

Cooperation and competition as social facilitators/inhibitors of attentional focusing in coaction

Simona Lastrego¹, Dominique Muller² & Fabrizio Butera¹

Background

The self-evaluation threat model (SETM, Muller & Butera, 2007) states that in coaction upward comparison elicits an attentional focusing effect. This focusing effect is due to the cognitive overload (Baron, 1986) caused by the threat associated with upward comparison, and refers to focusing on central over peripheral information. Muller and Butera (2007) showed that upward comparison elicited attentional focusing, while downward comparison did not.

Hypothesis

Our study aims at developing the SETM, and tests the hypothesis that upward comparison is indeed more threatening than downward comparison in competitive mindsets, while cooperation is able to reverse the effect: Cooperation allows assimilating the positive traits of a superior coactor, thus reducing the threat. However, this assimilative effect also applies to an inferior coactor, hence creating a threat for self-evaluation.

Materials

In order to measure attentional focusing, Treisman's (1988) illusory conjunction task was used. Higher attentional focusing results in the processing of only central cues and consequently less illusory conjunctions are made.

Procedure

Participants individually performed the task on a computer. Participants responded to a first series of illusory conjunction items. Then, they were informed that in the next phase they would be either in cooperation with or in competition against a coactor. Participants were always given the same bogus score, and coactors had either superior or inferior scores, allegedly based on the results of the first phase. Participants were then asked to perform a second series of illusory conjunction items.

Results

129 participants (111 females and 18 males, mean age = 21.66, $SD = 2.59$) were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

A significant interaction was observed:

$$F(1, 125) = 11.304, p < .002, \eta^2 = .08$$

Significant simple effects were found for both cooperation and competition:

$$F(1, 126) = 4.75, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03 \text{ for cooperation and } F(1, 126) = 7.75, p < .007, \eta^2 = .06 \text{ for competition.}$$

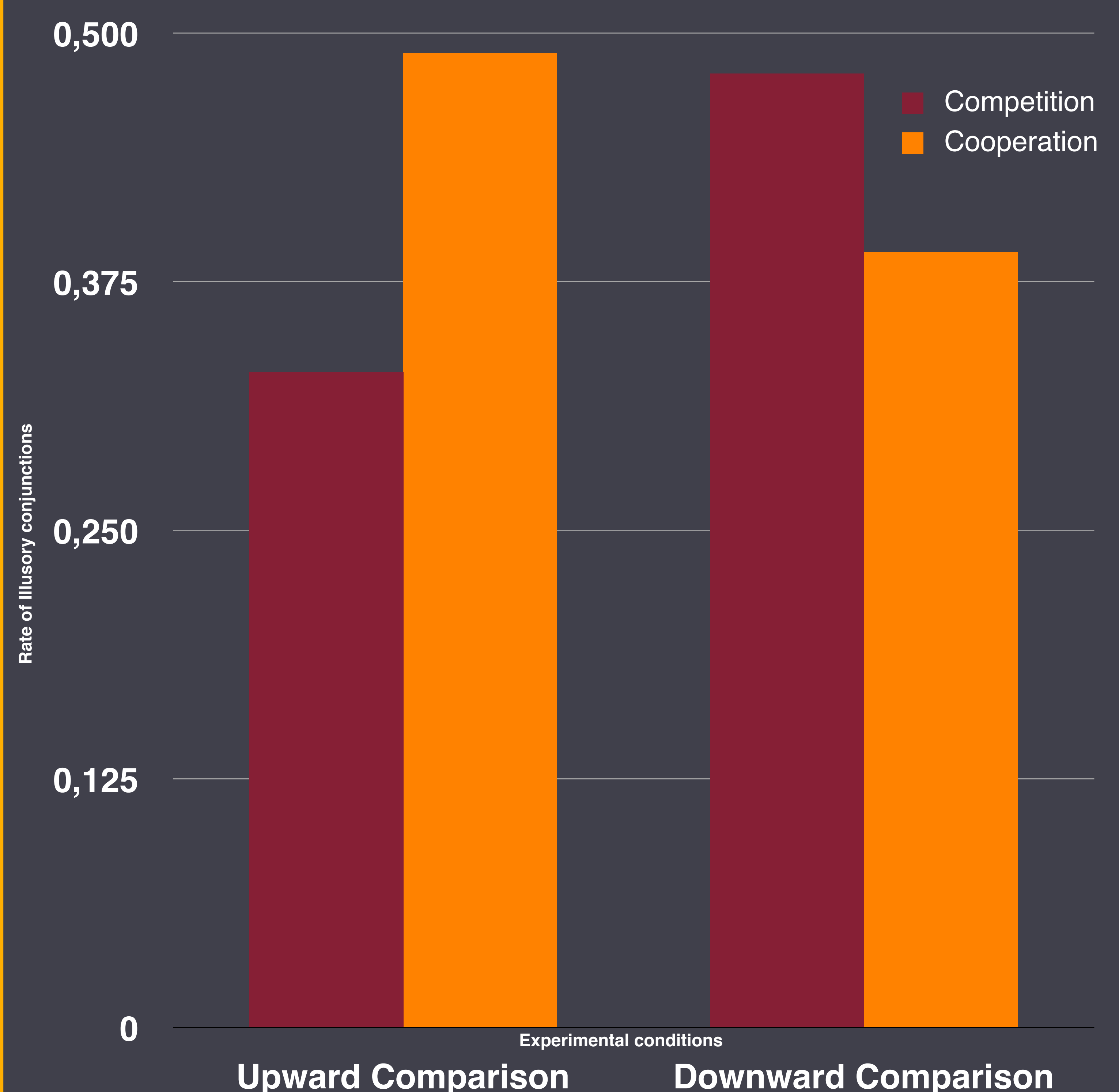


Figure1: Estimated means of illusory conjunctions rate: lower means refer to higher attentional focusing

Discussion

The experiment demonstrates that a superior coactor is not necessarily a threat for self-evaluation and an inferior one is not always self-reassuring: Social comparison direction does not explain the focusing effect per se, but as a function of people's mindset. Hence, during coaction, cooperation and competition can be regarded as social facilitators/inhibitors of attentional focusing.

References

- Baron, R. S. (1986). Distraction-conflict theory: progress and problems. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 19, pp. 1-40). New York: Academic Press.
- Muller, D., & Butera, F. (2007). The focusing effect of self-evaluation threat in coaction and social comparison. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(2), 194-211.
- Stapel, D. A., & Koomen, W. (2005). Competition, cooperation, and the effects of others on me. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(6), 1029-1038.
- Treisman, A. (1988). Features and objects: the fourteenth Bartlett memorial lecture. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 40A, 201-237.