

Personalized and Generalized Social Comparisons

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First, some definitions...

- Whenever you notice how you are similar to or different from another “target” person
 - you are making a *social comparison*
- If you focus on how you compare *particularly* with that one person
 - I call it a *personalized* comparison
- If you focus on how you compare *generally* with some set of others (of which the target is just one example)
 - I call it a *generalized* comparison

Some examples of personalizing vs. generalizing

- Imagine that the person sitting beside you, Sarah, just rushed over from a hotel down the street...
- If you think: “Sarah is staying at a different hotel than I am”
 - you’re making a *Personalized Comparison*
- If you think: “Some people attending this conference are staying at a different hotel”
 - you’re making a *Generalized Comparison*

Another example...

- You notice that while you are wearing dress shoes, Sarah is wearing tennis shoes...
- If you think: “Sarah is dressed more casually than I am”
 - you’re making a *Personalized Comparison*
- If you think: “Other people at this conference are dressed more casually than I am”
 - you’re making a *Generalized Comparison*

One final example...

- Imagine you learn that Sarah makes more money than you do...
- If you think: “Sarah makes more money than I do”
 - you’re making a *Personalized Comparison*
- If you think: “Other people at this conference make more money than I do”
 - you’re making a *Generalized Comparison*

One important implication of this distinction...

- When making a *Generalized Comparison*
 - An informative target is *any* person representative of the population of interest
 - The current target could be exchanged with any equally representative target
 - So, in the preceding examples, Sarah could be switched with anyone else here
- When making a *Personalized Comparison*
 - The population of interest is *that* person
 - So that person is not interchangeable with anyone else

Overview of Studies

- I will describe 3 studies of naturally-occurring social comparisons
 - One study assessed comparisons during a triathlon
 - Two studies assessed comparison in everyday situations
 - All three studies distinguished between personalized and generalized comparisons

To study comparisons during a triathlon, racers were...

- e-mailed a link to an internet questionnaire
 - n =159 completed the questionnaire
- asked to “vividly recall one time during the race when you compared yourself...to another racer...”
- asked about
 - Comparison Target
 - Stranger vs. Known Other
 - Comparison Focus
 - “particularly with that one racer” or “generally with the other racers and that person was just a convenient example”
 - Comparison Direction
 - “I am better-off” vs. “I am worse-off”
 - Post-Comparison Feelings

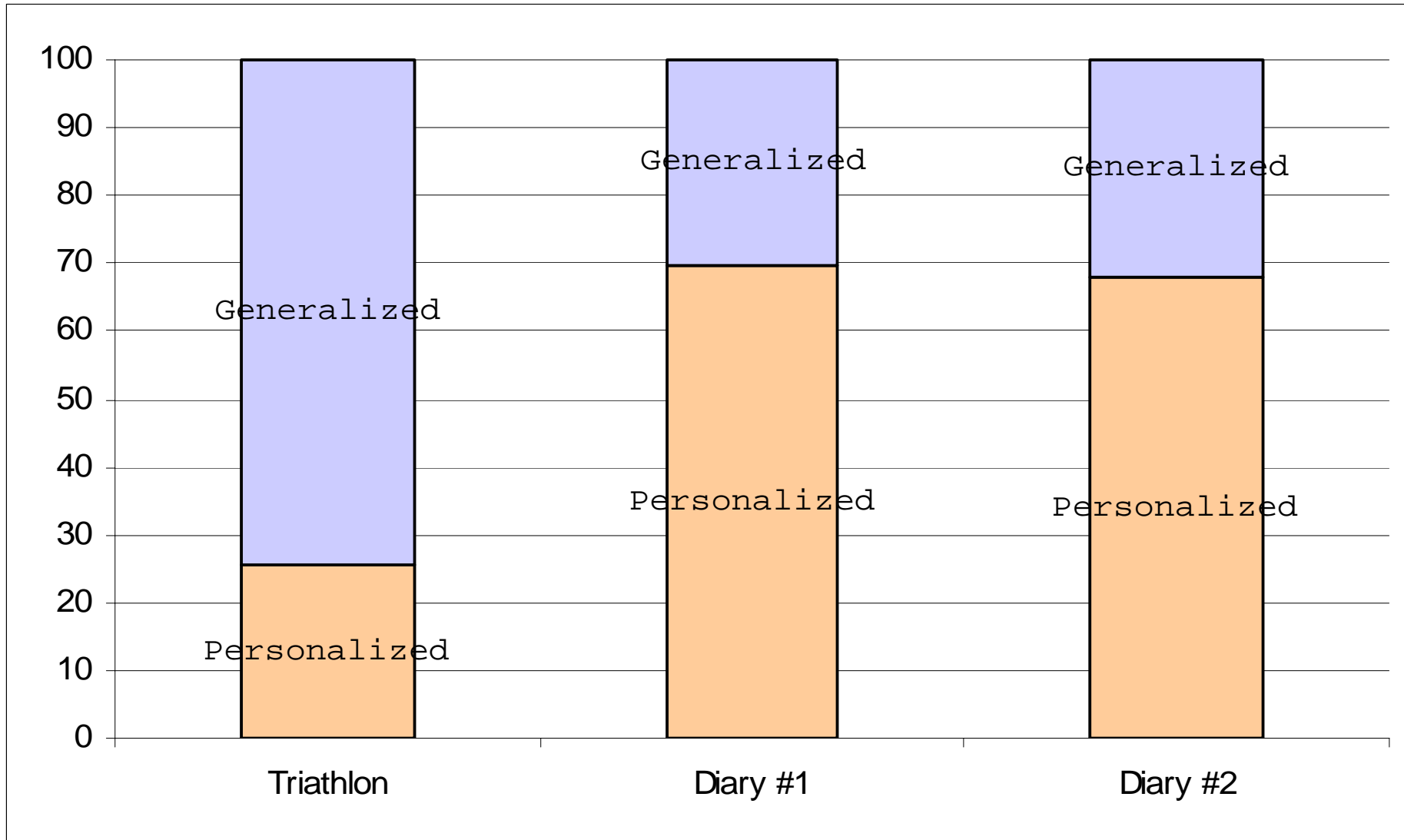
To assess social comparisons in everyday life...

- Students take home packets of “Social Comparison Records”
 - Complete one “each time you notice yourself talking about or thinking about similarities and/or differences between yourself and another person...”
 - Across the two “diary” studies, a total of 266 students completed 2,587 social comparison records

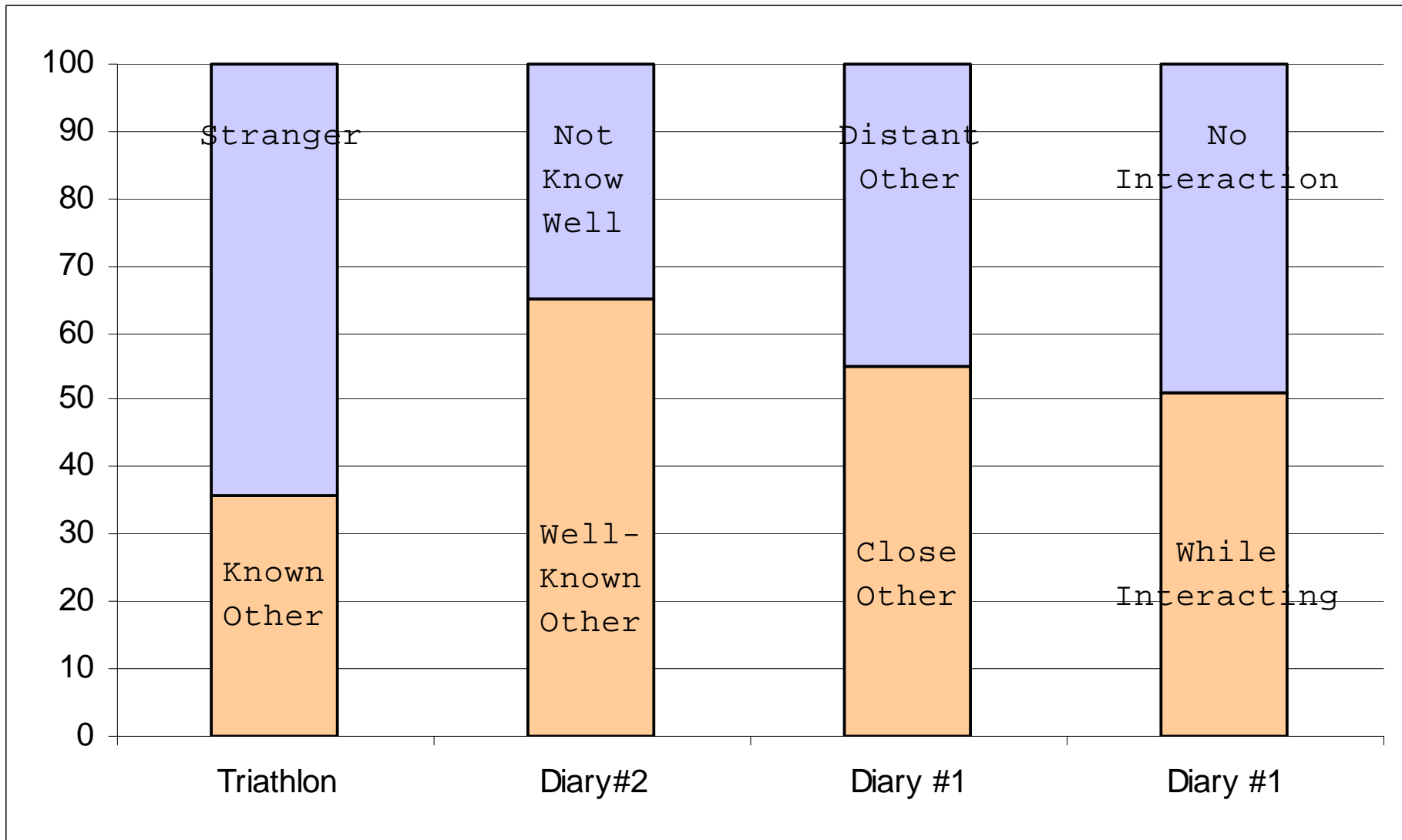
What did these social comparison records ask?

- (1) Comparison Target
 - Diary 1: “friend or close relative” or “acquaintance or stranger”
 - Diary 2: someone “know well” or “do not know well”
- (2) Comparison Focus: “was your main concern...”
 - “How do I compare particularly with this one person?”
 - “How do I compare generally with some set of others...?”
- (3) Comparison Direction
 - “better-off” or “worse-off”
- (4) Social Contact
 - “Interaction” or “No Interaction (just saw or thought about the person)”
- (5) Post-Comparison Affect

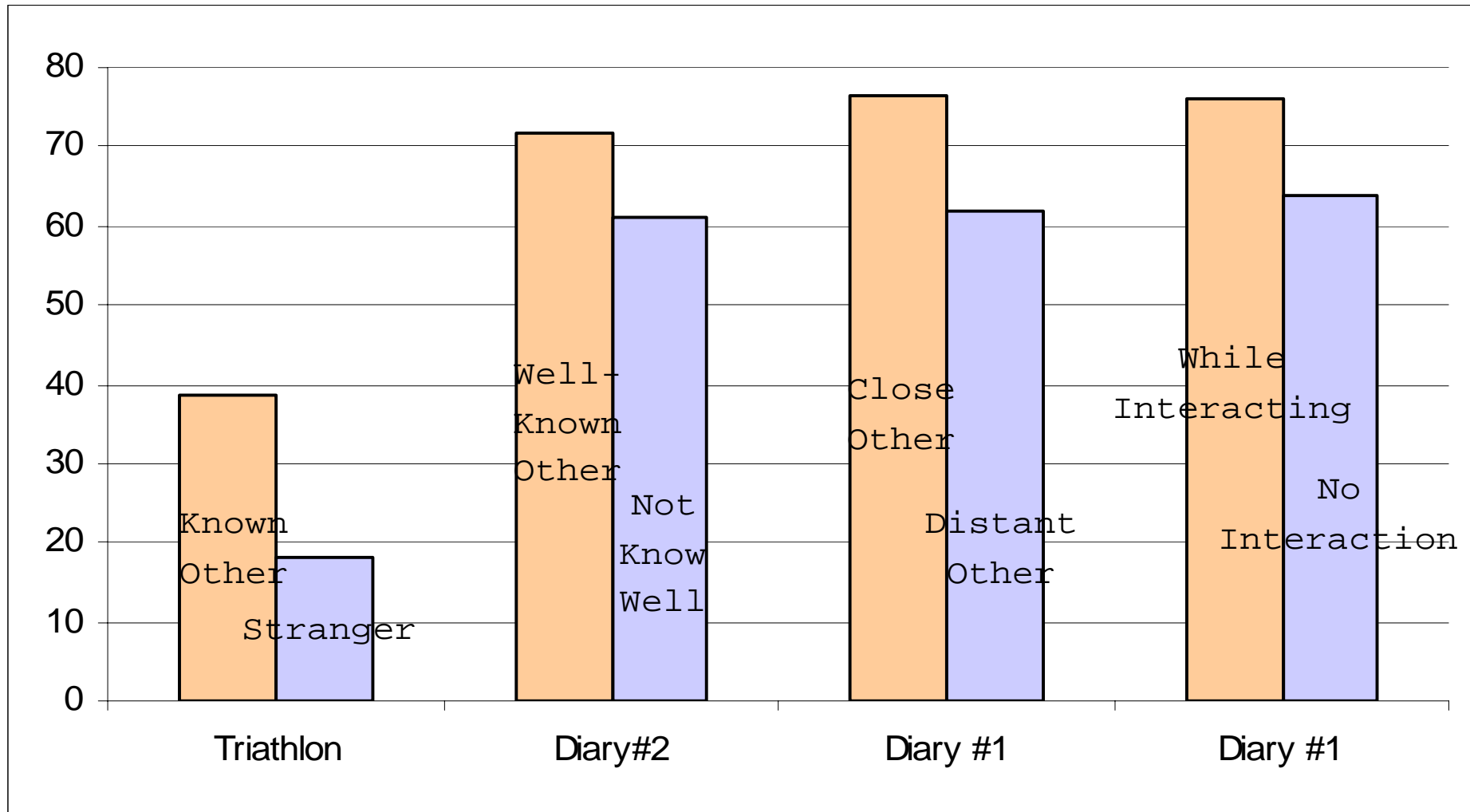
% of Comparisons Personalized v. Generalized



Interpersonal Context for Social Comparisons



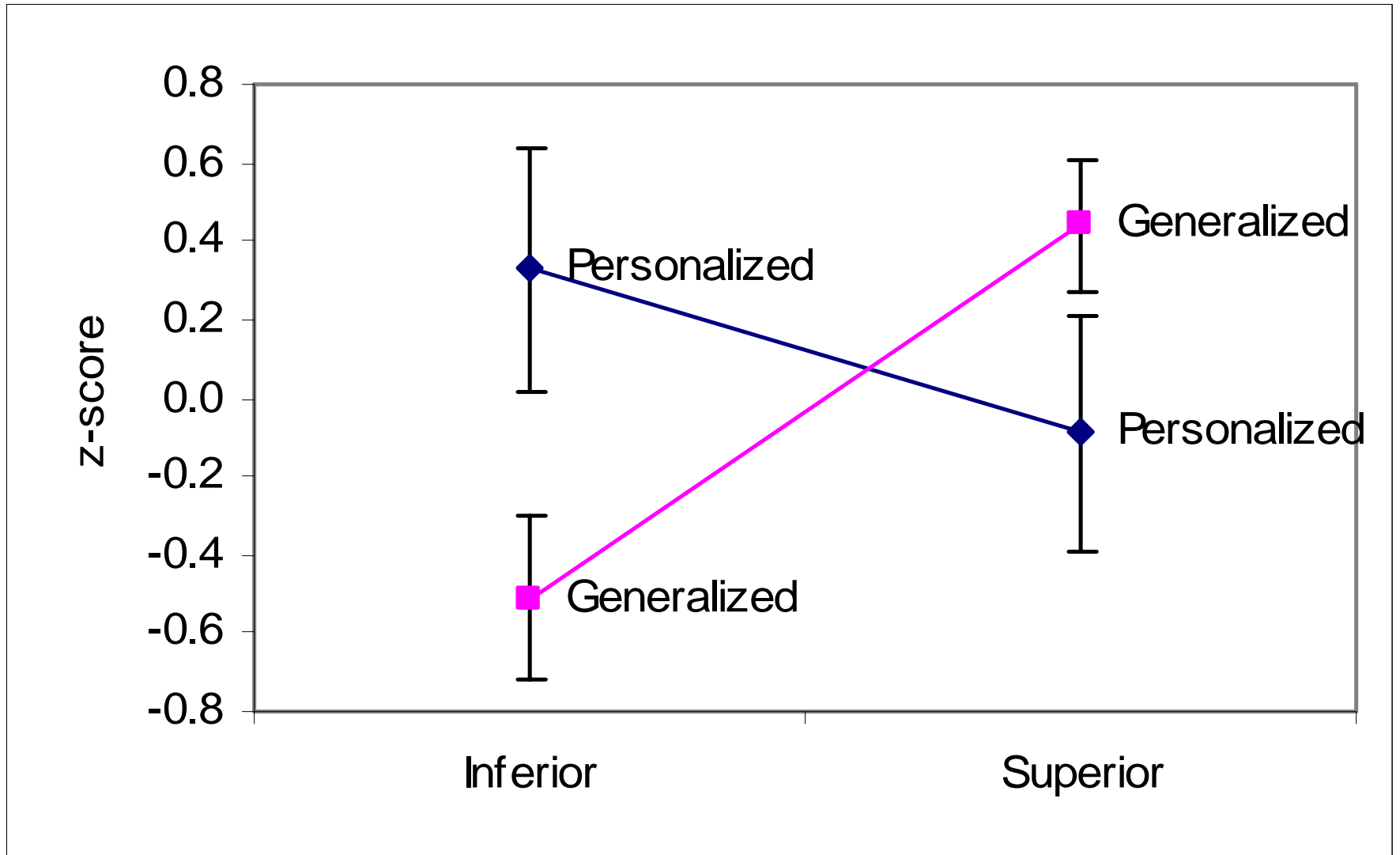
% Personalized as Function of Interpersonal Context



Emotional Consequences of Comparison Focus

- Personalizing a comparison narrows its relevance to one relationship
 - should limit the comparison's emotional consequences
- Generalizing a comparison broadens its relevance to many relationships and situations
 - should expand the comparison's emotional consequences

Post-Comparison Affect (Triathlon Study)



Post-Comparison Affect (Diary Study 1)



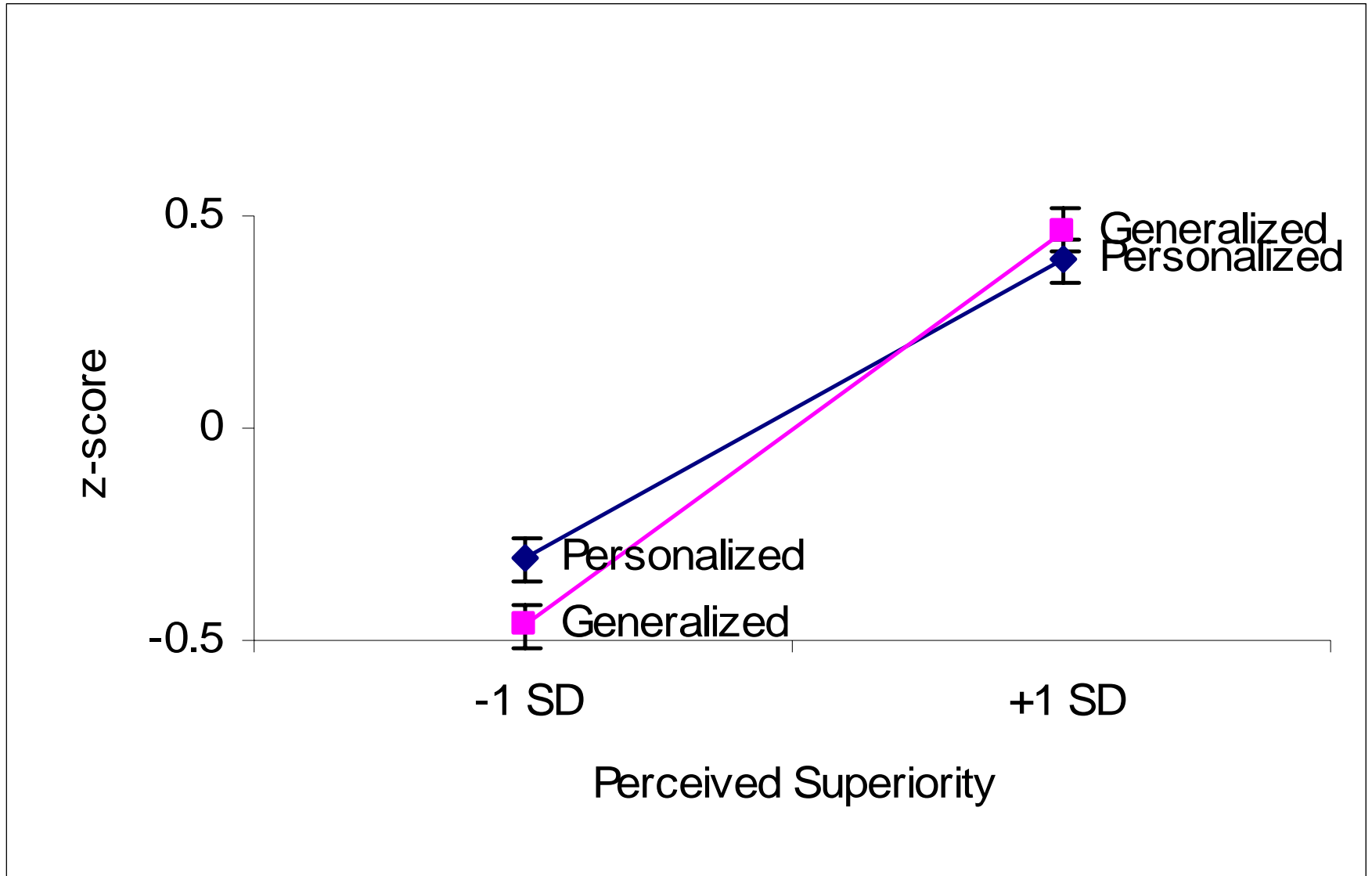
An example of *Interpersonal Feelings*

- Sarah passes you during the triathlon
 - You personalize the comparison
 - “I cannot compete with her—she runs like an Olympian”
 - protects belief that “I’m fast...relative to most people” and thus your general feelings about yourself
- Joe makes a pass at Sarah, not you
 - You personalize the comparison
 - “I cannot compete with her—she looks like a supermodel”
 - protects belief that “I’m attractive...relative to most people” and thus your general feelings about yourself
 - does **not** protect you from *interpersonal* feelings about this specific interpersonal situation.

Diary 2 Distinguished Interpersonal vs. General Feelings

- I asked respondents “How were you feeling...
 - “...*with this person* right after the comparison?”
 - followed by four scales that were combined into an index of *interpersonal feelings*.
 - “...*in general* following the comparison?”
 - followed by eight scales that were combined into an index of *general feelings*.
- I hypothesized that...
 - personalizing a social comparison—by limiting its implications—would decrease its influence on *general feelings* but not on *interpersonal feelings* specific to that self-target relationship

“General” Feelings (Diary Study 2)



Summary of Main Findings

- Consequences
 - Inferiority reduced general feelings more when framed as broadly relevant versus relevant to just one relationship
- Causes
 - Personalized comparisons more likely during interactions and when target was close or well-known
 - such experiences heighten interest in self-target relationship
- Prevalence
 - Personalizing > Generalizing in everyday situations
 - where most comparisons were with close others and over half were during interactions
 - Generalizing > Personalizing during a triathlon
 - where most comparisons were with strangers and probably none involved face-to-face interactions

Implications for studying social comparisons

- Social comparison research has ignored personalized comparisons, assuming that when you compare you are...
 - seeking information that transcends any particular self-other relationship
 - viewing targets as interchangeable sources of information
- In laboratory studies the others are anonymous strangers
 - If they simply exist as a set of scores, then you will treat them as interchangeable sources of information
 - Laboratory studies have studied generalized rather than personalized comparisons, which may limit their applicability to the interpersonal contexts in which most comparisons occur

Because outside the lab...

- Comparison targets often are people with whom we have continuing and consequential relationships
- Your interest in the target is not rational but *personal*
- The distinction between personalized and generalized comparisons is critical for understanding how people experience social comparisons in their everyday lives.