"Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better":

Do Optimistic Evaluations of One's Skills Predict Positive Life Outcomes?

Patrick L. Hill, Jordan H. Drackett, Daniel K. Lapsley

Abstract

Past research has suggested that individuals are often optimistic about their abilities compared to others. The current study evaluated whether this outlook predicted positive life outcomes. In a longitudinal study, college seniors evaluated their abilities in comparison to individuals their age and their development during college. These individuals then completed a survey evaluating life outcomes at midlife. Senior self-evaluations positively predicted their college development at T1, and satisfaction with life and hope at T2. These results suggest that having an optimistic view of one's capabilities during emerging adulthood can provide both distal and proximal psychological benefits.

Background

Past research has indicated that accurately assessing information available to you, or "being realistic" is the mark of mental health (Jahoda, 1958). However, Taylor and Brown (1988) discovered that people are healthier mentally if their sense of reality is focused in a positive direction. "Realistic" optimism may be particularly consequential when considering future goals. When thinking about the future, realistic optimism creates an overriding perspective on goal striving or problem solving that depicts the situation as a challenge, rather than a chore. Positive approach motivation leads to greater persistence, greater flexibility in strategies to reach a goal, greater creativity in solutions, better outcomes, and a higher subjective well-being (Schneider, 2001). In comparison, a negative approach to your undertakings may not be as conducive to your subjective happiness and success in the future.

In the current study, we evaluated whether having a optimistic view of your abilities in different fields may lead to positive life outcomes. We asked college seniors to rate their abilities on multiple traits with respect to the average person your age. After graduation, these individuals were assessed at mid-life with respect to multiple outcomes. As these individuals did graduate from college, it appears as though they would be relatively justified in viewing their skills optimistically compared to others their age. Therefore, we would expect that those individuals with more optimistic estimates of their abilities may be more prone to positive proximal and distal life outcomes.

Method and Reliabilities

Participants: 416 (57% male) senior undergraduates prior to graduation at T1; 399 (55% male) of which were assessed alumni at midlife (M_{age} = 35 years)

Reliabilities of Interest: College Development (α = .83); Satisfaction with Life (α = .87); Hope Scale - Self-Agency (α = .87); Hope Scale - Pathways to a Goal (α = .86)

Method: All participants completed a brief survey during their senior year at Notre Dame (T1). Alumni were then asked to take part in an online follow-up survey 14 years after graduation (T2). Participation was completely voluntary, and compensation was not provided at either time point.

Comparative Optimism Measure (Overall α = .79)

Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age. We want the most accurate estimate of how you see yourself using the following scale: Highest 10%, Above Average, Average, Below Average, Lowest 10%.

	Item M (sd)	α If Deleted
Academic Ability	4.30 (.67)	.78
Artistic Ability	2.97 (.95)	.80
Competitiveness	3.93 (.88)	.77
Drive to Achieve	4.17 (.75)	.77
Emotional Health	4.05 (.89)	.77
Mathematical Ability	3.83 (.90)	.80
Physical Health	3.89 (.79)	.77
Popularity	3.64 (.73)	.76
Popularity w/ opposite sex	3.51 (.79)	.77
Public Speaking Ability	3.61 (.88)	.77
Self-confidence (Intellectual)	4.11 (.73)	.76
Self-confidence (Social)	3.79 (.84)	.76
Understanding of Others	4.12 (.75)	.78
Writing Ability	3.81 (.85)	.78

Results

Tests for Group Differences in Comparative Optimism

Sex: t(408) = -4.09, p < .001
Males M = 54.75; Females M = 52.39

Changed Major During College: t(324) = 1.33, p > .1

Changed Career Plans: t(345) < 1

College GPA: r(409) = .06, p > .1

Regression Analyses Controlling for Gender and GPA

Predicting College Development (T1)

Comparative Optimism, β = .43, p < .001
College GPA, β = .11, p < .05
Sex, β = .00, p > .9

Predicting Satisfaction with Life (T2)

Comparative Optimism, β = .16, p < .01
Sex, β = -.12, p < .05
College GPA, β = -.07, p > .1

Predicting Hope - Self-Agency (T2)

Comparative Optimism, β = .32, p < .001
Sex, β = -.15, p < .01
College GPA, β = -.07, p > .1

Predicting Hope - Pathways to a Goal (T2)

Comparative Optimism, β = .23, p < .001
College GPA, β = -.10, p < .1
Sex, β = .02, p > .1

Conclusions

The current study evaluated whether optimism in one's own skills predicts proximal and distant positive life outcomes. Presumably, feeling better about one's abilities should lead to more positive outcomes. This prediction was supported by four analyses.

First, comparative optimism predicted a greater sense of development during college. Second, it predicted greater satisfaction with life 14 years after college. Third, it predicted greater hope as a result of self-agency, and as a result of finding multiple pathways to achieving a goal.

Importantly, optimism in one's skills appears to be a separate construct from measures of actual ability. Despite having several items related to academic ability, it was unrelated to one's college GPA. Additionally, it predicted all four positive life outcomes, when controlling for GPA. Therefore, it appears as though one can consider these "optimistic" appraisals, and not necessarily "realistic," at least with respect to academic skills.

Future Directions

Based on these results, we suggest three possible avenues for future research. First, the construct of optimism in one's skills should be better connected to other constructs in the literature. One critical option would be to evaluate its link to optimism bias. Optimism bias is generally defined as the belief that positive outcomes are more likely to happen to oneself, while negative outcomes are more likely to occur to others. While our measure asked participants to compare themselves to others on these skills, it is uncertain whether comparative optimism in one's abilities would necessarily relate to comparative optimism regarding life outcomes.

Second, one intriguing finding was the sex differences in our sample. We did not expect males to have greater optimism in their skills than females. Future research needs to better evaluate whether this differs with different samples, from other colleges and the general population.

Third, it will be of interest to examine whether optimism in one's skills counterindicates negative life outcomes. We did not include measures of negative outcomes at either time point, and therefore future research should evaluate whether optimistic appraisals could "buffer" one against negative outcomes.