Is Optimism Always Best?

Future Outlooks and Preparedness

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ABSTRACT—*Although people generally appear optimistic about the future, they shift from optimism under certain circumstances. Drawing from a recent review of the literature, we describe how both optimism and shifts from optimism serve the common goal of preparedness, which includes a readiness to deal with setbacks and a readiness to take advantage of opportunities. Shifts from optimism occur in response to available information and to the possibility that things may not turn out as hoped. People tend to shift from optimism when feedback is anticipated in the near future, when the outcome is important, when negative outcomes are easily imagined, and when the outcomes are uncontrollable. In addition, people with low self-esteem shift from optimism more readily than do people with high self-esteem. Finally, both optimism and shifts from optimism have unique benefits in terms of preparedness.*

KEYWORDS—*optimism; pessimism; expectations; preparedness*

In general, people are optimistic about the future, and for good reason. An optimistic outlook appears to provide numerous benefits (Scheier & Carver, 1993). It is linked to greater persistence toward goals and to better coping and adjustment. Optimism facilitates health benefits including reduced levels of postpartum depression, better recovery from alcoholism, and bolstered cardiovascular and immune-system functioning (see Shepperd, Carroll, & Sweeny, in press, for a review). Furthermore, optimism carries social benefits, at least in Western cultures. In general, optimistic people are better liked than pessimistic people (Helweg-Larsen, Sadeghian, & Webb, 2002). Finally, it feels good to believe that the future will be bright; believing otherwise can lead to anxiety.

Given the benefits of optimism, an optimistic outlook appears to be the status quo for most people in most instances. One might thus expect people to embrace optimism under all circumstances. However, mounting evidence suggests that people will shelve their optimism at the moment of truth in favor of a more realistic or even pessimistic outlook. For example, students in one study were pessimistic about their performance on an exam moments before receiving their grades (Shepperd, Ouellette, & Fernandez, 1996). Although past research generally overlooks the potential benefits of moving away from optimism at the moment of truth, we propose that optimism and shifts from optimism serve a similar goal: the need for preparedness (Carroll, Sweeny, & Shepperd, 2006). Importantly, our discussion of optimism is less concerned with whether predictions about the future are objectively optimistic relative to some external criterion, such as the population base rate, than in how predictions at one point in time compare with predictions at another point in time. For our purposes, optimism and pessimism refer to relative expectations about the future at a moment in time, not a dispositional tendency to view the future in a particular way.

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FUTURE OUTLOOKS AND THE NEED TO PREPARE

We propose that a need for preparedness governs fluctuations in future outlooks (Carroll et al., 2006). Preparedness is a goal state of readiness to respond to uncertain outcomes. It includes being prepared for possible setbacks should they occur, but also being prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they arise. In most circumstances, optimism best serves the goal of preparedness by organizing thoughts and activity around goal pursuit and persistence and the acquisition of opportunities and resources. Optimism fosters a positive mindset to undertake challenges with the confidence that one can succeed. However, in other circumstances, a shift from optimism best serves the goal of preparedness by directing thoughts and actions toward assessing and responding to changes in the local environment. Of course, when danger has passed or worst-case scenarios become less dire, shifts toward optimism can also serve the need for preparedness by directing energy toward goal attainment. Finally, a pessimistic outlook can facilitate preparation for possible undesired outcomes. As the moment of truth draws near,

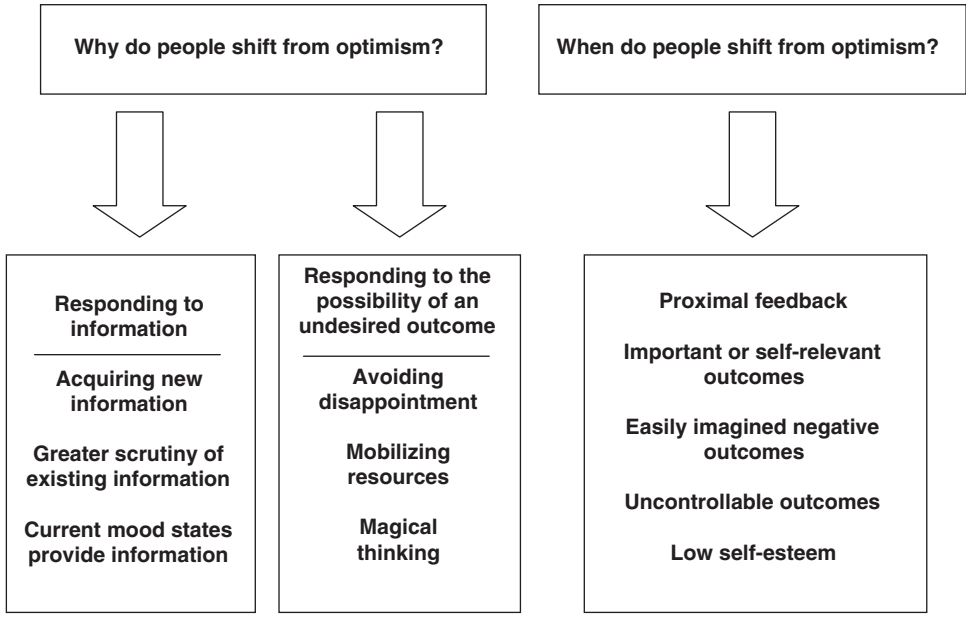

Fig. 1. Why and when people shift from optimism. People shift from optimism in response to information and in response to the possibility of undesired consequences. Situational and personal factors can make shifts from optimism more likely to occur.

pessimism directs cognitions and activity toward avoiding undesired outcomes or minimizing their consequences.

WHY DO PEOPLE SHIFT FROM OPTIMISM?

Given the evidence suggesting that optimism is the status quo, what prompts people to depart from optimism? We suggest two broad reasons for departures from optimism, both of which serve the larger need of preparedness (Fig. 1; Carroll et al., 2006). The first is a response to information and the second is a response to the possibility that things might not turn out as hoped. It is noteworthy that these explanations are not mutually exclusive; people may shift from optimism for multiple reasons.

Responding to Available Information

Sometimes people depart from optimism in response to information bearing on the accuracy of their predictions. The information can take three forms (Carroll et al., 2006). First, sometimes people gain new information that prompts them to adjust their predictions to prepare for what lies ahead. As the moment of truth draws near, people often gain greater understanding of the circumstances that might influence their outcomes and, perhaps, a better a sense of what outcomes are realistic and what outcomes are not. Second, people sometimes revise their outlooks as a result of more careful consideration or scrutiny of existing information. The greater scrutiny may arise from increased accountability concerns, whereby people feel pressure (either internally or externally generated) to justify or defend their outlook, or from the fact that as events draw near, people shift the way they construe events. Whereas people construe distant events abstractly and focus more on what they would like to happen, they construe near events concretely and focus more on what is likely to happen (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Third, current mood can be a source of information. As events and outcomes draw near, people often experience an increase in anxiety and may draw inferences about themselves and their likely outcomes based on their current anxiety (Schwartz & Clore, 1988).

To put these explanations in context, consider college students' predictions about their starting salaries. College seniors in one study shifted their salary predictions in their first postgraduation job from optimism 4 months prior to graduation to realism 2 weeks prior to graduation. Sophomores and juniors, by contrast, showed no such shift in predictions (Shepperd et al., 1996). Undoubtedly, the seniors recalibrated their predictions in part due to gaining greater information about starting salaries either from their own interview experience or from the experiences of friends. Furthermore, as their senior year drew to a close, the seniors may have felt growing pressure to explain their overly optimistic salary expectations to themselves and others, and they may have focused more on the difficulties of the application and interview process and less on the dream of making millions. Finally, the seniors may have interpreted increasing anxiety about the job market as evidence that their original expectations were too high.

Responding to the Possibility of an Undesired Outcome

Not all shifts in outlook reflect a response to information. In some instances, a shift from optimism reflects a response to the possibility that things may not turn out as hoped. That is, people

sometimes position themselves for the possibility of an undesired outcome. This category of response also has three manifestations (Fig. 1; Carroll et al., 2006).

The first manifestation is an attempt to prepare for possible disappointment. People's expectations strongly influence their feelings about their outcomes. When outcomes exceed expectations, people feel elated; when outcomes fall short of expectations, people feel disappointed (Shepperd & McNulty, 2002). Thus, people may shift their expectations downward to avoid disappointment. Second, people may shift from optimism in an effort to mobilize energy toward avoiding undesired outcomes or toward minimizing their consequences. In some instances, this mobilization reflects the cognitive strategy of defensive pessimism, in which some people use pessimism and the resulting anxiety to prompt preventative behavior (Norem & Cantor, 1986). The third manifestation is a form of magical thinking in which people perhaps believe that making optimistic predictions diminishes the likelihood that the desired outcome will occur. People may thus voice less optimistic or even pessimistic predictions to avoid "jinxing" a forthcoming outcome.

To put the second category of explanations in context, imagine a woman who finds a lump in her breast. She may adopt negative expectations (i.e., believing that the lump indicates cancer) to avoid being caught off guard and to minimize negative feelings if her suspicions are correct. Adopting negative expectations may also prompt her to take action by making an appointment with her doctor or scheduling a mammogram. Finally, she may believe that she could "jinx" herself and make a negative outcome more likely by assuming the best.

WHEN DO PEOPLE SHIFT FROM OPTIMISM?

Figure 1 also identifies a number of factors that moderate when people shift from optimism (Carroll et al., 2006). These factors are conditions under which people are likely to shift, and they may occur alone or in tandem in a particular situation. First, people shift from optimism when they anticipate information or feedback bearing on the accuracy of their outlook. The more proximal the feedback (i.e., as the moment of truth draws near), the more inclined people are to shelve their optimism. For example, students applying to graduate school may be confident of attaining admission into the most prestigious programs when the application deadlines are months away. However, these students may adopt more moderate expectations as they prepare for the GRE and struggle through the application process. When the process is complete (i.e., applications are in the mail), these students may further lower their expectations as they realize that their fate is now out of their hands. Finally, all optimism may vanish the day the graduate school admission letter arrives in the mail. Research documents this shift from optimism in domains ranging from exam predictions to expectations about testing positive for a disease. Figure 2 illustrates the typical pattern seen in exam-score estimates.

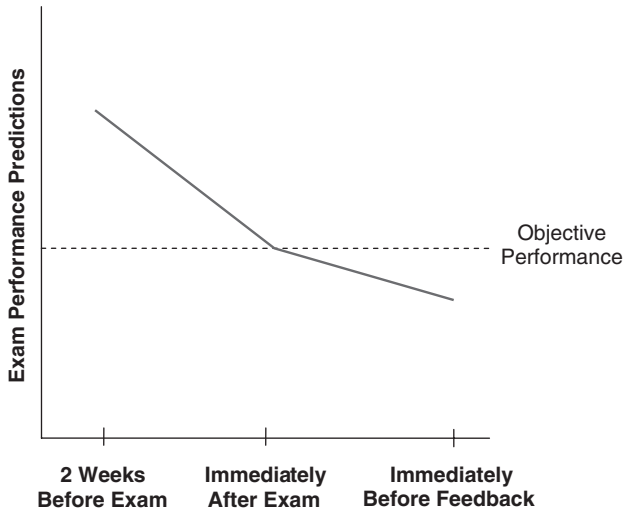

Fig. 2. Typical pattern of predictions for a hypothetical exam performance over time, relative to actual performance.

Second, people are more likely to shift from optimism when the outcome is personally consequential or important. Thus, for example, people are more likely to shift from optimism when awaiting test results for a serious disease than for a nonserious disease. Of course, outcome importance is somewhat subjective. Two people may regard the same potential outcome quite differently. A *C* on an exam may be disastrous for a student in danger of losing a scholarship but only a minor annoyance for another student not facing such dire consequences. As might be expected, the former student is more likely than the latter student to depart from optimism (Shepperd, Findley-Klein, Kwavnick, Walker, & Perez, 2000).

Third, people shift from optimism to the extent that they can easily imagine an alternative, worse outcome. The easier it is to imagine an undesired outcome, the more likely people are to shelve their optimism. Indeed, inducing people to imagine undesired outcomes can prompt a shift from optimism in future predictions (Sanna, 1999). Fourth, people shift from optimism when they perceive their future outcomes as beyond their control. For example, at the beginning of a semester, students may predict that they will receive *A*s in their courses because they plan to attend all of their classes and spend each night studying. As the final exam looms and all opportunities for control are diminished, students may be less optimistic about their chances for success. Similarly, people are more likely to be optimistic when they can control the impact of an undesirable outcome, even if they cannot prevent the outcome from occurring. For example, people are less likely to believe that they will contract diseases that can be prevented or even treated effectively with medication; they are more pessimistic about contracting diseases that cannot be prevented or treated.

Finally, people low in self-esteem lower their estimates more over time than do people high in self-esteem. The effect of self-esteem on future outlooks may arise for several reasons. First,

people with low self-esteem may be less certain of their abilities and thus more sensitive to situational cues (such as declining control) that suggest things may turn out badly. Second, they may think more about things that could lead to undesirable outcomes—that is, they may more readily mentally simulate undesirable outcomes when anticipating feedback. Third, people with low self-esteem are more reactive to feedback, and this reactivity may incline them to proactively regulate affect by shifting from optimism in anticipation of feedback. That is, they may be particularly inclined to prepare themselves for possible bad news by expecting the worst (Shepperd et al., 1996).

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF DEPARTURES FROM OPTIMISM

Although the benefits of optimism are well-documented, shifting from optimism also has benefits (Shepperd, Sweeny, & Carroll, 2006). First, a less optimistic outlook can make people feel better about the outcomes they experience. As noted earlier, people feel elated when outcomes exceed expectations, and shifting from optimism (i.e., lowering expectations) can increase elation in response to outcomes. Conversely, people feel disappointed when outcomes fall short of expectations. A shift from optimism allows people to prepare for and ultimately avoid potential disappointment by anticipating bad news. Second, a pessimistic outlook can prompt preparatory actions that reduce the likelihood of an undesired outcome, diminish the negative consequences, and expedite recovery.

Of course, a downward shift in outlook can have costs. Adopting a negative outlook forfeits the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of optimism, and embracing a pessimistic outlook can trigger negative affect and anxiety. The anxiety can be debilitating to the extent that people become preoccupied with thoughts of possible bad news and unable to manage other aspects of their life. For example, people who are obsessed with the possibility that a loved one may be injured or killed or that every minor health concern will turn out to be fatal may be unable to meet the demands of everyday life. Furthermore, people making predictions about the future must wrestle with an array of competing goals, and these goals may make pessimism undesirable. For example, a gymnast awaiting one set of scores while preparing for his or her next routine may forego pessimism in order to remain confident for the upcoming performance.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future outlooks are important because they influence how people feel about their outcomes and because they prompt activity directed at facilitating desired outcomes and avoiding or mitigating undesired outcomes. Although an optimistic outlook has numerous benefits and appears to be the ambient state for most people at most times, a downward shift from optimism also offers benefits. People who are overly optimistic about the future are ill-prepared to respond to setbacks that may occur. When available information indicates that expectations are inaccurate, shifting expectations prepares people to deal with the most likely outcomes. Likewise, when an undesired outcome seems possible, shifting expectations downward prepares people by providing protection from an emotional blow. Ultimately, we suggest that a balance between optimism and pessimism best serves the demands of preparedness. People should be optimistic enough to take advantage of the many benefits of a positive outlook, but they should also sufficiently temper that optimism so that they can motivate preventative action and avoid being caught off guard (Sweeny & Shepperd, in press).

Finally, we acknowledge many unanswered questions. First, the developmental processes that lead people to adjust their future outlooks downward from optimism are largely unknown. Do children learn about the consequences of holding different future outlooks from experience, or is this understanding a natural consequence of increased cognitive abilities? Second, all published research exploring shifts in future outlooks comes from investigators in Western cultures, and although the need for preparedness is likely universal, the specific strategies people use to achieve this end and the costs and benefits of these strategies may vary cross-culturally. Third, some of the presumed consequences of shifting from optimism are speculative and require empirical confirmation. These questions aside, recognizing that optimism is not always beneficial will likely yield new insights into how people can best prepare for future outcomes.

Recommended Readings

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