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The past is not what it used to be: Optimists' use of retroactive pessimism to diminish the sting of failure

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Abstract

Two studies tested whether optimists regulate moods by making the past seem inevitable in the case of failures. This retroactive pessimism effect on the part of optimists may appear to be particularly ironic and occurred both in response to a variety of imagined situations in comparison with predictions and successes when inevitability was measured on a constrained rating scale (Study 1) and in response to immediately experienced failures on a laboratory task when open-ended probability judgments were assessed (Study 2). The strategy was associated with positive moods for optimists and appears due to a few easily generated external reasons (Study 2). Pessimists did not use this retroactive strategy. Implications for timing of strategies, mental simulations, and hindsight biases are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Optimism and pessimism are fundamental constructs in a variety of theories and research dealing with self-regulation and coping (see Carver & Scheier, 1998; Chang, 2001; Norem, 2001; Peterson & Bossio, 1991; Seligman, 1998, for reviews). Although theories differ in specifics, common is the idea that optimists and pessimists diverge

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in the ways in which they explain and predict life events. Optimists construe their lives positively and expect favorable outcomes, whereas pessimists construe their lives negatively and expect unfavorable outcomes. As just a few examples, optimism's importance is borne out by associations with superior self-regulation on everything from laboratory and academic tasks (e.g., Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996; Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001) to coping with major health problems such as surgery and cancer (e.g., Scheier et al., 1989; Shepperd, Maroto, & Pbert, 1996a; Tennen & Affleck, 1987).

But how do optimists deal with adversity and maintain their optimism? Of course, there might be many ways. Our research was designed to test one strategy on the part of optimists that may at first appear particularly ironic. *Retroactive pessimism* (Tykocinski, 2001; Tykocinski, Pick, & Kedmi, 2002) may be used by optimists, whereby they distort the past so it seems more inevitable in the case of failures. This effect is related to the hindsight bias (e.g., Christensen-Szalanski & Willham, 1991; Fischhoff, 1975) and our proposal follows from findings that optimists' use retrospective mental simulation strategies (e.g., Sanna, 2000; Sanna, Stocker, & Clarke, in press). In Study 1, we examine our ideas across a variety of diverse situations and in Study 2 we test possible mechanisms that may underlie optimists' strategy. Together, the two studies are firmly grounded at the intersection of personality and social cognition.

2. Hindsight bias and retroactive pessimism

Documented initially by Fischhoff (1975) and Fischhoff and Beyth (1975), the hindsight bias suggests that once event outcomes are known, people view events as relatively inevitable (see Christensen-Szalanski & Willham, 1991; Hawkins & Hastie, 1990, for reviews). It is typically discussed with a cognitive emphasis, such as updating mental models, elaborating causal linkages, and deemphasizing information (e.g., Wasserman, Lampert, & Hastie, 1991). When later reporting expectations they had prior to knowing outcomes, people draw on updated models and rejudge events, resulting in the hindsight bias. The bias may be decreased by thinking about alternatives that discount the known outcome (e.g., Fischhoff, 1982). For people who can easily simulate alternatives, the hindsight bias is reduced, but when alternatives are not thought of easily, the hindsight bias can be increased (Sanna, Schwarz, & Stocker, 2002).

Another important way that simulated alternatives (or lack thereof) relate to the hindsight bias is through retroactive pessimism (Tykocinski, 2001; Tykocinski et al., 2002). People may make the past seem more inevitable after failures by reducing consideration of more positive alternatives. Retroactive pessimism was first demonstrated by Tykocinski and colleagues; the effect was greatest with larger losses, when particular outcomes were desired, for the self than others, and when disappointments were not otherwise mitigated, suggestive of a self-serving, defensive, motivation (Tykocinski, 2001; Tykocinski et al., 2002). In essence, because considering better alternatives amplifies negative emotions (e.g., Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Sanna & Turley-Ames, 2000), distorting events in hindsight so they are perceived as

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