "I think you don't have anything to gain from being pessimistic. I think it can be really easy to fall into that mindset **when you don't have control or stability**. If I were to talk to a coworker... I try to be encouraging and reinforce the ways that they have been successful."

**China:** Sense of responsibility motivates people to prescribe optimism *\*translated from mandarin\**

Interviewee 15: "To put it another way, I don't look at the results, I **just have this optimistic outlook for work.**"

Interviewee 6: "When you encounter so many difficulties, you can still face them **optimistically** and be convinced that **you can overcome all this...** This is stemmed from a **sense of responsibility to everyone...** The eyes of the family, employees, managers, customers, and the board of directors are all looking at you..."



Figure 3. Chinese process model of optimism