



Measuring optimism–pessimism from beliefs about future events

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Abstract

In this study optimism–pessimism was defined in terms of an expectancy-value model based on subjective probabilities and subjective values for positive or negative future events in one's personal life and for positive or negative future general world events [Wengler, L., & Svenson, O. (1982). Self-image and predictions about future events. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 23, 153–155]. The participants were 183 students. For each subject the correlation of probability and value ratings were computed separately for the sets of events. In a first analysis the sign of a coefficient categorised a subject as optimistic or pessimistic. 177 of 183 subjects were classified as optimistic about the personal future and six subjects as pessimistic. Considering the world's future, 155 persons were optimistic and 28 pessimistic. A second analysis used the value of a significant correlation ($p < 0.05$) for 20 observations to obtain three groups: optimistic ($r \geq 0.444$), pessimistic ($r \geq -0.444$) and an intermediate group. By this rule 132, or 72%, were classified as optimistic about the personal future, 47 as neither optimistic nor pessimistic and no one as pessimistic. As to the world's future, 74 were optimistic and three were pessimistic. Into the intermediate group fell 106 Ss, or 58%. Optimism–pessimism about one's personal future was weakly associated with that for the general world. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

From many studies it has been reported that most people are optimistic as they believe that

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they are more likely than their fellow men to experience positive events and less likely to experience negative events. This has been found, for instance, when subjects were asked to predict the risk of getting involved in an automobile accident (Robertson, 1977) or the risk of being personally afflicted by various diseases or health problems (Kirscht, Haefner, Kegeles & Rosenstock, 1966; McGee & Cairns, 1994; McKenna, Warburton & Winwood, 1993; Peterson & De Avila, 1995). Similar results were also obtained when psychology students were asked to predict the probability of obtaining different grades at an examination (Teigen, 1983). Svenson (1981) showed that car drivers believe that they are less risky and more skilful than the average driver. Weinstein (1980) found students to be optimistic when estimating the probabilities for positive and negative future life events: for nearly every one of 18 positive events subjects rated their own chance as greater than the chance of the average same-sex student to achieve desirable outcomes and for nearly every one of 24 negative events they believed that the risk of personally experiencing them in the future was smaller than the average. Weinstein considered this kind of optimism to be a cognitive bias in judgement. He referred to it as *unrealistic optimism* about future vulnerability. At least some risk factors were perceived by the Ss to be controllable by psychological attributes or their own action (Weinstein, 1980, 1984).

In Weinstein's study all events were of a personal character (e.g. 'living past 80' or 'attempting suicide'). Fischer and Leitenberg (1986) studied 583 children in the age of 9 to 13 yr and their results were in line with those of Weinstein's involving young adults. Fischer and Leitenberg showed that the "overwhelming majority of the Ss were quite optimistic and minimally pessimistic" (op.cit.) in their expectancies of success and failure in personal life. Thus, not only adults but also children seem to be very optimistic in judging their personal future. Further, Cohn, Macfarlane, Yanez and Imai (1995) studied adolescents' and parents' perception of risks from various kinds of involvement in health-threatening activities and from frequent causes of morbidity and mortality. They found adolescents to be more optimistic than their parents about health-threatening behaviours but less optimistic about their chances of avoiding the most common causes of illness or death. The latter finding may suggest either an influence of the different timeframes of parents and adolescents when judging future events or more risk denial in parents. Optimism has been reported to have effects dependent on the time perspective used in predicting future events (Lipkus, Martz, Panter & Drigotas, 1993).

Thus, several studies have shown that people are optimistic and believe more positive than negative things will happen to them in the future. Otherwise expressed, they have a general expectancy of positively valued outcomes of future life events. Three questions will be raised in the present study: (1) Are people optimistic about the future, when the concept of optimism is based not only on how likely they find various events to be but also on what value they place on each event? (2) Are people equally optimistic about events in their personal future life and about future world events with consequences of a more general nature? (3) If a person is optimistic about events in his or her future life, will this be related also to being more optimistic about world events generally? The approach to study optimism–pessimism in the present study explicitly considers both the subjective value of an event for the individual and its likelihood. Many studies have used ratings of perceived risks or subjective probabilities to infer the attitude to future events (Cohn, Macfarlane, Yanez & Imai, 1995; Lipkus, Martz, Panter & Drigotas, 1993; Weinstein, 1980, 1984) without weighting the likelihood ratings by subjective estimates of value of the future outcomes.

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