

# APPLYING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO POSITIVE WELL-BEING: FOCUS ON OPTIMISM

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## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Introduction to Positive Social Psychology	The Social Psychology of Optimism
Optimism	The Benefits of Optimism
Introduction to Optimism–Pessimism	Positive Coaching Exercises
Self-Assessment of Optimism–Pessimism	Broadening the Perspective on Positive Well-Being
	Summary

*You may recall the story of Deena, whom we introduced in Chapter 5 to illustrate the application of social psychology to clinical psychology. We will continue with her story to illustrate some of the content of this chapter. The story resumes with Deena about to go on her first date with the guy named Jim, whom she just met at the library. Recall that Deena immediately had been very attracted to Jim, but she was overwrought with worry and anxiety about the impression she would make. She had felt so skeptical about what might happen that she had even thought about calling off the date. Now, while she was looking forward to the*

evening, she also thought about the times when she had screwed up first dates. She waited outside her dorm where Jim said he'd pick her up in his car at 6:00 p.m. to go out for dinner and a movie. Deena soon became anxious as 6:00 came and went and Jim failed to show up. As she continued to wait, Deena considered the possibilities of what could have happened, including that perhaps Jim had second thoughts about the date with her. She remembered feeling awkward and uncomfortable when Jim had approached her in the library and that she hadn't washed her hair that morning. She wondered if she should be interested in him at all. As the minutes passed and the more she thought about it, the more negative Deena became about this evening working out well. Then, at 6:15 Deena's cell phone rang. It was Jim. He explained apologetically that he'd been stuck in a traffic jam for the last half hour and would be late for the date. Deena was relieved but still wondered if that was the real reason Jim was late. Finally, when on the date, Deena had a fun time with Jim and clearly was drawn to his looks and personality. They shared a bottle of wine and enjoyed good conversation. They laughed together, especially at the movie, which was very funny. The evening ended with Jim saying that he had a really good time and maybe they could get together again.

Once home after the date, Deena reflected on the evening. Yes, it was a fun date, but she really didn't think that she had done much to make it fun. Mostly it was the wine, the movie, and Jim's sense of humor that carried the evening. The wine surely helped to overcome her usual awkwardness. Deena thought she would like to date Jim again, but despite what he said at the end of the date, she doubted if he would call her. They hardly ever did. And if Deena and Jim did go on a second date, it probably would not go as well, and more of its success would rest on her shoulders, putting even more pressure on her.

- If you were in the same situation as Deena, what would your initial thoughts be about the reason why your date didn't show up on time? How you would explain his or her tardiness is important. As you read through the chapter,

you will learn how causal attributions can influence how upset you might get in this situation and whether you are likely to expect good or bad things to happen in future relationship events.

- How might psychology be applied to helping people like Deena to upgrade the quality of their interpersonal relationships?

## INTRODUCTION TO POSITIVE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Historically, the science and profession of psychology has been negative in orientation. Until recently, it has focused much of its attention on human weaknesses, liabilities, and negative mental health. This lopsided and pessimistic view of human nature is especially true of the subfields known as abnormal psychology and clinical psychology. Over the last 50 years, these two subfields have expended a huge amount of energy to understanding psychopathology and repairing what is wrong with people. This work (considered in Chapter 5) has produced a number of benefits. We know more today than we did previously about why people become depressed, why they become anxious, and why they suffer from other forms of negative mental health. In terms of treatment, we have also learned new methods of intervening to remediate such problems.

Unfortunately, the tremendous emphasis that has been placed on understanding and treating negative mental health has come at a cost. We know little about the psychology of flourishing and thriving in life. The current chapter seeks to help fill the gap left open by the neglect of the positive side of human nature. In particular, you will learn about the new field of positive psychology, which tends to emphasize positive well-being. **Positive well-being** may be defined as optimal adjustment to life and positive mental health. There are many examples of positive well-being. Perhaps the most studied of these is the subjective sense of satisfaction and happiness with the quality of one's life.

Relative to abnormal and clinical psychology, social psychology has been somewhat more balanced in terms of its concern with the negative and positive sides of human nature. Although it is true that social psychologists have given

attention to harmful and destructive aspects of the human condition, they have also studied the positive side of it. Because of this two-pronged approach, we currently know a lot about social psychological factors that cause or contribute to prejudice, discrimination, and aggression. Knowledge of variables that influence these phenomena has led to initiatives designed to lessen or prevent social inequity and other types of hurtful actions. In addition, social psychologists have improved understanding of positive and constructive processes such as altruism, helping, liking, and loving.

Recently, a small cadre of research psychologists has begun to study the relevance of social psychological theories and concepts to understanding positive well-being. We have dubbed this emerging specialized branch of scholarship **positive social psychology**. In the current chapter, you will learn more about this specialization, which has also been referred to as the interface of social psychology and positive psychology. Our general goal is to help you to better understand social-cognitive processes that make it more likely that a person will truly thrive and flourish in life. Our specific aim is to describe theory, research, and practical applications of the *expectancy construct*, that is, the role that expectations play in the lives of people. As such, we will concentrate on the social psychology of optimism (and pessimism). We will define and describe the nature of optimism and then identify its causes and its benefits. The main benefit of optimistic thinking is positive well-being. Consistent with the theme of this part of the book, special attention will be given to showing students how they can put their knowledge of optimism to use for purposes of upgrading the quality of their lives. Thus, in addition to describing theory and research, a major purpose of this chapter is to identify the practical relevance of this scholarship. To this end, we will suggest techniques that people can use to enhance their ability to think like an optimist. The specific technique or strategy we will offer is called attribution retraining (Forsterling, 2001). The more general term, *positive psychology coaching*, is the name that has been given to positive psychology technology as a whole (Biswas-Diener, 2010). This term has nothing to do with coaching in the context of athletics. It is more relevant to “life coaching.” Essentially, coaching techniques are self-help strategies that

research has shown are effective in helping to upgrade a person’s positive well-being.

After learning about the relevant scholarship and trying out some of the positive coaching techniques, you will learn that positive social psychology concerns itself with more than telling people to “don’t worry, be happy.” Using your own life as a case study, we believe you will see how the joint application of positive psychology and social psychology can help you feel a greater sense of satisfaction with your life. Toward the end of the chapter we will broaden the discussion to give a brief overview of other areas that fall under the umbrella of the rapidly emerging field of positive social psychology.

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## OPTIMISM

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### Introduction to Optimism–Pessimism

Imagine a science fiction movie in which people live in a world with no future. In such a world, there is no such thing as optimism. By definition, optimism is a type of thinking that requires a person to be mindful about his or her future goals. How optimistic are you that you will get an A on your next exam in this course? Would you say your chances are 80% or above? Maybe you have serious doubts and would say your chances are below 25%. Generally speaking, social psychologists would call you optimistic in the first case and pessimistic in the second case. From this example, you can see that optimism has to do with estimates of the future probability of reaching an important goal.

**Outcome expectancies of optimists and pessimists.** People who look forward to the future and see it as rosy differ from those who see it as bleak. The former (i.e., **optimists**) believe that good things are very likely to happen. Technically speaking, these people have *positive outcome expectancies* that significantly influence both their thinking and their approach to the world. The belief that a desirable goal in life (e.g., getting good grades) is attainable has incentive value for the individual; that is, it stimulates or energizes both one’s goal-directed thinking and one’s goal-directed action. Positive expectancies also cause people to be more persistent when pursuing their goals. Persistence or “grit” helps to inoculate people

against caving in to the temptation to give up on their efforts to attain their goals. Whereas optimistic expectancies facilitate constructive actions that are goal congruent, negative expectancies—those held by **pessimists**—have the opposite effect. People who doubt their chances of attaining desirable goals tend to withhold effort. Negative outcome expectancies act as disincentives. They tend to de-motivate people and produce destructive actions that are goal incongruent. This is why pessimists are more likely to quit or give up when faced with obstacles that block their progress toward goals.

People have expectancies for attaining a variety of valued goals in many different areas of their lives. It will come as no surprise that, in addition to having academic aspirations and expectancies, students have aspirations and expectancies for their romantic lives, social lives, and family lives. They also have career goals and goals for their physical and mental health. From your own personal experience, you probably know students who have strong convictions they will reach most of their goals in most spheres of their lives. On balance, their faith outweighs their doubt. You may also know a few people who harbor more doubt than conviction. Think about yourself and all the different goals in life that you aspire to reach. On balance, which are you: an optimist or a pessimist? Does it really matter? Why should you care about improving your understanding of your position along the continuum of optimism–pessimism? The previous paragraph clearly suggests whether a person is an optimist or a pessimist matters a great deal. Next we consider in what ways it matters.

**Consequences of outcome expectancies.** One of the main reasons that positive social psychologists study optimists and pessimists is that having positive or negative expectancies for the future can affect the quality of one's life. As you will see later in the chapter, research shows a person's level of optimism influences a wide range of life outcomes. To give you a "trailer" of "coming attractions," research has shown that compared with their pessimistic counterparts, people who hold optimistic expectancies enjoy better emotional well-being, better medical health, and better academic performance. Occupational research also shows that optimists outperform and even outearn pessimists in work-related achievement

domains. Last, but not least, optimists have people in their lives who give them more social support, and they also enjoy more satisfying romantic relationships. In conclusion, research suggests that optimists thrive and flourish in a greater number of life domains. Given that optimists tend to fulfill their potential more than pessimists, perhaps those of us with lives marked with unfulfilled potential in some areas can learn a few lessons by adopting more optimistic lifestyles.

For example, in the educational domain, let's take the case of a student who is attending the last year of high school, but who is (unrealistically) pessimistic about getting into college despite having good grades. Because of the negative expectancies, the student feels demoralized and does not bother to apply for higher education. This example illustrates a **self-fulfilling prophecy**: when the way you imagine the future leads you to behave in a manner that causes the imagined future to come true. Action (or inaction) follows belief (or disbelief). Self-fulfilling prophecies can have real-life consequences. For the student in question, making a pessimistic prediction about goal attainment easily could have long-term detrimental effects because it curbed educational advancement, which in turn likely would limit career options and future earnings potential. Thankfully, when you were in your last year of high school, you were more optimistic about your future in education. Your positive expectancies motivated you to actively pursue postsecondary school education. Happily, the optimistic prediction you had about your life paid off, and you are on the way to earning your degree.

Let's review the self-fulfilling prophecy process as it is relevant to any sphere of life in which people may or may not strive for valued goals. People—optimists—who believe their futures will be rosy in a given domain of life (e.g., relationships, career) are likely to actually take steps toward realizing their desired futures. For pessimists, however, negative expectancies act as disincentives, which de-motivate them. As a result, people who believe the future will be dark, cold, and wet tend to withhold effort, thereby increasing the chances that the undesirable future will actually happen. If you forecast warm and sunny "relationship weather," you increase your chances of making this happen. The reason is simple enough. The greater motivation of optimists

leads them to make a greater number of constructive coping efforts that move them closer and closer to their desired futures.

### Self-Assessment of Optimism–Pessimism

To facilitate your understanding of the conceptual information in this chapter, we encourage you to pause for a moment now and respond to a series of questions that we refer to as the self-assessment

inventory. The questions are designed to help you reflect on the future and the outcomes you expect to attain.

From a positive social psychological perspective, optimism is a domain-specific way of perceiving the future. You may be optimistic about some spheres of your life, but fall on the pessimistic side when thinking about other spheres. The self-assessment inventory is designed to help you to become more mindful of whether you are optimistic or pessimistic in several life domains.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT INVENTORY

We invite you to reflect on your future with respect to five domains of life. For each domain, a positive outcome is indicated. You are to think forward to a year after you graduate and use the following probability rating scale to indicate what you believe is the probability that you will actually achieve the positive outcome as stated.

0%    10%    20%    30%    40%    50%    60%    70%    80%    90%    100%

For each domain, select a probability between 0% and 100%. For instance, if you choose 10%, it means you believe there is very little likelihood that your life will be this way one year after graduation. The only requirement is to be honest with yourself. When answering, avoid giving in to the temptation to be unrealistically optimistic (i.e., avoid wishful thinking).

Write the probabilities that you select on a piece of paper. Carefully consider each question and select the probability that you will attain the stated outcome one year after graduation. Now please begin.

1. What are the chances you will be in a satisfying and fulfilling romantic relationship?
2. What are the chances you will be doing fun things with good friends?
3. What are the chances you will have excellent medical health?
4. What are the chances you will be very happy with your life?
5. What are the chances you will have a satisfying job or be working for an advanced degree that meets with your satisfaction?

Once you have answered all five questions, you can calculate your overall level of optimism by adding up the five selected probability scores and dividing by 5. Then you can identify your level of optimism–pessimism in accordance with the following classification:

80–100	high optimism
60–79	moderate optimism
40–59	balanced between optimism and pessimism
20–39	moderate pessimism
0–19	high pessimism

Interpretation of your results is straightforward. If, for example, your overall optimism score is somewhere in the 60–79 range, the measure suggests that you have an overall moderate level of optimism, whereas if your overall score is in the 20–39 range, a moderate level of pessimism is suggested. Thus, the average score that you receive across the five domains of optimism gives you some indication of the extent to which you are in general optimistic or pessimistic. Recognize that the self-assessment scale was developed specifically for the purpose of this chapter and may not meet the psychometric criteria that are required of established personal assessment measures. For instance, no attempt has been made to systematically determine various indices of reliability and validity. Nonetheless, to the extent that you conscientiously and candidly answered the five questions, the exercise may be regarded as providing personally relevant feedback concerning your level of optimism–pessimism.

Furthermore, we should also recognize that there are many spheres of life in which optimism plays a role, some of which are not tapped by the self-assessment scale (see if you can add a few to the list of five), and therefore the overall score is far from inclusive. Also, what may be of more pertinence and interest to you than the overall score are the indices of optimism–pessimism with respect to specific domains of life. As we noted earlier, for some people, optimism levels can vary substantially, including from one domain of life to the next. You can use the same classification scheme to identify your level of optimism–pessimism for each of the five domains.

If the results suggest that you have a mixed profile, we invite you to think of reasons why you might be more optimistic (or pessimistic) in one or more domains than in other domains. Use this self-assessment exercise as a means of helping you to explore this very important aspect of positive well-being—optimism—as it pertains to you. Later we will identify some factors that affect why people tend to be optimistic or pessimistic.

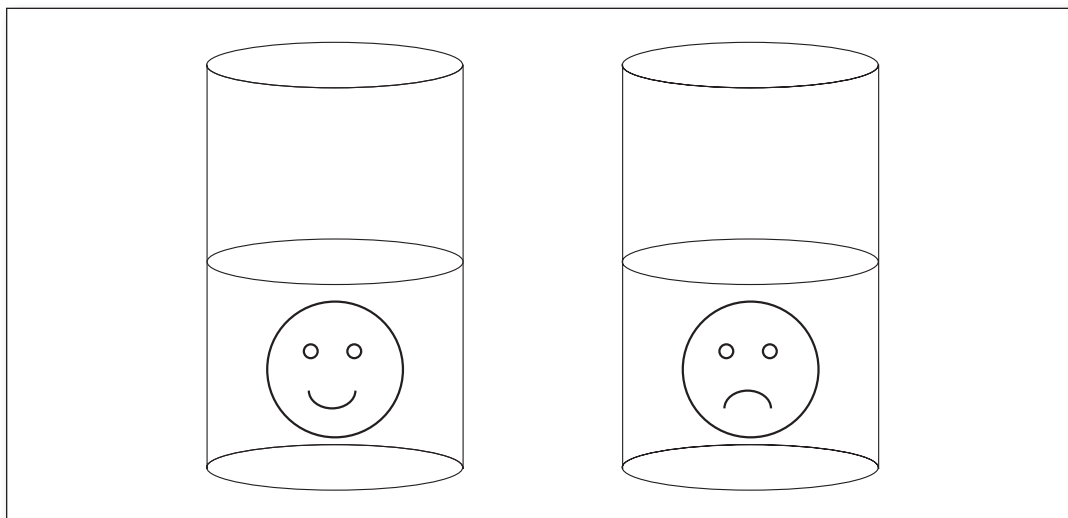
In the next section, we provide a fuller examination of the nature of optimism. We also show how social psychological theory is relevant to a scientific understanding of optimism. We discuss prominent theories that have been used to explain optimism, and we will apply the theories to the vignette at the beginning of this chapter.

## The Social Psychology of Optimism

Social psychologists have developed several theories to describe the processes underlying optimism and pessimism. Two theories are described here: Carver and Scheier's (2009) expectancy theory and Seligman's (2011) learned optimism theory. Common to both theories is the idea that optimism has little to do with the objective characteristics of the situation that can range from dire to ideal. Instead, optimism is a largely subjective perceptual phenomenon. As a mini learning exercise, we invite you to obtain and fill to the halfway mark two identical juice glasses. Be sure to fill both glasses exactly halfway. Set them side-by-side and focus your attention on the glass on the left. Using the power of your mind, see the glass as being half full. Try to sense, to experience, its fullness. This is how optimists experience the world. Now shift your gaze to the glass on the right. Focus your mind on the fact it is half empty. Experience its emptiness. If you can actually experience its emptiness, you will know how many pessimists tend to think when considering their future lives (see Figure 17.1).

In their conception of optimism, Scheier and Carver (1992) maintain that optimism presupposes that people are able to identify goals that exist in the future. There are *two basic kinds of goal*: things we want to happen (approach goals) and things we don't want to happen (avoidance goals). When thinking about the future, optimists believe that good things will be plentiful and that bad things will be rare. For instance, you might think it is important to get high marks on your future exams. According to Scheier and Carver, there are individual differences in the subjective probability that positive-valued goals will be realized and negative-valued goals will be averted. If you are an optimist, you will believe there is a high probability that you will both obtain high marks and avoid failing exams. On the other hand, if you are a pessimist, you will believe the probability is low that you will achieve high marks and avoid failing exams. By definition, optimists strongly expect good things will happen in the future. They believe they will get what they want. Conversely, pessimists strongly expect bad things will happen in the future. They believe they will get what they fear.

Using the power of your imagination, think forward to your next exam in this course and about the exercise involving the two juice glasses. With regard to what you expect as a grade on your next

**Figure 17.1** Is the glass half empty or half full?

exam, which glass do you most closely identify with? Does the “empty” glass come to mind, or are you thinking about the “full” glass? Keep in mind that it matters a lot whether you see life through the eyes of an optimist or a pessimist. During times of difficulty or goal frustration, optimistic thinking leads to continued efforts in the service of goal pursuit. In contrast, when the going gets tough, negative thinking does not get the person going.

**What determines if a person is an optimist or a pessimist?** There are many reasons why someone might see his or her future as being half full or half empty. You may recall that in Chapter 5 we mentioned Seligman’s learned helplessness theory of depression (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale [1978]). Seligman (2011) has modified that theory. His modification is called **learned optimism theory**. This theory identifies factors that determine whether someone is likely to think about the future in ways that are optimistic or pessimistic. According to Seligman, your expectancies for the future depend upon the kinds of attributions you make. An **attribution** is an inference about why something happened (also see, for example, Chapter 10). Seligman’s learned optimism theory classifies attributions along three dimensions: internal/external, stable/unstable, and global/specific. The types of attribution that people make affect the degree of optimism that they have for the future.

**Internal attributions** occur when individuals attribute events that happen to them internally, that is, to self-related causes. In contrast, **external attributions** occur when individuals attribute such events externally, that is, to things that are outside of themselves and often out of their control, such as luck or other people. Optimists tend to make internal attributions for positive events such as receiving a good mark (“I am responsible; something about me caused the good mark”), and they make external attributions for negative events such as receiving a poor mark (“I am not responsible; something else caused the bad mark”). On the other hand, pessimists tend to infer the opposite: They make external attributions—shun responsibility—for good events and make internal attributions—assume responsibility—for bad events.

**Stable attributions** are made when people attribute events to things that are not likely to change (e.g., level of intelligence, discriminatory practices). In contrast, **unstable attributions** are made when people attribute events to factors that are temporary (e.g., a head cold, bad weather). In this case, the event is explained as being due to a cause that is unusual and/or unlikely to occur often. Optimists tend to make stable attributions for good things that happen (i.e., the cause of this good event will continue to benefit me) and unstable attributions for bad things that happen (i.e., the cause is temporary

and thus unlikely to harm me again). The attributions of pessimists reflect the opposite pattern in which they see the cause of positive events as unstable and the cause of negative events as stable. Last, **global attributions** are made when people believe that the cause of an event will have wide-ranging effects. **Specific attributions** are made when people believe that the cause of an event will be limited to that area of life. Optimists tend to make global attributions for good events (i.e., the cause has benefited me in this area and also can benefit me in other areas), whereas they tend to make specific attributions for negative events (i.e., the cause has harmed me in this area but will not in other areas). As you might expect, pessimists tend to explain good and bad things that happen to them with the opposite pattern of attributions.

Peterson and Seligman (1984) suggest that people tend to adopt habitual ways of explaining why things happen in their lives. Consistent differences in the types of causal attributions that people make have been termed **explanatory style**. According to this framework, *differences in explanatory style can help to account for how people become optimists and pessimists*. You may have anticipated which pattern of causal attributions is associated with optimists and which pattern is associated with pessimists. An **optimistic explanatory style** (also called positive explanatory style) involves the following: Individuals make internal, stable, and global attributions to account for why good things happen to them. For example, "I got a good mark because I am smart." This explanation involves an internal attribution (my intelligence is the cause), a stable attribution (level of intelligence does not change), and a global attribution (high intelligence affects performance in other courses and areas of life). On the other hand, when bad things happen, the optimistic explanatory style involves external, unstable, and specific attributions. For example, "I got a poor mark because my neighbor had an all-night engagement party." This is an external attribution (the neighbor's party was the cause), an unstable attribution (engagement parties do not happen often), and a specific attribution (the negative effect of the party pertains only to this one exam).

Now a **pessimistic explanatory style** (also called negative explanatory style) involves a very different set of attributions than an optimistic explanatory style. The individual uses external,

unstable, and specific attributions to explain good things that happen to him or her. For example, "I received a good mark because I got lucky." This is an external attribution (good performance was seen as due to something outside of the self), an unstable attribution (luck changes), and a specific attribution (the luck helped with the exam performance but not with anything else). When bad things happen to the pessimist, he or she accounts for them by making internal, stable, and global attributions. For example, "I got a poor mark because I am not smart." This is an internal attribution (my low intelligence is the cause), a stable attribution (intelligence level does not change), and a global attribution (low intelligence negatively influences performance in other courses and areas of life).

Having considered the different explanatory styles of optimists and pessimists, including the examples provided, we expect that you have a clearer understanding of how optimists think and how pessimists think and in particular of the marked differences in how they account for the good and bad things that happen to them. When a good thing occurs, optimistic people lay claim to it, see themselves as responsible for its occurrence, expect to be able to accomplish it again, and expect to accomplish similar good things in other areas of their lives. Pessimists, on the other hand, see something or someone other than themselves as responsible for the occurrence of the good thing and think it is unlikely to occur again (or often) in similar or different situations. Optimists and pessimists "trade" patterns of attributions when a bad thing happens. Simply put, pessimists blame themselves; optimists do not.

**Case example of a pessimist.** Recall the vignette about Deena at the beginning of the chapter. Even before reading any more of this chapter, it is quite likely that you identified Deena as a pessimistic thinker. If you had done so, you would have been correct. Let us analyze that scenario from the standpoint of the social psychological concepts that we have considered.

The vignette begins with Deena waiting for Jim to pick her up for their first date. On the surface, this had the potential to be a good date. Deena was an attractive young woman (as described in the Chapter 5 vignette), was very attracted to Jim, and, on at least one level, was excited about the date with Jim. However, leading up to the date, Deena was plagued by negative



outcome expectancies (e.g., about the impression she would make and how she often “screwed up first dates”). The negative expectancies, as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, set in motion negative thoughts that threatened to sabotage the date (thoughts about calling it off) even before it had begun.

We see evidence of Deena’s attributional style. As noted, she made internal attributions for previous unsuccessful first dates. Also notice when a seemingly minor negative event occurred with Jim not arriving exactly on time, Deena overreacted by entertaining the possibility that once again she may have done something—behaved awkwardly, hadn’t washed her hair—to undermine a date (this time even before it happened). Jim’s being a little tardy triggered other pessimistic thoughts, including him having second thoughts and not being interested in her and she questioning her interest in him. We see further evidence of Deena’s pessimistic explanatory style when after the date she reflected on the evening with Jim, which involved the two having a fun time together (e.g., good conversation, lots of laughter). In typical pessimistic fashion, Deena explained this positive event (a good thing that happened to her) by disclaiming responsibility for causing it (she hadn’t “done much to make it fun”) and pointing to external, largely temporary (unstable) and situation-specific causes, including the wine, the movie, and Jim’s sense of humor. Furthermore, we can see that Deena’s negative thinking and attributions throughout the scenario served to reinforce her negative outcome expectancies for the future so that she doubted that Jim would call her, but if he did, it would be unlikely that a second date would be as successful as the first.

Imagine the scenario involving Deena and Jim if Deena had been an optimist instead of a pessimist and how her positive outcome expectancies and optimistic explanatory style would have guided her thinking and actions. We expect that she would have eagerly and with few, if any, concerns looked forward to the date with Jim. She would have barely given a thought to his not arriving exactly on time, freely enjoyed the evening with Jim (even more so than pessimist Deena), never questioned her contribution to the date’s success, expected to receive a call from Jim, and looked forward to another fun time with him. Quite a difference is apparent in the romantic relationship lives of the two Deenas. Clearly, there

are benefits that stem from being an optimist. In the next section, we consider some of the benefits.

## The Benefits of Optimism

There is an abundance of research that suggests optimism facilitates optimal adjustment (social, psychological, physical) across a variety of spheres of life. We will consider the benefits of optimism in six spheres: romantic relationships, friendships, biomedical health, mental and emotional health, work, and college. In this section, we review a small portion of the large body of research that is consistent in pointing to the advantages of optimistic thinking in contrast to pessimistic thinking. Some of the studies used an overall (dispositional) measure of optimism, whereas other studies used a domain-specific measure. Regardless of the kind of measure used, the research consistently points to the benefits of optimistic thinking. In some cases, we indicate what the study suggests about why and how optimism exerts its beneficial influence.

**Romantic relationships.** Research has suggested that optimism has positive effects on the well-being of couples involved in dyadic romantic relationships. In one study (Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007), greater optimism among relationship members was associated with better relationship satisfaction, happiness, and functioning. The findings suggest that the positive outcomes might have been due to the fact that optimistic couples tended to engage in more cooperative problem solving than pessimistic couples. Another study involved couples in which the woman was being treated for breast cancer (Abend & Williamson, 2002). Compared with more pessimistic women, optimistic women reported that their partners found them to be more physically attractive and were more available to give support and nurturance. Also, levels of relationship disagreement were lower in couples with more optimistic women.

**Friendships.** The quality of nonromantic friendships has also been found to be higher in friendships consisting of optimists compared with pessimists. For example, optimism among friends has been shown to be positively correlated with the perceived availability of social support and with support reciprocity and negatively correlated with levels of interpersonal conflict (Friedman et al., 2006; Sumi, 2006).

**Biomedical health.** There is an extensive base of evidence suggesting optimism contributes to positive biomedical health outcomes. In a study of psychological factors that influence women's biological responses (e.g., estradiol levels) to fertility treatment, Lancaster and Boivin (2005) found that optimism is associated with a better response and that this effect was explained as likely due to optimists' higher levels of emotional calm and lower levels of negative emotional reactivity. Mulkana and Hailey (2001) investigated why lower levels of medical symptoms are found in persons who score high on optimism. Among university students, they found better health-related lifestyle habits in optimists and suggested that health-enhancing lifestyle behaviors likely serve to protect and preserve the health of optimists.

**Mental and emotional health.** The evidence supporting a link between optimism and mental health likewise is convincing. Affleck, Tennen, and Apter (2001) investigated emotional well-being in persons suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, and fibromyalgia. Their results indicated that day-to-day levels of happiness were positively related to optimism, whereas levels of sadness were inversely related to optimism. The authors suggested that optimists are better able to regulate their moods than are pessimists. Similar results have been found with healthy employed adults. For example, a Finnish study showed that optimistic employees suffered from less emotional exhaustion (burnout) and mental distress than pessimistic employees (Makikangas & Kinnunen, 2003).

**Work.** Research has strongly suggested optimism contributes to better performance and better adjustment in occupational settings. In a study by Segerstrom (2007), former law students were followed for over 10 years after they graduated. The results showed that more optimistic first-year law students made more money 10 years later. It was suggested that this effect can be explained by higher levels of effort and persistence. Other research has shown that job satisfaction, work happiness, and organizational commitment are all higher in optimists (Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

**College.** Of immediate relevance to you is evidence that indicates an appreciable connection between the levels of optimism and college

student performance and retention. Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) demonstrated a direct relationship between positive outcome expectancies (optimism) and college grades. In addition, Nes, Evans, and Segerstrom (2009) explored the role that optimism might play with respect to college retention, noting that predictors of retention are especially important to identify given the fact that the average annual income of adults with a bachelor's degree is almost 90% greater than that of adults with a high school diploma. The researchers found support for their prediction that students with high scores on optimism would be less likely to drop out of college than students with low scores.

What makes optimism more beneficial than pessimism in the context of being a full-time student who is studying for a degree? Some answers to this question were hinted at in the research covering the benefits of optimism earlier in this section. At this point, let us examine the idea that optimistic students cope with the stresses of their education more effectively. A number of studies have examined the roles of optimism and pessimism in the employment of two basic types of coping strategy: problem-focused coping (also known as approach-oriented coping) and emotion-focused coping (also known as avoidance-oriented coping). **Problem-focused coping** involves engaging in behaviors (words, deeds, cognitions) that are aimed at modifying a stressful situation that is perceived by the individual to be controllable and amenable to change. **Emotion-focused coping** involves behaviors and cognitions that do not directly address the source of stress; instead they aim to reduce the individual's level of emotional distress. Avoidance strategies involve cognitive or behavioral distraction or withdrawal.

Aspinwall and Taylor (1992) studied approach- and avoidance-oriented coping in university students who were undergoing a high degree of academic stress. Their findings showed that optimistic students coped better than pessimistic students. In particular, optimists were more likely to use direct, problem-focused coping strategies. The optimists were more likely to seek out and find new friends and to ask other students for help. Also, they studied harder for exams and were less likely to report wanting to give up. Pessimistic students, on the other hand, were more likely to employ emotion-focused coping strategies including the following kinds of behavior: They avoided

thinking about deadlines, disengaged from studying and preparing for classes, procrastinated, and became distracted by irrelevant (to academic progress) social activities. Pessimists also engaged in more wishful-thinking coping, which tends to be passive and not very constructive. As a result of their different modes of coping, the problems faced by pessimists tended to fester and get worse, whereas the problems confronted by optimists tended to be taken care of more effectively. Because this study by Aspinwall and Taylor tracked students' emotional well-being/adjustment over time, it provides evidence consistent with the following causal chain of influence: Initial optimism leads to the use of effective coping responses, which in turn contribute to both better psychological well-being/adjustment and better academic performance.

### Positive Coaching Exercises

A wide variety of coaching techniques has been studied by scholars who conduct research at the interface of social psychology and positive psychology. These techniques tend to be brief and psychoeducational in nature, and when they are enacted by individuals themselves, they represent personal interventions, the focus of this part of the book. That is, individuals draw on social psychological theory and evidence to develop a strategy directed at improving their functioning in some area of life. Coaching exercises that involve disputing pessimistic causal attributions (i.e., maladaptive attributions) and replacing them with optimistic attributions (i.e., adaptive attributions) are commonly referred to as **attribution retraining interventions**. Attribution retraining has been shown to improve many aspects of human functioning, including, for example, prevention of depression (Reivich, Gillham, Chaplin, & Seligman, 2005), increase in academic performance (Berkeley, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011), improvement in benefits from couples and family therapy (Hilt, 2003), increase in happiness (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010), reduction in aggressive behavior (Hudley, Graham, & Taylor, 2007), increase in achievement motivation (Perry, Hechter, Menec, & Weinberg, 1993), and enhanced consideration of career goals (Szabo, 2006).

In this section of the chapter, we invite you to take advantage of the opportunity to upgrade your quality of life by engaging in an attribution retraining exercise. The concepts and theories we have discussed so far will have no practical

benefit in terms of upgrading the quality of your life unless you make a special effort to put them into action. This means you will need to find time to practice the techniques. Some students may only want “head knowledge” of the principles we have discussed. If this is true in your case, you can read through the rest of this section to achieve an understanding of the process of attribution retraining and then move on to the rest of the chapter. However, before doing so, remember the section on the benefits of optimism and the compelling advantages that people who think optimistically have over people who think pessimistically in a wide diversity of areas of life. We believe that virtually anyone has something to gain from supplementing his or her cognitive understanding with “experiential understanding.”

It is perhaps an oversimplification, but we distinguish between three categories of people who may be involved in attribution retraining: those who are pessimists (moderate or high), those who are on the border between optimism and pessimism, and those who are optimists (moderate or high). The self-assessment inventory that you completed earlier in the chapter may help you identify your category either for the overall score or for each individual domain. However, regardless of a person's category, the overriding goal is the same—to have positive (and realistic) outcome expectancies with respect to an important domain of life or important domains of life. This is the key to becoming involved in attribution retraining. You must acknowledge the importance to you of thinking as an optimist (i.e., having positive outcome expectancies) with regard to significant areas of your life. Remember that positive expectancies energize and motivate the individual to expend effort toward the achievement of goals, whereas negative outcome expectancies do the opposite—they de-energize and de-motivate the individual. Also, you must remember that a person's explanatory style has a significant influence on his or her outcome expectancies, with a positive explanatory style contributing to and undergirding positive expectancies and a negative explanatory style undermining them and supporting the development and maintenance of negative expectancies.

The process of attribution retraining centers on changing (i.e., retraining) the causal attributions that people make for positive and negative things that happen to them in particular domains

of their lives. As you would expect, pessimists must undergo more change in their attribution styles than those who are somewhere between optimism and pessimism who in turn have to engage in more change than optimists. In the case of high optimists, the term *retraining* may not be especially applicable as these individuals may, for the most part, have to simply review and verify their attribution styles and recommit to them. Needless to say, structured attribution retraining programs do not routinely involve people who have positive outcome expectancies with respect to the domain area in question. To provide you with guidance about attribution retraining, we will briefly consider two domains as a means of illustrating the process of attribution retraining: education and romantic relationships. However, the process and principles that are illustrated also are relevant to attribution retraining in other spheres of life.

***Attribution retraining in the academic domain.***

With regard to the domain of concern (in this case the academic domain), the first step is to take some time to examine the kinds of attribution that you typically make when you experience successful outcomes (e.g., satisfactory grades) and unsuccessful outcomes (e.g., unsatisfactory grades). As you carry out this retraining exercise, you may find it helpful to write down the ideas that come to your mind. Think of a few successful academic outcomes that you have had in the recent past and the causal attributions that you may have made at the time or now make. If you make an external and unstable attribution such as good luck or an unusually easy test, this is undesirable because you are not assigning responsibility for the positive event to yourself. Do your best to identify an internal and potentially stable cause such as the good grade being a reflection of your ability/knowledge or your effort/hard work. Such explanations help to encourage expectations of continued success (i.e., stability), possibly enhancing your performance in other courses as well (i.e., global attribution).

Likewise, think of some unsuccessful academic outcomes that you had in the recent past and attributions that you made (or now make) in explaining them. It is especially undesirable if you tend to explain negative academic outcomes as the result of lack of ability because a person has little or no control over such a stable factor and as such the attribution merely reinforces and

sustains negative outcome expectations. Be very careful not to assume that you have low ability for the subject matter of a course because admission to your school signifies that the admissions staff evaluated you as of sufficient intelligence to succeed and graduate from their institution. More than likely there are other students whose ability level is at your ability level or lower and who have achieved quite satisfactorily in the course in question.

Do your best to change the attribution from ability/intelligence to either bad luck or lack of effort (unstable causes), because both leave open the possibility of improved performance in the future. Now that you have taken a first step in changing your explanatory style regarding academic performance, periodically repeat the exercise, especially when newly relevant academic outcomes occur, so that with time you should experience movement toward a more functional (i.e., optimistic) explanatory style and, accordingly, more positive outcome expectancies with their self-fulfilling properties, including increased motivation, effort, persistence, and rewards.

***Attribution retraining in the romantic relationship domain.***

The relationship between Deena and Jim, described in the opening vignette, falls into this domain category as a new romantic relationship. Recall that at one point Deena had apparently thought of Jim as possibly her “Mr. Right.” At the end of the section, “The Social Psychology of Optimism,” we included a social psychological analysis of that early stage of Deena and Jim’s relationship, which revealed Deena’s pessimistic outcome expectancies and explanatory style. We will not repeat that information here but suggest that Deena would be a prime candidate for attribution retraining in that her maladaptive attributions were seriously interfering with her ability to adjust well to her social world. The objective of attribution retraining would be to help her alter her attributions for bad and good relationship events in such a way that she would not so readily see herself as the cause of negative events and not so readily exclude herself as a significant causal factor with regard to positive events.

Now we ask you to think back to a time when you were in a romantic relationship that ended poorly with your partner initiating the breakup and leaving you with angry and/or hurt feelings. If this kind of situation has not happened to you, use the power of your imagination to think up a

likely scenario. (Another possibility would be for you to think in terms of a friendship relationship that ended with the other person severing the ties.) Reflect for a few moments about the reason(s) for the breakup, including what you regard is the single most important cause of the relationship breakdown. Conduct an analysis of the attributions you have made. If you made an internal attribution and believe that something about you caused the breakup, we caution that certain kinds of internal attribution will tend to dampen your optimism and increase your pessimism about future romantic relationships. Attributions for past negative events, such as a partner-initiated breakup, that are both internal and stable (thus not under your control), should be avoided because they hinder optimism and breed pessimism. For example, you may think the relationship ended because you are unlovable or not sufficiently attractive. Your cognition is that you caused the breakup due to a characteristic of yours that will continue to threaten future romantic relationships. Such a cognition promotes and reinforces pessimistic outcome expectancies.

If you make an internal attribution for the breakup, an unstable cause is preferable because you may see yourself at fault, but a reoccurrence of the cause having a similar effect is not necessarily likely to happen. This is closer to the way optimists think. For example, maybe you made some faulty choices. Bad decision making identifies you as the cause, but future decisions do not have to continue to be problematic. Moreover, try to come up with an attribution that is even more consistent with the

optimistic explanatory style. Optimists tend to make external attributions for bad events. For example, if you attributed the breakup to a change in life circumstances of your partner (he or she had to move to a distant city), we would classify this as both an external attribution and one that is unstable. Take a moment to reflect on other aspects of the explanation you offered for the breakup. If you made stable attributions, think again. Finally, if you made a global attribution, think again. Try to come up with a specific attribution that is potentially true. The goal is to tilt the balance so that optimism tends to outweigh pessimism.

Now that you have engaged in some attribution retraining concerning your academic performance and your romantic relationships, consider how you can extrapolate the approach to explaining good and bad events in other domains of your life. To improve the breadth of your optimism for the future, try to re-explain your past failures (and successes) in other spheres of life. Ask yourself why bad things happened and why good things happened. Write down explanations for why these things happened. The more time you can spend questioning and disputing negative attributions, the better. By getting enough practice replacing negative attributions with positive ones, you will be able to teach yourself how to be more optimistic about the future. While it is impossible to always be 100% optimistic in all domains of your life, it is possible to eliminate stubborn patterns of habitual pessimism, patterns that are self-limiting and self-defeating. Research suggests the payoff is an upgraded quality of life.



### CULTURE CAPSULE: EAST–WEST DIFFERENCES IN THE OPTIMISTIC BIAS

Are North Americans more prone to optimism than people from the Far East? People who believe good things are more likely to occur in their own lives relative to the lives of others (and who think bad things are relatively less likely) may be said to score high on optimism. Some scholars have called skewed results of comparative judgments **optimistic bias**. For instance, people who score high on optimistic bias would think their chances of winning the Powerball lottery in the future are better than the comparative chances of others and also would believe they are less likely than others to get into a serious car accident. In contrast, when thinking about their futures, people who believe bad things are more likely to occur (and who thereby think good things are less likely) are said to score low on optimistic bias. In other words, some people have a **pessimistic bias**. Such people would tend to believe their own chances of winning the lottery and getting into a car accident are lower and higher, respectively, than the comparative chances of others.

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Research by Chang, Asakawa, and Sanna (2001) has examined the question of cultural differences in optimistic bias. In their study, Japanese (representing Easterners) were compared to European Americans (representing Westerners). Based on the evidence that Westerners are more sensitive to positive information about themselves (i.e., in line with the Western cultural norm supporting self-enhancement) and Easterners are more sensitive to negative information about themselves (i.e., in line with the Eastern cultural norm supporting self-criticism), the authors hypothesized that Westerners would show an optimistic bias for both positive and negative events and Easterners would show a pessimistic bias for both positive and negative events.

In two studies, students at the University of Michigan (the Westerners) and students at Shikoku Gakuin University (the Easterners) filled out self-report questionnaires that measured degrees of optimistic bias and pessimistic bias. As predicted, the Westerners believed that it was less likely that bad things would happen to them relative to others. This finding was interpreted as evidence of an optimistic bias for negative events. It is easy to see how such a “bias” might help give a person a subjective sense of safety and security. Contrary to prediction, Easterners also believed that it is less likely that negative events would happen to them. This unexpected finding suggests there was no East–West difference in people’s optimistic bias for negative events—both groups showed an optimistic bias.

A cultural difference was found, however, for positive events. As hypothesized, the Easterners showed a pessimistic bias for future good events—they tended to believe that good things are more likely to happen to others than to themselves. Curiously, when forecasting the chances of good things happening in the future, Westerners had neither an optimistic (which had been hypothesized) nor a pessimistic bias. In sum, the results provided evidence of a cultural difference but only in pessimistic bias regarding positive events.

It should be noted the study entailed a correlational research design; thus, inferences about cause-and-effect relationships must remain tentative. That is, we cannot conclude that the American–Japanese difference in pessimistic bias concerning positive events was caused by differences in culture. Also, stronger conclusions about East–West differences must await replication of the results in a wider representation of cultural groups.

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## **BROADENING THE PERSPECTIVE ON POSITIVE WELL-BEING**

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The purpose of this section is to help to expand your awareness of the scope of positive psychology beyond the topic of optimism. In the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that many of the theories and concepts being studied in the field of positive psychology have their origins in the field of social psychology. One of the more obvious examples of this cross-fertilization involves the branch of attribution theory that was originally concerned with understanding why some people are particularly vulnerable to depression. What started as research on the depressogenic explanatory style morphed, over time, into research on learned optimism. The person who was chiefly responsible for this transformation is social psychologist Martin Seligman. Seligman is also one of the founding fathers of the field of positive psychology. His most recent book on positive psychology is titled *Flourish* (2011). We recommend the book to people who are interested

in maximizing their potential to thrive and upgrade the quality of their lives.

Hart and Sasso (2011) have identified four broad themes that define the subject matter of concern to positive psychology. Because research shows optimism can upgrade the quality of a person’s life in a number of ways, it is a topic that attracts a great deal of scholarly attention. By itself, however, optimism is not one of the four main themes that describe the field of positive psychology. Instead, it is a member of a close-knit family that consists of a constellation of positive personality traits, such as hardiness, sense of coherence, emotional intelligence, gratitude, and hope. The name of the theme of this cluster is *character, strengths, and virtues*. Let us briefly consider the topic of hope, which, in addition to optimism, is one of the positive personality traits.

*Research on hope* has become very popular due to the work of C. R. Snyder, who is well known for pioneering scholarship at the interface of social psychology and clinical psychology. Snyder (2002) has defined hope as the positive personality trait

that arises when two psychological conditions (see below) coexist simultaneously. When these conditions converge, a person is apt to experience strong positive expectancies concerning the occurrence of future events or situations. You will recognize this type of expectancy as optimism. As a member of the family of positive personality traits, hope is a “sister” to optimism. Similar to the concept of optimism, the concept of hope assumes that high-functioning people organize their lives around the pursuit of important goals.

According to Snyder (2002), hope arises in people when they score above average on two kinds of thinking. The first kind is called **pathway thinking**. People score high on pathway thinking when they know what steps to take to reach a goal. Not only do they know the means to reach the goal; they see many workable routes. Thus, if one route is blocked, they find it easy to think outside the box in order to identify creative alternative solutions. The second kind of thinking that gives rise to hope is called **agency thinking**. Snyder describes this as a blending of willpower and sense of mastery. People who score high on agency thinking are very strongly committed to achieving goals that they see as being important (i.e., have willpower). In addition to having very high levels of energy/motivation, these people also have high self-efficacy (i.e., sense of mastery). In other words, they feel confident in their ability to implement the steps that they believe will lead to goal attainment. People who score above average on *both* pathway thinking and agency thinking are said to have high levels of hope. When these two elements converge, all sorts of benefits are likely to result. Research shows these benefits rival those that are enjoyed by optimists (e.g., Gillham, 2000).

In addition to the theme of positive personality traits, the three other themes that define the content of the field of positive psychology, as identified by Hart and Sasso (2011), are (a) resilience and positive coping under conditions of adversity, (b) subjective happiness and life satisfaction, and (c) the developmental process of self-actualization and personal growth. To learn more about the four content areas of positive psychology, we encourage you to read *Positive Psychology: The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths* (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011), which reviews theories related to positive psychology and provides practical advice on how to implement a number of positive coaching techniques.

## SUMMARY

This chapter serves as an introduction to positive psychology, the branch of psychology that emphasizes positive well-being, which is defined as optimal adjustment to life and positive mental health. There is a close connection between positive psychology and social psychology in that theory and research in social psychology have contributed considerably to understanding positive well-being. At the intersection between positive psychology and social psychology is the study of optimism (and pessimism), which represents the main focus of this chapter.

The nature of a person’s outcome expectancies is central to the definitions of optimism and pessimism. Optimists expect their futures will bring them positive outcomes (good things will happen to them), whereas pessimists believe their futures will bring them negative outcomes (bad things will happen to them). Outcome expectancies significantly guide and influence individuals’ thinking and approach to the world and act as self-fulfilling prophecies. Research indicates that people who hold optimistic outcome expectancies enjoy positive well-being in many domains of life; there truly are benefits of thinking optimistically as opposed to pessimistically.

An important distinction is between an optimistic (positive) explanatory style and a pessimistic (negative) explanatory style. Individuals who use the optimistic style make internal, stable, and global attributions to explain the causes of good things that happen to them and make external, unstable, and specific attributions to account for bad things that happen. People who use the pessimistic explanatory style demonstrate the opposite pattern, that is, external, unstable, and specific attributions for the good things and internal, stable, and global attributions for the bad things. Not surprisingly, people who use the optimistic explanatory style and those who use the pessimistic explanatory style are likely to become optimists and pessimists, respectively. Attribution retraining is an intervention designed to help a pessimist replace his or her maladaptive pessimistic explanatory style with a more adaptive optimistic explanatory style. The reader is provided with guidance on how to carry out attribution retraining with respect to any sphere of life about which he or she has negative outcome expectancies.