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“As good as it gets” or “The best is yet to come”? How optimists and pessimists view their past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

We examined the relation between dispositional optimism and subjective evaluations of past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction. Consistent with previous research and public opinion polls, results from a survey of 400 undergraduates showed an upward “trajectory” in mean life satisfaction ratings: past < present < anticipated future life satisfaction. We compared life satisfaction trajectories among groups of optimists, moderates, and pessimists. In a repeated-measures ANOVA, a significant interaction between temporal perspective (past, present, anticipated future) and optimism/pessimism group revealed surprising similarities and differences between groups. First, optimists were characterized by more positive life evaluations than pessimists, regardless of temporal perspective. Second, both optimists and pessimists reported upward trajectories from the past to the anticipated future. Third, whereas optimists expected that the future would *not* be more satisfying than the present, pessimists – not optimists – anticipated brighter futures.

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“The point of living, and of being an optimist, is to be foolish enough to believe the best is yet to come.” (Peter Ustinov, 1921–2004)

1. Introduction

When people are asked to rate their past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction, they typically rate their lives at present as more satisfying than the past, and their lives in the future are expected to be even more satisfying than the present. This upward subjective “trajectory” in life satisfaction ratings has been observed in social surveys conducted around the world (Pew, 2002), and is typical of all age groups except the very old (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Ryff, 1991; Staudinger, Bluck, & Herzberg, 2003). Pollsters and media agencies routinely trumpet this pattern as a sign of optimism, and praise the public’s ability to expect a brighter future even in times of hardship (Moore, 2006; Taylor, Funk, & Craighill, 2006).

Psychological researchers, however, typically define dispositional optimism with respect to people’s expectancies for the future, without reference to the past and present: Whereas optimists expect generally positive personal future outcomes, pessimists expect negative outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Fur-

ther, recent findings show that anticipating one’s future life satisfaction to exceed past and present levels predicts distress and dysfunction (Busseri, Choma, & Sadava, 2009; Lachman, Rocke, Rosnick, & Ryff, 2008), rather than positive psychological and physical well-being outcomes (Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007; Peterson & Bossio, 2001; Scheier & Carver, 1992) typically associated with optimism. These conflicting lines of evidence beg the question: How do optimists and pessimists see their future life outcomes relative to their present and past lives?

Optimism researchers have proposed that a history of past successes serves as the basis for positive expectancies for the future (Peterson, 2000; Scheier & Carver, 1993; see also Montgomery, David, DiLorenzo, & Erblich, 2003). With respect to present functioning, whereas positive expectancies that are grounded in the reality of one’s life at present are thought to be adaptive (Peterson & Bossio, 2001; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001), expectations that deviate substantially from the reality of one’s present life are considered likely to impede positive functioning (Baumeister, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor & Armor, 1996). Further, the motivation to engage in committed and effective pursuit of important personal goals thought to be characteristic of optimists is assumed to flow directly from their confidence in positive future life outcomes (Aspinwall, Richter, & Hoffman, 2001; Carver & Scheier, 2001; Scheier et al., 2001). Thus, although a positive orientation toward the future is considered to be the hallmark of optimism, people’s evaluations of their past and present lives are clearly implicated.

Given this, optimists’ positive expectancies for the future may be connected closely to positive evaluations of their past and pres-

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ent lives. In support of this notion, researchers employing a subjective temporal perspective have reported moderate to strong positive correlations among self-report ratings of recollected past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction, typically ranging from .40 to .70 (e.g., McIntosh, 2001; Shmotkin, 1998; Staudinger et al., 2003). Studies have also revealed overlaps in the cognitive processes and memory systems involved in reconstructing the past and imagining the future (Atance & O'Neil, 2003; Buckner & Carroll, 2006; Tulving, 1985). Neuroimaging studies have further revealed commonalities in the brain networks activated when people think about past and future events (Buckner & Carroll, 2006; Schacter & Addis, 2007; Sharot, Riccardi, Raio, & Phelps, 2007). Also, optimism is associated with an attentional bias toward positive information in one's environment, including current and past events (Noguchi, Gohm, & Dalsky, 2006; Segerstrom, 2001). Collectively, these various lines of research suggest that across multiple levels of experience and functioning, there may be important connections between people's evaluations of their past, present, and anticipated future lives.

We found no published studies, however, examining how optimists and pessimists see their futures relative to their past or present lives. Based on the existing literature, several possibilities can be delineated. Consistent both with optimists' positive social learning history (Peterson, 2000) and the well-established association between optimism and positive functioning (Scheier & Carver, 1993), optimists may have more positive views of their past and present lives compared to pessimists, as well as more positive expectancies for the future. Additionally, to the extent that optimism is characterized primarily by a positive future orientation, optimists' anticipated futures may be evaluated more positively than their present and past lives – consistent with pollsters' interpretations (e.g., Moore, 2006; Taylor et al., 2006) – whereas pessimists may anticipate that their future life will be even worse than their present. Alternatively, if optimism represents a broad cognitive bias impacting how people view most aspects of their lives, not just the anticipated future (e.g., Cummins & Nistico, 2002; Dember, 2001; Schneider, 2001), optimists' anticipated futures might appear bright, but not necessarily brighter than their present and past lives, whereas pessimists may predict gloomy, but not gloomier futures. As a first step toward exploring these possibilities, in the present study we examined dispositional optimism in relation to people's evaluations of their past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Undergraduates ($N = 400$; M age = 19.96; $SD = 4.44$; 79% female) completed a questionnaire packet in small group settings in exchange for course credit.

2.2. Measures

The 15-item Temporal Satisfaction With Life Scale (Pavot, Diener, & Suh, 1998) was used to measure recollected past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction (LS), with ratings ranging from 1-*strongly disagree*, to 7-*strongly agree*. This scale comprises three parallel sets of five items oriented to each temporal perspective, differing in wording with respect to whether the items referenced the past (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life in the past"), present (e.g., "I am satisfied with my current life"), or anticipated future life satisfaction (e.g., "I will be satisfied with my life in the future"). Note that the time frame for the past and future items is unspecified. Scores for past, present, and future LS were com-

puted by summing the five items from each temporal perspective (α s = .86, .91, and .84, respectively).

The 10-item Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) was used to measure dispositional optimism/pessimism, with ratings ranging from 0-*strongly disagree*, to 4-*strongly agree*. Scores were computed by summing the six optimism/pessimism items ($\alpha = .79$). Note that although some researchers have proposed that the positively and negatively-worded LOT-R items form separate "optimism" and "pessimism" factors (e.g., Chang, Sana, & Yang, 2003), other investigators have shown that alternative latent factor models provide equivalent, if not superior fit to this two-factor model, including models comprising a single latent optimism factor indicated by all six items, along with a latent method factor, indicated either by the three positively-worded or three-negatively-worded items (e.g., Rauch, Schweizer, & Moosbrugger, 2007; see also Bryant, King, & Smart, 2007). Further, despite these various possibilities concerning the latent structure of the LOT-R, the most commonly used method for scoring the LOT-R scale is a single summative index, as recommended by Scheier et al. (1994).

3. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study measures are shown in Table 1. For the sample as a whole, mean LS ratings reflected an upward subjective trajectory: past < present < anticipated future LS. Further, scores for past, present, and anticipated future life satisfaction were positively inter-correlated. Each satisfaction score was also positively associated with dispositional optimism, such that more optimistic respondents tended to report higher satisfaction with their past, present, and anticipated future lives.

To evaluate the relation between dispositional optimism and the subjective life satisfaction trajectories, a tripartite split was used to divide respondents into three approximately evenly-sized groups: "optimists" (M optimism/pessimism = 17.93, $SD = 1.86$; $n = 144$), "moderates" (M optimism/pessimism = 14.13, $SD = 0.83$; $n = 136$), and "pessimists" (M optimism/pessimism = 9.58, $SD = 2.30$; $n = 120$). Optimism/pessimism group was examined as a between-subjects factor in a repeated-measures ANOVA in which subjective temporal perspective (past, present, anticipated future LS) was the within-subjects factor.

There was a significant main effect of temporal perspective; $F(2,794) = 71.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$. Mean past LS was lower than present LS, both of which were lower than anticipated future LS; M s = 21.00, 23.26, and 24.69, respectively (p s < .05 in Bonferroni-corrected pairwise contrasts). The main effect of optimism/pessimism group was also significant; $F(2,397) = 63.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$. Optimists reported higher LS than moderates, who reported higher LS than pessimists; M s = 25.79, 23.34, and 19.83, respectively ($p < .05$ for each pairwise contrast).

As shown in Fig. 1, although all three groups were characterized by ascending trajectories from past to anticipated future LS, the shape of these trajectories differed across groups, as indicated by a significant interaction between temporal perspective and optimism/pessimism group; $F(4,794) = 6.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Among

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study measures.

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Past life satisfaction	21.17	6.79	–			
2. Present life satisfaction	23.50	6.58	.47	–		
3. Future life satisfaction	24.83	4.75	.38	.62	–	
4. Optimism	14.31	3.81	.35	.55	.47	–

$N = 400$. All p s < .001.

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