INTRODUCTION

A consistent finding often referred to as the depressive realism phenomenon finds that mildly depressed individuals relative to nondepressed individuals are more accurate in judging their degree of control in a task (Alloy, Abramson, & Vasu, 1981; Musson & Alloy, 1987). These findings emerge mostly from experimental studies conducted almost exclusively in a laboratory setting (Alloy & Abramson, 1988). As a result, while the aforementioned findings have been theoretically interesting, their implications for the prevention and treatment of depression has remained unclear (Alloy & Abramson, 1988) especially since cognitive therapy of depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979) emphasizes the importance of challenge and disputing biased cognitions and perceptions. In addition, depressive realism has been criticized (Achserman & DelFulbe, 1991) for lacking an objective standard of reality from which to compare depressed and non-depressed persons’ perceptions. Further, the depressive realism phenomenon cannot consistently be shown in clinical depressed samples.

Attributional style refers to the habitual way that individuals assign cause to events. According to the theory in which attribution style is embedded, hopelessness theory (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989), individuals who see negative events as arising from stable and global causes are especially vulnerable to depression in the face of negative life events. Attributional style is assessed via self-report measure called the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson, et al., 1982) or via content analyses of naturally occurring speech also known as the CAVE technique (Peterson et al., 1992).

The current investigation sought to address these concerns by exploring this phenomenon in the context of the hopelessness theory, and by examining the extent to which attributional style of both pessimistic and non-pessimistic participants differed from objective assessments of the same materials made by trained raters, thereby providing the objective standard of reality necessary for investigating this phenomena.

Participants read and rated CAVE statements that were selected on the basis of their objective level of pessimism, as assessed via trained raters. A discrepancy score was computed by subtracting the level of pessimism indicated by the trained raters for each statement from the level of pessimism rated by the participants in the current investigation. Therefore, when either the objectively rated level of pessimism was low and subjectively rated as high, or vice versa, a large discrepancy score (either positive or negative) results, while more accurate assessment by the participants result in small discrepancy scores. This discrepancy score provided our measure of the objective present in their attributional style, and serves as a proxy for reality, insofar as the objective ratings of the CAVE materials serve as our

METHODS

Participants
• 197 undergraduate students
• 42% male, 58% female
• 1% Asian, 12% African American, 82% Caucasian
• 1% Hispanic, 3% Other, 1% Missing
• Participants ranged from 18-48 years of age (M = 19.46, SD = 3.28)

Measures
• Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson, et al., 1982)
• Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, et al., 1996)
• Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE; Peterson, et al., 1992)

RESULTS

To determine if degree of realism differentiated depressed from nondepressed participants and pessimists and optimists, Multivariate ANOVA with BDI (Low/High) and ASQ Pessimism Status (Low/High) as grouping variables and the CAVE discrepancy score as the DV were conducted and found (see Fig. 1):

• Significant main effect for BDI Group, (F(1,197) = 4.03, p = .05, f = .14)
• Significant main effect for ASQ Group, (F(1,197) = 54.57, p < .001, f = .53)
• Non-significant ASQ x BDI Group interaction, (F(1,197) = 3.19, p = .08, f = .13)

Follow-Up Analysis using One-Sample T-Tests on both the High and Low Pessimism Groups individually to determine if their discrepancy score differed from 0 (no discrepancy/perfect objectivity) found:

For the Low Pessimism Group, (t(110) = 4.16, p < .001, d = .79)
For the High Pessimism Group, (t(86) = 8.31, p < .001, d = 1.82)

DISCUSSION

These findings do not support the depressive realism hypothesis that depressed individuals are more objective than nondepressed individuals, in addition:

• Pessimists were found to be less realistic than optimists, and to be biased in favor of viewing events pessimistically
• Optimists were found to be optimistically biased

When both attributional style and depression were considered together, the effect for attributional style on realism was more robust, indicating that there may be a related pessimistic realism effect

Limitations
• Participants consisted of relatively highly-functioning college students, resulting in uncertain generalizability to the public
• The lack of other methods of assessing realism may mean that the results of this study are specific to the assessment methods employed here

Future Studies
• More direct methods of operationalizing realism are in development that can be utilized in future research to increase the validity of the realism construct
• Future research can also improve the construct validity of realism by illustrating relationships with theoretically relevant, extra-test variables
• Replicating the current study utilizing a more representative population, with assessment of clinical depression

REFERENCES


