Optimism:
The past, present, and future of a positive trait

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1. Optimism: What is it?

- Expectations about the personal future (Carver & Scheier, 1982)
- Continuum: Expect negative vs. positive outcomes
1. Optimism: How is it studied?

• Measurement: Self-report questions
  (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Scheier et al., 1994)

  – In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.

  – If something can go wrong for me, it will.
1. Optimism: How is it studied?

- Measurement: Self-report questions
  (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Scheier et al., 1994)

- Focus: Life in general (vs. specific events, domains)

- Stable over time

- Trait: “dispositional optimism”, general way of thinking
1. Optimism: What do we know?

- Higher levels of optimism linked with ‘positive’ things
  - Higher well-being
  - Less mental illness
  - Stronger social bonds
  - Professional success
  - Less physical impairment/illness
1. Optimism: How does it work?

- Control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Carver et al., 2010)
1. Optimism: How does it work?

- Self-fulfilling prophecy
  - Expectation = good things
  - Behavior = effective, adaptive
  - Result = greater success in life
1. Optimism: How does it work?

• Anticipated future: central role
  – Definition
  – Explaining how it works

• But ... future does not exist in a temporal vacuum
  – Subjective experience of time:

→ Implications for optimism?
2. Temporal perspective: What is it?

- How people think about, respond to subjective time
  - Memories about the past
  - Experiences of the present
  - Expectations of the future
2. Temporal perspective: What is it?

• Most research focuses on one temporal period, but ...

• Important intersections
  – Life narratives
  – Self-identity
  – Self-evaluation
  – Cognition, perception, neuroscience
2. Temporal perspective: What do we know?

• Fundamental connections among temporal periods
  – How we view our lives *in the past, at present, in the future*
Optimism: Past, Present, & Future

2. Temporal perspective: Why do we care?

- Optimism
  - Understood as a future-oriented trait
  - More to understand using a temporal lens?
  - Roles of the subjective past and present?

→ Optimism from a temporally-expanded perspective
3. Optimism through a temporal lens

- My research: compare optimists and pessimists
  - How they view their past, present, and future lives
    - Life evaluations, temporal focus
    - Links with positive outcomes

Busseri, Choma, & Sadava (2009), *Personality and Individual Differences.*
3. Optimism through a temporal lens

- Do optimists view their lives positively?

- Optimists vs. pessimists
  - biggest difference ~ expectations for the future?
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- General belief: (my) “life gets better and better”
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Optimists vs. pessimists

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<th>Past</th>
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<th>Future</th>
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<td>Subjective temporal period</td>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>Optimists</td>
<td>Pessimists</td>
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“The best is yet to come!”
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Younger adults (<45 yrs) vs. older adults (>70 yrs)
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

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3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

• Connections among subjective temporal periods
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Connections among subjective temporal periods
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Links with positive outcomes
  - Anything unique about optimism? … no!

- Well-being
- Social connections
- Physical health
- Active coping
3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Optimism across subjective temporal periods:
  - Positive orientation to one’s life
Optimism: Past, Present, & Future

3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Optimism across subjective temporal periods:
  
  → Positive orientation to one’s life

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3. Optimism, temporal lens: What do we know?

- Optimism across subjective temporal periods:
  - Positive orientation to one’s life
  - Broad positive cognitive bias

3. Optimism, temporal lens: Why do we care?

- Implications for research and theory
  - Interpreting findings about optimism
    - Central role of anticipated future?
  - Understanding how optimism works
    - Pull of the future vs. power of positive orientation to one’s life?
3. Optimism, temporal lens: Why do we care?

- Implications for practice
  - Expecting a brightER future may not be optimistic (?!)
  - Young optimists (expect stability) vs. old (expect decline)
  - Focusing on future vs. past, present, future
    - A plan and a path connecting ‘now’ to ‘then’
4. Conclusions

- Subjective temporal perspective $\rightarrow$ new insights
- Expecting a bright future vs. brightER future
- Power of optimism $\rightarrow$ positive orientation