
The Future of Optimism

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Recent theoretical discussions of optimism as an inherent aspect of human nature converge with empirical investigations of optimism as an individual difference to show that optimism can be a highly beneficial psychological characteristic linked to good mood, perseverance, achievement, and physical health. Questions remain about optimism as a research topic and more generally as a societal value. Is the meaning of optimism richer than its current conceptualization in cognitive terms? Are optimism and pessimism mutually exclusive? What is the relationship between optimism and reality, and what are the costs of optimistic beliefs that prove to be wrong? How can optimism be cultivated? How does optimism play itself out across different cultures? Optimism promises to be one of the important topics of interest to positive social science, as long as it is approached in an even-handed way.

Over the years, optimism has had at best a checkered reputation. From Voltaire's (1759) Dr. Pangloss, who blathered that we live in the best of all possible worlds, to Porter's (1913) Pollyanna, who celebrated every misfortune befalling herself and others, to politicians who compete vigorously to see who can best spin embarrassing news into something wonderful, so-called optimism has often given thoughtful people pause. Connotations of naivete and denial have adhered to the notion. In recent years, however, optimism has become a more respectable stance, even among the sophisticated.

Research by a number of psychologists has documented diverse benefits of optimism and concomitant drawbacks of pessimism. Optimism, conceptualized and assessed in a variety of ways, has been linked to positive mood and good morale; to perseverance and effective problem solving; to academic, athletic, military, occupational, and political success; to popularity; to good health; and even to long life and freedom from trauma. Pessimism, in contrast, foreshadows depression, passivity, failure, social estrangement, morbidity, and mortality. These lines of research are surprisingly uniform, so much so that an optimism bandwagon has been created, within psychology as well as the general public (Gillham, in press). We see an interest in how optimism can be encouraged among the young and how pessimism can be reversed among the old. The future of optimism appears rosy indeed. Or does it?

I begin this article with a review of what psychologists have learned about optimism, but my eventual purpose is to discuss its future both as a research interest of psychologists and as a social value. I believe that these futures are

entwined, perhaps too much so. Optimism as a research topic has flourished in the contemporary United States precisely while people in general have become more hopeful about the future.

The danger of this coupling is twofold. First, some of the documented benefits of optimism—at least as typically studied—may be bounded. Optimism in some circumstances can have drawbacks and costs, although researchers rarely look for these qualifying conditions. Second, even if it needs to be contextualized, optimism as a research topic deserves to be more than a fad. A sophisticated optimism can be quite beneficial to individuals in trying circumstances, and it behooves psychologists to learn as much as possible about the topic right now, when society supports this interest, so that these lessons can be deployed in other times and places where they can do the most good.

I also comment on the recent call for a “positive” social science. To paraphrase Seligman (1998), psychology should be as focused on strength as on weakness, as interested in resilience as in vulnerability, and as concerned with the cultivation of wellness as with the remediation of pathology. A close look at optimism provides some insights into how to guide this redirection of psychology so that it does justice to the mandate and avoids the “everything is beautiful” approach of humanistic psychology in the 1960s. A positive psychology should not hold up Dr. Pangloss or Pollyanna as role models.

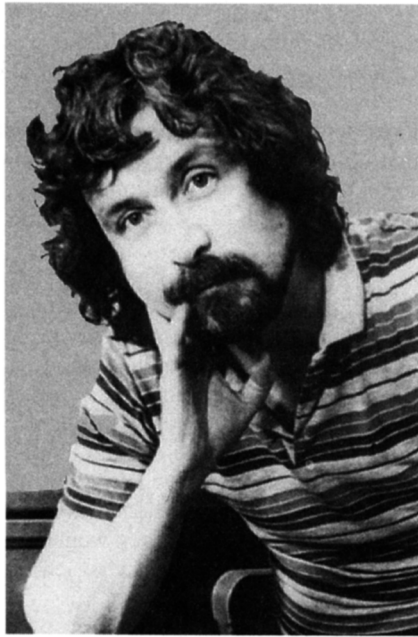
What Is Optimism?

A useful definition of optimism was offered by anthropologist Lionel Tiger (1979): “a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future—one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure” (p. 18). An important implication of this definition, one drawn out by Tiger, is that there can be no single or objective optimism, at least as characterized by its content, because what is considered optimism depends on what the individual regards as desirable. Optimism is predicated on evaluation—on given affects and emotions, as it were.

Contemporary approaches usually treat optimism as a cognitive characteristic—a goal, an expectation, or a causal

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attribution—which is sensible so long as we remember that the belief in question concerns future occurrences about which individuals have strong feelings. Optimism is not simply cold cognition, and if we forget the emotional flavor that pervades optimism, we can make little sense of the fact that optimism is both motivated and motivating. Indeed, people may well need to feel optimistic about matters. We should not be surprised that optimism and pessimism can have defensive aspects as well as ego-enhancing ones (cf. Norem & Cantor, 1986).

Along these lines, we can ask whether people can be generically optimistic, that is, hopeful without specific expectations. Although at odds with conventional definitions, the possibility of free-floating optimism deserves scrutiny. Some people readily describe themselves as optimistic yet fail to endorse expectations consistent with this view of themselves. This phenomenon may merely be a style of self-presentation, but it may additionally reflect the emotional and motivational aspects of optimism without any of the cognitive aspects. Perhaps extraversion is related to this cognitively shorn version of optimism.

Optimism as Human Nature

Discussions of optimism take two forms. In the first, it is posited to be an inherent part of human nature, to be either praised or decried. Early approaches to optimism as human nature were decidedly negative. Writers as diverse as Sophocles and Nietzsche argued that optimism prolongs human suffering: It is better to face the hard facts of reality. This negative view of positive thinking lies at the heart of Freud's influential writings on the subject.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1928) decided that optimism was widespread but illusory. According to Freud, optimism helps make civilization possible, particu-

larly when institutionalized in the form of religious beliefs about an afterlife. However, optimism comes with a cost: the denial of our instinctual nature and hence the denial of reality. Religious optimism compensates people for the sacrifices necessary for civilization and is at the core of what Freud termed the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.

Freud proposed that optimism is part of human nature but only as a derivative of the conflict between instincts and socialization. He thought some individuals—Freud mentioned the educated and in particular neurologists—did not need the illusion of optimism, although the masses were best left with their “neurosis” intact and the belief that God was a benevolent father who would shepherd them through life and beyond. Only with this belief and its associated fear that God would retaliate against them if they transgressed would people be law-abiding. According to Freud, a rational prohibition against murder is not compelling to the masses. It is more persuasive to assert that the prohibition comes directly from God.

As psychodynamic ideas became popular, Freud's formula equating (religious) optimism and illusion had widespread impact. Although no mental health professional asserted that extreme pessimism should be the standard of health—pessimism of this sort was presumably due to fixation at an early psychosexual stage—most theorists pointed to the *accurate* perception of reality as the epitome of good psychological functioning: “The perception of reality is called mentally healthy when what the individual sees corresponds to what is actually there” (Jahoda, 1958, p. 6). Similar statements were offered by the entire gamut of influential psychologists and psychiatrists from the 1930s through the 1960s: Allport, Erikson, Fromm, Maslow, Menninger, and Rogers, among many others (see Snyder, 1988, and Taylor, 1989, for thorough reviews).

Never mind that one cannot know what is “actually there” in the future until it happens, and never mind that Freud in the first place acknowledged that an illusory belief was not necessarily a false one. “Reality testing” became the defining feature of the healthy individual, and psychotherapists took as their task the need to expose people to reality, however painful it might be. Only the most modest expectations about the future could pass muster as realistic, and anything else was regarded as denial (cf. Akhtar, 1996).

Matters began to change in the 1960s and 1970s in light of research evidence showing that most people are not strictly realistic or accurate in how they think. Cognitive psychologists documented an array of shortcuts that people take as they process information. Margaret Matlin and David Stang (1978) surveyed hundreds of studies showing that language, memory, and thought are selectively positive. For example, people use more positive words than negative words, whether speaking or writing. In free recall, people produce positive memories sooner than negative ones. Most people evaluate themselves positively, and in particular more positively than they evaluate others. Apparently, in our minds, we are all children of Lake Wobegon, all of whom are above average.

The skeptical advocate of a harsh reality could dismiss findings like these as demonstrating little except how widespread optimistic illusions are, but it proved more difficult to dismiss results showing that psychologically healthy people in particular showed the positivity bias. Richard Lazarus (1983) described what he called *positive denial* and showed that it can be associated with well-being in the wake of adversity. Aaron Beck (1967) began to develop his influential cognitive approach to depression and its treatment, a cornerstone of which was the assertion that depression was a cognitive disorder characterized by negative views about the self, experience, and the future—that is, by pessimism and hopelessness.

Early in the course of his theory development, Beck was still influenced by the prevailing view of mental health as grounded in the facts of the matter, because he described people with depression as illogical. By implication, people who are not depressed are logical—that is, rational information processors—although there was no good reason for this assumption. Part of cognitive therapy is designing experiments to test negative views, but Beck's procedures are geared toward guaranteeing the results of these experiments, and cognitive therapists never attempt to falsify the occasionally positive view that a person with depression might bring to therapy (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). In any event, Beck (1991) more recently backed off from this view of people who are not depressed being logical to allow that they can bring a positive bias toward their ongoing experience and expectations for the future.

Anthony Greenwald's (1980) statement likening human nature to a totalitarian regime was another turning point in how optimism was regarded by psychologists. According to Greenwald, the self can be regarded as an organization of knowledge about one's history and identity. This organization is biased by information-control strategies analogous to those used by totalitarian political regimes. Everyone engages in an ongoing process of fabricating and revising his or her own personal history. The story each of us tells about ourselves is necessarily ego-centric: Each of us is the central figure in our own narratives. Each of us takes credit for good events and eschews responsibility for bad events. Each of us resists changes in how we think. In sum, the ego maintains itself in the most self-flattering way possible, and it has at its disposal all of the psychological mechanisms documented by Matlin and Stang (1978).

Another turning point in the view of optimism was Shelley Taylor and Jonathan Brown's (1988) literature review of research on positive illusions. They described a variety of studies showing that people are biased toward the positive and that the only exceptions to this rule are individuals who are anxious or depressed. Taylor (1989) elaborated on these ideas in her book *Positive Illusions*, where she proposed that people's pervasive tendency to see themselves in the best possible light is a sign of well-being. She distinguished optimism as an illusion from optimism as a delusion: Illusions are responsive, albeit reluctantly, to reality, whereas delusions are not.

The strongest statement that optimism is an inherent aspect of human nature is found in Tiger's (1979) book *Optimism: The Biology of Hope*. He located optimism in the biology of our species and argued that it is one of our most defining and adaptive characteristics. Tiger proposed that optimism is an integral part of human nature, selected for in the course of evolution, that is developing along with our cognitive abilities and indeed the human capacity for culture.

Tiger even speculated that optimism drove human evolution. Because optimism entails thinking about the future, it first appeared when people began to think ahead. Once people began anticipating the future, they could imagine dire consequences, including their own mortality. Something had to develop to counteract the fear and paralysis that these thoughts might entail, and that something was optimism. By this view, optimism is inherent in the makeup of people, not a derivative of some other psychological characteristic. Tiger went on to characterize optimism as easy to think, easy to learn, and pleasing—what modern evolutionary psychologists describe as an evolved psychological mechanism (Buss, 1991).

Optimism as an Individual Difference

At the same time optimism as human nature was being discussed in positive terms by theorists like Lazarus, Beck, Taylor, and Tiger, other psychologists who were interested in individual differences began to address optimism as a characteristic people possess to varying degrees. These two approaches are compatible. Our human nature provides a baseline optimism, of which individuals show more versus less: "In dealing with natural systems the shortest analytical distance between two points is a normal curve" (Tiger, 1979, p. 162). Our experiences influence the degree to which we are optimistic or pessimistic.

There are numerous treatments of optimism as an individual difference. A definitive history of their antecedents is beyond the scope of this article (see Peterson & Park, 1998, for a more thorough discussion), but certainly we should acknowledge several intellectual precursors, starting with Alfred Adler's (1910/1964, 1927) fictional finalism, based on Vaihinger's (1911) "as-if" philosophy. Kurt Lewin's (1935, 1951) field theory and George Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory provided influential frameworks for understanding how beliefs—optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between—channeled people's behavior. Julian Rotter's (1954, 1966) social learning theory and especially his generalized expectations (locus of control and trust) legitimized an approach to personality in terms of broad expectancies about the future.

Also important in leading to psychology's interest in optimism as an individual difference was the waning of traditional stimulus-response (S-R) approaches to learning and their replacement with cognitive accounts emphasizing expectancies (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). According to S-R accounts, learning entails the acquisition of particular motor responses in particular situations. Learning by this view entails the forging of associations between stimuli and responses, and the more closely these are linked

together in experience (contiguity), the more likely learning is to occur. Under the sway of behaviorism, learning was thought to have no central (cognitive) representation.

Used in arguments against S–R views of learning were findings that the associations acquired in conditioning are strengthened not by contiguity per se but by contingency: the degree to which stimuli provide new information about responses (Rescorla, 1968). S–R theory stresses only temporal contiguity between the response and the reinforcer, viewing the individual as trapped by the momentary co-occurrences of events. If a response is followed by a reinforcer, it is strengthened even if there is no real (causal) relationship between them. In contrast, the contingency view of learning proposes that individuals are able to detect cause–effect relationships, separating momentary non-causal relationships from more enduring true ones (Wasserman & Miller, 1997).

So, learning at its essence entails the discovery of “what leads to what” (Tolman, 1932). Because learning of this sort necessarily extends over time, it is sensible to view it in central (cognitive) terms. Although there is disagreement about the fine detail of these central representations, it is clear that contingency learning is a critically important psychological process linked to subsequent motivation, cognition, and emotion. Most theorists in this tradition have opted to regard the representation of contingency learning as an expectation to explain how it is generalized across situations and projected across time. As explained later, most approaches to optimism as an individual difference adopt this approach, in which optimism is regarded as a generalized expectation that influences any and all psychological processes in which learning is involved.

I briefly survey several of the currently popular approaches to optimism as an individual difference. It is no coincidence that each has an associated self-report questionnaire measure that lends itself to efficient research. The correlates of these cognates of optimism have therefore been extensively investigated. Research is uniform in showing that optimism, however it is measured, is linked to desirable characteristics: happiness, perseverance, achievement, and health.

Most studies have been cross-sectional, but the demonstrated correlates are usually interpreted as consequences of optimism. Relatively little attention has been paid to the origins of this individual difference and in particular to the distinct possibility that its putative outcomes are alternatively or additionally its determinants. Relatively little attention has been paid to the larger web of belief in which optimism resides (Quine & Ullian, 1978). Further, relatively little attention has been paid to why optimism has such a wide array of correlates. Indeed, optimism is what I call a Velcro construct, to which everything sticks for reasons that are not always obvious.

Dispositional optimism. Michael Scheier and Charles Carver (1992) have studied a personality variable they identify as *dispositional optimism*: the global expectation that good things will be plentiful in the future and bad things, scarce. Scheier and Carver’s overriding perspective is in terms of how people pursue goals, defined as

desirable values. To them, virtually all realms of human activity can be cast in goal terms, and people’s behavior entails the identification and adoption of goals and the regulation of actions vis-à-vis these goals. Therefore, they refer to their approach as a self-regulatory model (Carver & Scheier, 1981).

Optimism enters into self-regulation when people ask themselves about impediments to achieving the goals they have adopted. In the face of difficulties, do people nonetheless believe that goals can be achieved? If so, they are optimistic; if not, they are pessimistic. Optimism leads to continued efforts to attain the goal, whereas pessimism leads to giving up.

Scheier and Carver (1985) measured optimism (vs. pessimism) with a brief self-report questionnaire called the Life Orientation Test (LOT). Representative items from this test, with which respondents agree or disagree, include the following:

1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.
2. If something can go wrong for me it will. [reverse-scored]

Positive expectations are usually combined with (reverse-scored) negative expectations, and the resulting measure is investigated with respect to health, happiness, and coping with adversity (e.g., Carver et al., 1993; Scheier & Carver, 1987; Scheier et al., 1989; Strack, Carver, & Blaney, 1987). Results show that dispositional optimism is linked to desirable outcomes and in particular to active and effective coping (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986).

Explanatory style. Martin E. P. Seligman and his colleagues have approached optimism in terms of an individual’s characteristic explanatory style: how he or she explains the causes of bad events (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). Those who explain bad events in a circumscribed way, with external, unstable, and specific causes, are described as optimistic, whereas those who favor internal, stable, and global causes are described as pessimistic.

The notion of explanatory style emerged from the attributional reformulation of the learned helplessness model (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Briefly, the original learned helplessness model proposed that after experiencing uncontrollable aversive events, animals and people become helpless—passive and unresponsive—presumably because they have “learned” that there is no contingency between actions and outcomes (Maier & Seligman, 1976). This learning is represented as a generalized expectancy that future outcomes will be unrelated to actions. It is this generalized expectation of response–outcome independence that produces later helplessness.

Explanatory style was added to the helplessness model to better account for the boundary conditions of human helplessness following uncontrollability. When is helplessness general, and when is it circumscribed? People who encounter a bad event ask “why?” Their causal attribution determines how they respond to the event. If it is a stable (long-lasting) cause, helplessness is thought to be chronic. If it is a pervasive (global) cause, helplessness is thought to be widespread. If it is an internal cause, self-esteem is thought to suffer.

All things being equal, people have a habitual way of explaining bad events—an explanatory style—and this explanatory style is posited to be a distal influence on helplessness following adversity (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Explanatory style is typically measured with a self-report questionnaire called the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), which presents respondents with hypothetical events involving themselves and asks them to provide “the one major cause” of each event if it were to happen to them (Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982). The respondents then rate these provided causes along dimensions of internality, stability, and globality. Ratings are combined, although bad-event ratings and good-event ratings are kept separate. Explanatory style based on bad events is usually independent of explanatory style for good events. Explanatory style based on bad events usually has more robust correlates than explanatory style based on good events, although correlations are typically in the opposite directions (Peterson, 1991).

A second way of measuring explanatory style is with a content analysis procedure—the Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE)—that allows written or spoken material to be scored for naturally occurring causal explanations (Peterson, Schulman, Castellon, & Seligman, 1992). Researchers identify explanations for bad events, “extract” them, and present them to judges who rate them along the scales of the ASQ. The CAVE technique makes possible after-the-fact longitudinal studies, so long as spoken or written material can be located from early in the lives of the individuals for whom long-term outcomes of interest are known.

Remember that the generalized expectation of response–outcome independence is hypothesized as being the proximal cause of helplessness, even though research in this tradition has rarely looked at this mediating variable. Rather, researchers measure explanatory style and correlate it with outcomes thought to revolve around helplessness: depression, illness, and failure in academic, athletic, and vocational realms. Invariably, an optimistic explanatory style is associated with good outcomes (Peterson & Park, 1998).

As explanatory style research has progressed and theory has been modified, the internality dimension has become of less interest. It has more inconsistent correlates than do stability or globality, it is less reliably assessed, and there are theoretical grounds for doubting that it has a direct impact on expectations per se (Peterson, 1991). Indeed, internality may well conflate self-blame and self-efficacy, which would explain why it fares poorly in empirical research. In a modification of the helplessness reformulation, Abramson, Metalsky, and Alloy (1989) emphasized only stability and globality.

The most important recent chapter in helplessness research was the reframing of explanatory style by Seligman (1991) in his book *Learned Optimism*, in which he described how his lifelong interest in what can go wrong with people changed into an interest in what can go right (cf. Seligman, 1975). Research on helplessness was transformed into an interest in what Seligman called optimism,

although he could have called it mastery, effectance, or control. His terminology is justified by the central concern in helplessness theory with expectations, but it is worth emphasizing yet again that these expectations tend not to be explicitly studied.

Peterson, Maier, and Seligman (1993) asserted that everything learned about helplessness (pessimism) informs what we know about optimism, but this statement is glib. Optimism is not simply the absence of pessimism, and well-being is not simply the absence of helplessness. Research on learned optimism (i.e., optimistic explanatory style) will not be as substantial as it might be if it remains focused on the constructs of original interest to helplessness theory. I return to this point later in this article.

On one level, the Scheier and Carver approach is congruent with the Seligman approach. LOT correlates and ASQ/CAVE correlates are strikingly similar, and measures of the two constructs tend to converge when they are—rarely—examined together in the same study. However, a closer look reveals some critical differences. The LOT is a pure measure of expectation, very close to the dictionary definitions of optimism and pessimism. An optimistic expectation leads to the belief that goals can be achieved, although it is neutral with respect to how this will happen. In contrast, the ASQ measure reflects causality, so it is additionally influenced by people’s beliefs about how goals are brought about. Said another way, optimistic explanatory style is more infused with agency than is dispositional optimism.

Hope. These two visions of optimism—expectation and agency—are integrated in a third approach, C. Rick Snyder’s (1994) ongoing studies of hope. Snyder traced the origins of his thinking to earlier work by Averill, Catlin, and Chon (1990) and Stotland (1969), in which hope was cast in terms of people’s expectations that goals could be achieved. According to Snyder’s view, goal-directed expectations are composed of two separable components. The first is agency, and it reflects someone’s determination that goals can be achieved. The second is identified as pathways: the individual’s beliefs that successful plans can be generated to reach goals. The second component is Snyder’s novel contribution, not found in other formulations of optimism as an individual difference.

Hope so defined is measured with a brief self-report scale (Snyder et al., 1996). Representative items, with which respondents agree or disagree, include the following:

1. I energetically pursue my goals. [agency]
2. There are lots of ways around any problem. [pathways]

Responses to items are combined by averaging. Scores have been examined with respect to goal expectancies, perceived control, self-esteem, positive emotions, coping, and achievement, with results as expected (e.g., Curry, Snyder, Cook, Ruby, & Rehm, 1997; Irving, Snyder, & Crowson, 1998).

Issues in Optimism

Let me turn to the future of optimism and focus on issues that deserve attention, by both psychologists and citizens in

general. I also draw out some of the implications of these issues for how we might conduct positive social science. To set the stage for this discussion, I introduce a distinction between two types of optimism (Tiger, 1979).

Little Optimism Versus Big Optimism

Little optimism subsumes specific expectations about positive outcomes: for example, "I will find a convenient parking space this evening." Big optimism refers to—obviously—larger and less specific expectations: for example, "Our nation is on the verge of something great." The big-versus-little optimism distinction reminds us that optimism can be described at different levels of abstraction and, further, that optimism may function differently depending on the level. Big optimism may be a biologically given tendency filled in by culture with a socially acceptable content; it leads to desirable outcomes because it produces a general state of vigor and resilience. In contrast, little optimism may be the product of an idiosyncratic learning history; it leads to desirable outcomes because it predisposes specific actions that are adaptive in concrete situations.

Said another way, the mechanisms linking optimism to outcomes may vary according to the type of optimism in focus. For example, one of the striking correlates of optimism is good health (e.g., Peterson, 1988; Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988; Scheier & Carver, 1987, 1992). This link seems to reflect several different pathways, including immunological robustness (Kamen-Siegel, Rodin, Seligman, & Dwyer, 1991; Scheier et al., 1999; Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998; Udelman, 1982), absence of negative mood (Weisse, 1992), and health-promoting behavior (Peterson, Seligman, Yurko, Martin, & Friedman, 1998). The big-versus-little optimism distinction may help us understand which pathways are involved in given instances of well-being (Peterson & Bossio, 1991). The trajectory of a severe illness such as AIDS or cancer may be better predicted by big optimism working through the immune system and mood, whereas the onset of disease and the likelihood of traumatic injuries may be more influenced by little optimism working through behavior and concrete lifestyle choices (Peterson, Moon, et al., 1998).

What exactly is the relationship between little and big optimism? Empirically, the two are no doubt correlated, but it is possible to imagine someone who is a little optimist but a big pessimist, or vice versa. It is also possible to imagine situations in which big optimism has desirable consequences but little optimism does not, or vice versa. The determinants of the two may be different, and ways of encouraging them may therefore require different strategies.

Researchers need to approach the big-versus-little optimism distinction more deliberately. On the face of it, the dispositional optimism measure of Scheier and Carver (1985) and the hope measure of Snyder et al. (1996) tap big optimism because they ask people to respond to generalizations about the future. In contrast, measures of explanatory style—especially the CAVE technique—seem to get at a smaller optimism because the focus is on specific

causal explanations for concrete events. Studies to date have rarely included more than one optimism measure at a time, and those that do are conducted by researchers more interested in how measures converge than with the possibility that they have different patterns of correlates. The big-versus-little optimism distinction may provide a way of thinking about such differences if they indeed emerge.

Again, What Is Optimism?

In addition to the big-versus-little optimism distinction, there are some other definitional issues that need to be addressed by psychologists. Let me repeat that optimism is not just a cognitive characteristic: It has inherent emotional and motivational components (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1990). Researchers often seem to regard emotion and motivation as outcomes that are separate from optimism per se. At least in the case of big optimism, this assumption may not be warranted.

We ask different questions if we see emotion and motivation as part of big optimism. How does optimism feel? Is it happiness, joy, hypomania, or simply contentment? Is the optimistic person experiencing *flow*: actively engaging in what he or she is doing while not self-consciously mindful (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)? Fredrickson (1998) argued that positive emotions, neglected by psychologists relative to negative emotions, broaden the person's cognitive and behavioral repertoire. Is this true as well for big optimism? We know that optimism is linked to perseverance, but is it associated as well with a good choice of goals, those that lend themselves to pursuit and eventual attainment? As R. M. Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, and Deci (1996) discussed, not all goals are of equal merit for individuals, given their particular psychological makeup and context. Is optimism therefore associated with the choice of goals that facilitate authenticity in this sense? Carver, Reynolds, and Scheier (1994) have begun to investigate these sorts of questions by ascertaining the possible selves of optimists and pessimists.

There are probably activities that satisfy a person's need to be optimistic but are ultimately pointless, the psychological equivalent of junk food. Are video games, the World Wide Web, mystery novels, gambling, and collections of thimbles or matchbooks (or journal article reprints we never read) analogous to empty calories, activities whose pursuit consumes time and energy because they engage optimism but eventually leave us with nothing to show, individually or collectively?

Optimism and Pessimism

Another definitional issue has to do with the relationship between optimism and pessimism. They are usually regarded as mutually exclusive, but surprisingly there is evidence that they are not. For example, the optimism and pessimism items in Scheier and Carver's (1985) LOT prove somewhat independent of one another. This lack of correlation can be regarded as a methodological nuisance, but it is worth considering the possibility that some people expect both good things *and* bad things to be plentiful. Such individuals could be described as having hedonically rich

expectations as opposed to misbehaving on a questionnaire. Are they living life fully, or are they ambivalent and confused? Distinguishing between optimism and pessimism allows an intriguing question to be investigated: Are there effects of optimism above and beyond those of the absence of pessimism (Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997)?

Along these lines, as already noted, explanatory style derived from attributions about bad events is usually independent of explanatory style based on attributions about good events. The former is usually identified as "the" optimistic explanatory style, in part because the correlates are stronger, but a step back reveals this treatment is curious. Attributions about bad events (presumably linked to expectations about such events) are identified as optimistic or pessimistic, whereas attributions about good events are not. One would think it should be just the opposite, a point made by Snyder (1995) when he described explanatory style as a strategy of excuse making. This criticism is blunted—but only somewhat—when internality–externality is removed from the meaning of the construct.

The concern of helplessness theorists with attributions about bad events is explained by the outcomes of historical interest: depression, failure, and illness. Optimism is correlated with their absence, and pessimism, with their presence. Explanatory style research has led to increased understanding of these problematic states. However, one must appreciate that the zero point of these typical outcome measures signifies, respectively, *not* being depressed, *not* failing, and *not* being ill. If we want to extend findings past these zero points to offer conclusions about emotional fulfillment, achievement, and wellness, we may or may not be on firm ground. Perhaps explanatory style based on attributions about good events would then be more relevant. In any event, researchers of positive social science need to study not just independent variables that pertain to strength but also appropriate dependent variables.

Psychological well-being cannot be simply the absence of distress and conflict, any more than physical health is the absence of disease. Discussions of what well-being entails are ongoing in various research and theoretical literatures (e.g., Barsky, 1988; Seeman, 1989), but these have not yet been incorporated into the lines of inquiry concerned with optimism. I recommend that this incorporation take place, and I speculate that big optimism might be a more potent influence on well-being than is little optimism.

In the typical demonstration of learned helplessness, animals or people exposed to aversive events they cannot control show deficits in problem solving relative to research participants exposed to aversive events they can control as well as participants given no prior experience with aversive events; these latter two groups do not differ from one another (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). Prior experience with controllable events confers no apparent benefit. Perhaps this is because the baseline assumption is that control exists, or, to say it another way, individuals are optimistic unless there is a reason not to be.

If the test tasks are changed, however, prior experience with controllable events does have a demonstrable effect: enhanced persistence at a difficult or unsolvable task. Theorists have discussed this opposite manifestation of learned helplessness under such rubrics as learned hopefulness, learned industriousness, learned mastery, learned relevance, and learned resourcefulness (e.g., Eisenberger, 1992; Mackintosh, 1975; Rosenbaum & Jaffe, 1983; Volpicelli, Ulm, Altemor, & Seligman, 1983; Zimmerman, 1990). Outcome measures have to allow the benefit to be manifest.

In choosing appropriate measures, it would be instructive for optimism researchers to turn to the literature on resilience (Anthony & Cohler, 1987). Here we see an interest in children growing up in dire circumstances who not only survive but thrive. Their resilience is only evident if we choose measures that reflect thriving. Resilience depends critically on a supportive relationship with another person. Could the same be true of optimism in the face of adversity? Much of the optimism literature is curiously asocial. Researchers do not even distinguish between private versus public (socially communicated) optimism, which would seem to be an important distinction. Emphasis is quite individualistic, but optimism may be as much an interpersonal characteristic as an individual one.¹

The Reality Basis of Optimism

One more important issue is the relationship of optimism to reality. Optimism can have costs if it is too unrealistic. Consider unrealistic optimism as described by Weinstein (1989) with respect to people's perception of personal risk for illnesses and mishaps. When people are asked to provide a percentage estimate of the likelihood, in comparison with peers, that they will someday experience an illness or injury, most underestimate their risks. The average individual sees himself or herself as below average in risk for a variety of maladies, which of course cannot be.

This phenomenon is appropriately lamented because it may lead people to neglect the basics of health promotion and maintenance. More generally, optimism in the form of wishful thinking can distract people from making concrete plans about how to attain goals (Oettingen, 1996). Unrelenting optimism precludes the caution, sobriety, and conservation of resources that accompany sadness as a normal and presumably adaptive response to disappointment and setback (Nesse & Williams, 1996).

For another example, consider the personality variable of John Henryism (James, Hartnett, & Kalsbeek, 1983; James, LaCroix, Kleinbaum, & Strogatz, 1984). Inspired by the railroad worker of folklore, who won a contest against a steam hammer but died thereafter of a heart

¹ Consider the helping alliance in psychotherapy, which many theorists agree is a necessary condition for any form of treatment to succeed (Frank, 1978). One way to look at the helping alliance is in terms of shared expectations for treatment and its outcome. To the degree that both parties believe therapy will be helpful, it is likely to continue to and indeed be helpful (Priebe & Gruyters, 1993; Tryon & Kane, 1990). In other words, the helping alliance revolves around a dyad-level optimism.

attack, this individual difference reflects the degree to which African Americans believe that they can control all events in their lives solely through hard work and determination. Individuals who score high on the John Henryism measure but are low in socioeconomic status are apt to be hypertensive (James, Strogatz, Wing, & Ramsey, 1987).

Constant striving for control over events without the resources to achieve it can take a toll on the individual who faces an objective limit to what can be attained regardless of how hard he or she works. If optimism is to survive as a social virtue, then the world must have a causal texture that allows this stance to produce rewards. If not, people will channel their efforts into unattainable goals and become exhausted, ill, and demoralized. Alternatively, people may rechannel their inherent optimism into other goals.

Positive social science should not become so focused on optimism as a psychological characteristic that it ignores how it is influenced by external situations, including other people. This danger is easiest to see in the case of little optimism, where we can easily decide that a given belief is wrong. It is less easy to see in the case of big optimism, but even here we can use the broader vantage of history or aggregate data to realize that some widely shared big goals are just as unrealistic as the expectation that one will lead a life free of specific illnesses and injuries.

The resolution is that people should be optimistic when the future can be changed by positive thinking but not otherwise, adopting what Seligman (1991) called a flexible or complex optimism, a psychological strategy to be exercised when appropriate as opposed to a reflex or habit over which we have no control:

You can choose to use optimism when you judge that less depression, or more achievement, or better health is the issue. But you can also choose not to use it, when you judge that clear sight or owning up is called for. Learning optimism does not erode your sense of values or your judgment. Rather it frees you to . . . achieve the goals you set. . . . Optimism's benefits are not unbounded. Pessimism has a role to play, both in society at large and in our own lives; we must have the courage to endure pessimism when its perspective is valuable (p. 292).

Particularly in the case of little optimism, people need to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of the belief in question.

When there is room for doubt, people should fill the gap with hope. Big optimism can be more hopeful than little optimism, which has a greater press to be accurate. I assume big and little optimism are redundant for many people. Psychologists should think about how to help people disaggregate the two in a useful way, to teach them how to have dreams but not fantasies—illusions without delusions. The prior question, of course, is, what other psychological characteristics need to be in place for an individual to be flexible in the use of his or her optimism?

The Cultivation of Optimism

Despite the cautions just raised, there is abundant reason to believe that optimism—big, little, and in between—is useful to a person because positive expectations can be self-fulfilling. How can we set optimism in place for the

young? Here the research by Seligman and his colleagues is instructive. Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, and Seligman (1995) have begun an intervention program using strategies from the cognitive-behavioral therapy realm to teach grade school children to be more optimistic. Results to date suggest that optimism training of this sort makes subsequent episodes of depression less likely. I point out again that the absence of depression should not be the only outcome that interests positive social scientists. We also want to know if optimistic children end up happy and healthy, with rich social networks and rewarding pursuits.

If big optimism is truly part of human nature, then we need to be concerned with somewhat different matters. First, how can optimism be channeled in one direction rather than another? As will be discussed shortly, optimism in the United States has long been entwined with individualism. Is there any way to harness our inherent optimism to a concern with the commons? Can optimism about one's neighbor be made as satisfying as optimism about oneself?

Religion can provide some answers. Indeed, Tiger (1979) argued that religions arose at least in part to tap the biologically given need of people to be optimistic. Religious thought lends itself particularly well to big optimism because of its certainty. Tiger observed, much as Freud (1928) did decades earlier, that religion is more amenable to optimism than is science, which is explicitly tentative and probabilistic in its pronouncements.

Secular social scientists interested in optimism often ignore the close link between optimism and religion, with the exception of an investigation by Sethi and Seligman (1993) in which they studied the causal explanations contained in religious texts. Across Christian, Jewish, and Muslim texts, conservative tracts were more optimistic than were liberal ones. Can we generalize from this result, juxtapose it with research on the benefits of optimism, and conclude that fundamentalists are better off than their reformed colleagues? This possibility is worthy of investigation, and researchers have to be willing to follow the data wherever they might lead (Schumaker, 1992).

Second, how can we prevent optimism from being thwarted? Here there is no mystery. Stress and trauma of all sorts take their toll on optimism, and to the degree that people can lead less terrible lives, optimism should be served. We do not want to create a life without challenge, because perseverance can only be encouraged when people meet and surmount difficulties, but we do need to be sure that the difficulties can be eventually surmounted.

Also contributing to optimism is social learning. I assume optimism can be acquired by modeling—vicariously, as it were—so we need to be attentive to the messages our children receive about the world and how it works. Explanatory styles of parents and children converge, and although part of the reason for this may be shared experiences or genetic predispositions, it could also reflect the wholesale transmittal of belief systems

by modeling (Seligman et al., 1984). Also consider messages from the popular media, which are as mixed vis-à-vis optimism as they are on any other subject. Rags-to-riches stories—unrealistic parables suggesting that anything and everything wonderful is possible—are juxtaposed on the evening news with stories about the horrors that lurk around every corner (Levine, 1977).

Third, what can we do to rekindle optimism that has been thwarted? We know from Seligman et al.'s (1988) research that cognitive therapy as developed by Aaron Beck effectively targets pessimistic explanatory style in such a way that depression is alleviated and its recurrence is prevented. Again, studies like this need to be enriched by additional outcome measures. Does cognitive therapy merely return the person to a nondepressed mode, or does it further enrich the individual? Does it affect big optimism as much as it does little optimism?

The human potential movement began in the 1960s, when therapy techniques used for distressed people were used with the normal in an attempt to make them super-normal (Tomkins, 1976). Whether this succeeded is debatable, but is there some equivalent here with respect to optimism training? What happens when cognitive-behavioral therapy is used with nonpessimistic people? Do superoptimists result, and what are they like? Are they the epitome of well-being or caricatures of positive thinking like Dr. Pangloss and Pollyanna?

Optimism and Society

Do cultures or historical eras differ in their characteristic optimism? The answer is probably no insofar as our focus is on big optimism. Big optimism makes society possible, and a pessimistic civilization cannot survive for long. Indeed, societies make available to people countless ways of satisfying their needs to be optimistic about matters:

One of the recurrent themes of human culture has to do with contests—with play which is given an effortful structure and in which some more or less entertaining activity takes place but with an uncertain outcome. Countless humans affiliate with teams, boxers, billiard players, gymnasts, skaters, racers, runners, divers and cheer for them to win and feel despondent when they lose. . . . Contests have a great deal to do with the matter of optimism and they may well be one of the commonest expressions of a way of behaving which . . . is common anyway. Contests are usually optional. . . . Certainly no one is required to take the fan's role. (Tiger, 1979, p. 250)

Of course, many of us do take on this role, and even fans of the Chicago Cubs or the Boston Red Sox find a way to be optimistic about next season when, of course, "everything will be different."

Virtually all societies have contests, but striking differences exist across societies in terms of most other ways of feeling and being optimistic. As noted, the goals considered desirable will vary from person to person, group to group, culture to culture. Other than a nebulous belief in progress and some human universals like contests, there is considerable variation across cultures in the content of optimism (e.g., Chang, 1996; Heine & Lehman, 1995; Lee

& Seligman, 1997). Here is another fruitful topic for researchers and members of a given society to examine: What are the goals that a society holds up as most desirable, and how optimistic are members of that society vis-à-vis those goals?

In the United States, the biggest goals we have as a people include individual choices, individual rights, and individual fulfillment. Americans are greatly occupied with what they can and cannot accomplish in their everyday lives, in particular with what they can acquire. In a capitalist society, people's acquisition of material goods and their concomitant fascination with the money that allows them to do so represent a socially sanctioned way of satisfying the optimistic force that organizes the entire culture. The downside of optimism satisfied in this way is the encouragement of greed.

Shallow materialism results. In the United States today, we even see people turning themselves into commodities. We want to be marketable, to keep our options open, and to cash in on what happens to us, especially misfortunes. "Because it will look good on my résumé" is a rationale I hear increasingly often from my students as an explanation for why they are pursuing some seemingly selfless and good activity. No wonder people are alienated, and no wonder depression is on the rise among young adults (Robins et al., 1984).

However, only the crassness of this rationale is new. There has long been a tradition in the United States of "self-help" books promising people success if they only think positively (Starker, 1989). As emphasized, though, optimism need not be attached just to selfish concerns, and it need not pertain just to individual agency (Wallach & Wallach, 1983). Collective agency—collective optimism, if you will—would seem a desirable goal to add to those associated with individual optimism (cf. Snyder, Cheavens, & Simpson, 1997). A resurgence of traditional religion, volunteerism, or philanthropy would facilitate this change, so long as people do not ask what is in it for them (Seligman, 1988).

In his book *The Positive Thinkers*, Donald Meyer (1988) traced the history of a uniquely American brand of optimism by discussing its influential proponents: Phineas Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy, Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, and Ronald Reagan, among others:

The popular psychology of positive thinking . . . flourished among people able, for reasons of culture and politics, to imagine that the only thing wrong with their lives was within themselves. If they could learn how to manage their own consciousness . . . the world outside would prove positive in its response. Of course this world was always that of the United States, not of mankind, but the sense of God's abundance waiting only to be received . . . had always taken for granted the greater readiness of Americans, and hence America, for such grace. (p. 382)

What Meyer identified is a very big optimism, rich and fuzzy in its meaning. Numerous other *-isms* adhere to this politically laden form of American optimism, notably capitalism, materialism, and individualism, as discussed.

Positive thinking as examined by Meyer (1988) has additionally been defined by what it opposes: Catholics, women, minorities, the lower classes, intellectuals, homosexuals, and even government itself. Victim blaming is common (W. Ryan, 1978). Pessimists are singled out as being especially objectionable: Remember Spiro Agnew's alliterative attacks on the "nattering nabobs of negativism"? It would be wise for positive social scientists to anticipate that segments of the general public may hear pronouncements about the importance of optimism in terms of these unfortunate political connotations, as an inadvertent code for exactly the opposite of what is being conveyed. As I have tried to make clear in this article, optimism and its benefits exist for all of us, if we approach optimism in an even-handed way.

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