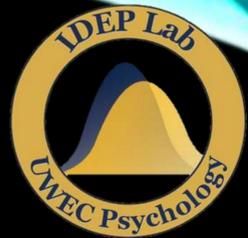




SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE FOCUSING ILLUSION



Casey R. Bloechl, Katie A. Plamann, and April Bleske-Rechek
University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

BACKGROUND

- The term *focusing illusion* has been used to describe the tendency for people's general judgments to be influenced by focusing their attention on a specific domain.^{1,2}
- This effect has been observed in a variety of contexts. For example, when people report how satisfied they are with their dating life, their subsequent reports of their general life satisfaction are positively correlated with what they just said about their dating life. However, when the questions are asked in reverse order (life satisfaction and then dating satisfaction), the two responses are not correlated.² People's judgments of their general life satisfaction have been influenced by previously drawing their attention to various other aspects of their life, such as where they live (WI vs. CA),¹ how much money they make,³ and satisfaction with their physical health.⁴

OBJECTIVES

- In the current study, we aimed to document the focusing illusion in four contexts. We aimed to manipulate people's perceptions of their general life happiness by drawing their attention to their relative mate value, ambition, physical attractiveness, and number of short-term sex partners. We generated the following predictions:
- For both men and women, higher levels of reported romantic interest from others would be followed by higher reported levels of life happiness.
- For men in particular, a higher self-perceived level of ambition and more short-term sex partners would be followed by higher reported levels of life happiness.
- For women in particular, a higher self-perceived level of physical attractiveness would be followed by higher reported levels of life happiness.
- For each of these domains, we expected no association between the domain-specific judgment and life happiness when life happiness was reported first (control conditions).

METHOD

- We surveyed a total of 318 UWEC undergraduates (125 M, 193F) in various locales across campus (e.g., the student union).
- The study was a 2 (question order) x 2 (participant sex) x 4 (domain of self-evaluation) between-subjects expericorr design. The dependent variable was general life happiness (seven-point scale ranging from *Life sucks* to *I love my life*).
- The paper-and-pencil questionnaire was one page in length. We included several filler questions (neutral content) before and after our primary variables of interest.

PREDICTED AND ACTUAL RESULTS

MATE VALUE:

In the past month, how many people have been romantically or sexually interested in you?

	Control Condition: <i>Life happiness, then Mate value</i>		Focusing Condition: <i>Mate value, then Life happiness</i>	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Prediction:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r > 0$	$r > 0$
Actual:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$

We predicted that in the focusing condition, when people reported how many people had recently taken romantic interest in them and then reported their life happiness, their happiness would be positively correlated with what they had previously reported about romantic interest from others. We did not find support for this prediction.

AMBITION:

Compared to your same sex peers, how ambitious are you?

	Control Condition: <i>Life happiness, then Ambition</i>		Focusing Condition: <i>Ambition, then Life happiness</i>	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Prediction:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r > 0$	$r = 0$
Actual:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$

We predicted that in the focusing condition, when men evaluated their ambition and then reported their life happiness, their happiness would be positively correlated with what they had previously reported about their ambition. We did not find support for this prediction.

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS:

Compared to your same sex peers, how physically attractive are you?

	Control Condition: <i>Life happiness, then Attractiveness</i>		Focusing Condition: <i>Attractiveness, then Life happiness</i>	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Prediction:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r > 0$
Actual:	$r = 0$	$r > 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$

We predicted that in the focusing condition, when women evaluated their attractiveness and then reported their life happiness, their happiness would be positively correlated with what they had previously reported about their attractiveness. We did not find support for this prediction.

NUMBER OF SEX PARTNERS:

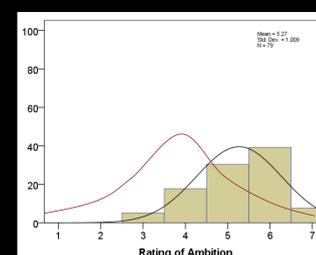
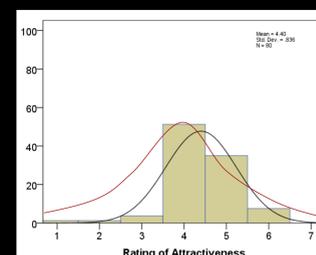
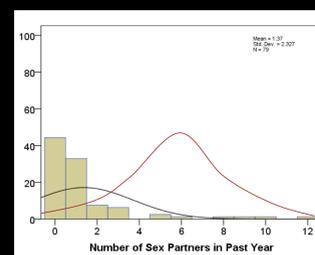
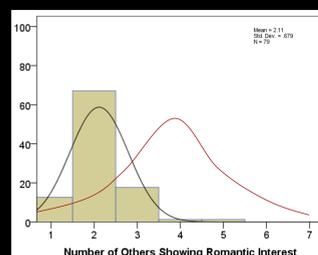
How many different sex partners have you had in the past year?

	Control Condition: <i>Life happiness, then # of Sex partners</i>		Focusing Condition: <i># of Sex partners, then Life happiness</i>	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Prediction:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r > 0$	$r = 0$
Actual:	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$	$r = 0$

We predicted that in the focusing condition, when men reported their number of sex partners and then reported their life happiness, their happiness would be positively correlated with what they had previously reported about their number of sex partners. We did not find support for this prediction.

EXPLAINING THE RESULTS

In summary, we found no evidence of the focusing illusion. Because the focusing illusion is a well-established phenomenon, we pursued methodological explanations for our null results. Below we display a likely explanation: Participants' self-evaluations in the four focusing domains were very limited in variability. The vast majority of participants (in their respective conditions) reported romantic interest from a couple of people; the vast majority reported having had 0 or 1 sex partners; and the vast majority perceived themselves to be at least average in ambition and attractiveness. If everyone felt similarly (and positively) about themselves, then we had no variability to capitalize on when pursuing correlations between self-evaluations and happiness with life.



DISCUSSION

- We designed this study to determine whether asking men and women to evaluate themselves in specific domains would prime them to use (focus on) that specific evaluation when subsequently reporting their life happiness. We expected that men and women would be differentially susceptible to this "focusing illusion," depending on the specific domain of self-evaluation (e.g., attractiveness vs. ambition), but we found no focusing illusion effects for either sex.
- There are multiple reports of focusing illusion effects in the published literature; we wonder if there are many others like us who have failed to detect the effects, or if our study is uniquely flawed by participants' restricted range of responses in their self-evaluations.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Because the logic behind the focusing illusion is strong, and there is substantial published support for this effect, we suspect that our null results are due to limitations in our stimulus materials and participants' range of responses. Hence, we are trying again.
- We are currently in the process of studying people's perceptions of their *psychological well-being* (as opposed to general life happiness), after being primed to think about their exposure to various factors that are widely (but falsely) believed to have negative effects on well-being, such as coming from a divorced family. We expect to report on these results next year.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- This research is supported by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire.
- Thank you to Learning & Technology Services for printing this poster.