

Optimism, Effects on Relationships

Sanjay Srivastava

University of Oregon

Kimbery M. Angelo

University of Oregon

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One enduring lesson from social and personality psychology is that beliefs affect social behavior. Beliefs can proactively shape the ways that individuals perceive and make sense of social situations, and beliefs can affect how individuals behave toward others. A belief orientation that has received a great deal of attention in a variety of domains is *optimism*. The focus of this entry is on how optimism is related to relationship processes and outcomes. This entry begins by defining optimism, reviewing some of the outcomes generally associated with it, and presenting a general theoretical model that explains why optimists enjoy more favorable outcomes in many areas of life. It then considers the role of optimism in relationships, discusses some of the positive relationship outcomes that have been associated with optimism, and highlights the adaptive relationship processes through which optimism brings about those outcomes.

What is Optimism?

Optimism is defined as a tendency to expect favorable outcomes. Research has demonstrated that there are individual differences in global optimism – that is, some individuals are more inclined than others to expect good things across a variety of life domains. A global, dispositional tendency to be optimistic will typically manifest itself in a variety of more specific beliefs tied to particular times, situations, or life domains; and over and above any dispositional tendency, optimistic or pessimistic beliefs may be activated or diminished by short-term factors (for example, people in happy or angry moods are more optimistic than people in fearful moods). Optimism and pessimism are generally conceptualized as opposite sides of a continuum. Thus, when this entry refers to

“optimists” or “pessimists,” that is used as shorthand for relative differences along such a continuum, not for qualitatively different types of people.

Research on dispositional, global optimism helps paint a picture of the personality traits and outcomes typically associated with being an optimist. This research has shown that optimists tend to have somewhat higher levels of extraversion and self-esteem, and lower levels of neuroticism, stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. Optimism is associated with a number of favorable outcomes in various domains of physical health and psychological functioning. For example, optimism assessed prior to a stressful transition has been shown to predict fewer physical symptoms in patients and better immune system functioning during the transition. Optimism is also correlated with lower depression, fewer mood disturbances, and fewer negative interpersonal interactions. Optimism has been shown to predict less negative affect, depression, and stress during major life transitions.

A subset of optimism research has investigated outcomes in interpersonal relationships. Research has shown that individuals with optimistic outlooks are better liked by others and are socially rejected less often; have fewer negative social interactions; have longer-lasting friendships; and experience lesser social alienation and anxiety. In romantic relationships, both optimists and their partners enjoy greater relationship satisfaction, and optimists’ relationships are at lower risk of breaking up.

How Optimism Influences Outcomes

Charles Carver and Michael Scheier, who have theorized and written extensively about optimism, have proposed that the associations between optimism and positive outcomes can be explained using an expectancy-value model of self-regulation and goals.

Their model starts with the key assumption that nearly all behavior is driven, implicitly or explicitly, by goals. According to an expectancy-value model, goal-driven behavior is energized by two factors. The *value* of a goal refers to its desirability to the individual. *Expectancies* refer to beliefs about the attainability of goals. Goal pursuit is a joint function of value and expectancies: all else held equal, an individual will be more persistent in pursuing a goal when that goal is greatly valued and when the individual expects to be successful in attaining the goal. The proposed role of optimism within the expectancy-value framework is that optimists tend to have more favorable expectancies. Thus, one would expect optimists to be more persistent in pursuing desirable goals, and thus to attain better outcomes.

In support of this model, research on coping strategies has indicated that optimists are indeed more persistent and more successful in pursuing goals. When faced with challenges or obstacles, optimists are more likely to use approach-oriented coping strategies like active coping, planning, positive reinterpretation, and less likely to use avoidance-oriented coping strategies like denial and behavioral disengagement. Optimists are also more likely to use coping strategies that target a problem directly when doing so would be effective; but when a problem is unresolvable or uncontrollable, they make use of emotion-based strategies like acceptance, humor, and positive reframing in order to lessen the problem's impact. Optimists' persistence is not limitless or self-destructive, however: optimism is also associated with behavioral flexibility in coping with a stressor, such that optimists disengage from hopeless tasks and shift their attention to more tractable problems, rather than proceeding with nonproductive persistence.

Self-regulation theories propose that progress toward goals can affect mood. Consistent with this idea, optimists experience less negative emotion (such as shame, depression, and anger) when their progress toward goals is disrupted, presumably because they anticipate being able to overcome the obstacles. Indeed, optimists not only regulate their behavior during goal pursuit by working towards their goals; they also engage in more proactive steps to promote well-being and prevent stress, suggesting that they are better able to prevent their emotions from interfering with their behavior. Optimists' use of emotion-based coping buffers some of the negative emotions that might otherwise accompany failure or unresolvable problems.

Global Optimism and Relationship Processes

Global, dispositional optimism is not explicitly defined as a relational construct, and the most commonly used measure of global optimism (the Life Orientation Test) makes no reference to beliefs about relationships. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, several lines of research on optimism and relationships show that a globally optimistic outlook is associated with a variety of positive social outcomes. How does optimism help bring about positive outcomes in relationships?

Perceived Social Support

One key factor that researchers have focused on is *perceived support*. Perceived support refers to the belief that others will be available to provide assistance and comfort if needed. Perceived support is only modestly related to objective indicators of the actual social support received. Thus, it is more than just a realistic reflection of others' supportive behaviors; perceived support appears to also reflect stable, persistent beliefs about others' likely future behavior. As such, it can promote adaptive responses to

stressors and obstacles: Before actual support is even necessary, perceived support can lead an individual to appraise a situation as less stressful (because the individual expects that he or she will be able to draw on others' help to cope with the stressor), lowering the demand for objective support or other coping. Perceived support beliefs show some consistency across multiple others, but they can also vary between types of relationships or between specific individual others. For example, it is possible for an individual to see a romantic partner as very supportive and a friend as not very supportive, or vice versa.

Research indicates that perceived support is associated with several of the same processes as global optimism, including adaptive coping, favorable expectancies, and positive affect. Recently, several studies have provided more direct support for a link between optimism and perceived support. Optimism has been associated with perceived support among air crash rescue workers, bereaved men, romantic couples, and students transitioning to college. It appears that, if global optimism is a general tendency to expect good things, perceived support is a more specific manifestation of optimism in which one expects a particular good thing (social support) in a particular context (close relationships).

Supportive Behaviors in Relationships

Another way that optimism can lead to positive relational outcomes is through actual social support, both offered and received by optimists. One factor to consider is the sheer availability of supportive others. Optimism is a socially valued trait, and as a result optimists tend to be well-liked by others and have larger social networks. Thus, one of the benefits of optimism is to simply have more people available to offer support in difficult times.

Beyond sheer quantity of support, however, optimism affects the quality of support given and received in close relationships. According to the expectancy-value framework, optimists will expect that conflicts with partners can be successfully resolved. As a result optimists can be expected not to withdraw from conflicts and instead to engage in flexible, constructive, and cooperative problem-solving behaviors with partners. Withdrawal or disengagement from conflict is a major risk factor for relationships; optimism should therefore lower the probability of this risk. Research has supported this prediction: When discussing conflicts with partners, optimists are more likely to listen to their partners and demonstrate interest, and less likely to criticize or withdraw from the conflict. Of particular interest is that the partners of optimists engage in the same constructive behaviors as optimists. In other words, the partner of an optimist will reciprocate the optimist's flexible engagement in problem-solving, regardless of the partner's own level of optimism. These reciprocal, constructive problem-solving processes are a major mechanism by which optimism brings about positive relationship outcomes (i.e., high relationship satisfaction for both partners, and low probability of breakup or divorce).

Specific Optimistic Beliefs

This entry so far has addressed global, dispositional optimism – the general tendency to expect favorable outcomes. A complementary approach is to define optimism with respect to some particular time, situation, or life domain. Thus, rather than focusing on (global, stable) optimists versus pessimists, one might instead consider the importance of particular optimistic beliefs. As discussed earlier, the two ways of thinking about optimism are not entirely unrelated. A global tendency to be optimistic (“good things are

going to happen”) can give rise to more specific optimistic beliefs, such as perceived support (“my partner will still love me after this argument”), which act as more specific expectancies to support flexible and constructive pursuit of relational goals. As a practical matter, however, an emphasis on specific beliefs highlights avenues for intervention and change: Whereas it might be difficult to change someone’s global outlook, it is more reasonable to target specific beliefs in domains where they are causing the most harm (i.e., through therapy or self-improvement).

Generally speaking, research on optimistic beliefs about relationships has shown that they lead to adaptive outcomes. Research by Sandra Murray and others has shown that partners who have *positive illusions* about each other – meaning more positive views of a partner than the partner has of him- or herself – have more satisfying and longer-lasting relationships. Such positive illusions are most adaptive when they are quite general in their content: A belief that “my partner is a good person” tends to be beneficial for the relationship, even if the believer has to overlook a few of the partner’s foibles and failings. However, unrealistically optimistic beliefs about partners are less adaptive when they are so specific that they create opportunities for tangible disappointment. For example, a belief that “my partner is a neat and tidy person” can raise high expectations that come crashing down when faced with a sink full of dirty dishes night after night. Researchers Lisa Neff and Ben Karney have identified “global adoration and specific accuracy” as an especially adaptive pattern in marital relationships.

Conclusion

Optimism brings about positive outcomes in relationships by promoting favorable expectancies, which in turn cause individuals to pursue their relationship goals more

flexibly and persistently. This core principle helps explain why other individual differences that correlate only modestly with optimism, such as a secure attachment style or low fear of negative evaluation, appear to lead to many of the same outcomes: they are multiple pathways to favorable expectancies. This principle also suggests avenues for therapeutic intervention or self-improvement. The benefits enjoyed by optimists may be accessible to individuals who work on changing their beliefs. By identifying and revising irrational or pessimistic beliefs about a partner, through therapy or introspection, it may be possible to cultivate a mindset that will lead to more constructive interactions with a partner, and ultimately to a more satisfying and longer-lasting relationship.

Sanjay Srivastava and Kimberly Angelo

University of Oregon

See also: Approach and Avoidance Motivation in Relationships; Beliefs about Relationships; Expectations about Relationships; Personality Traits, Effects on Relationships; Social Support, Nature of

Further Readings

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