Does optimism help us during a pandemic?

Optimists tend to see the effects of a pandemic as temporary disruptions to their life. That is, in evaluating risks and benefits, individuals who are subject to an optimism bias tend to evaluate more positively the consequences of a pandemic to themselves than to the rest of the population. Optimism is a coping mechanism to deal with adversity, and more specifically with the anxiety that results from the uncertainty of a pandemic, as well as the behavioural fatigue that naturally results from its policy reactions. Hence optimism plays a role in seeing light at the end of the tunnel and coping better with the effects of the pandemic.

Why and when are we optimists?

An inbuilt optimism results from an evolutionary logic to counteract the hardwired 'negativity bias' of everyday life, especially at times of a pandemic . However, optimism, rather than stable over time, can change across one's age, and is influenced by our perceived control over the consequences of our actions. This explains why people are more likely to display optimism bias towards 'known risks' than 'unknown' ones such as COVID-19. In my own research, when we compare how people perceive the risks of genetically modified foods, mobile phones, gene testing, radioactive waste and climate change, we find people are more optimistic with regards to GM food and mobile phones than radioactive waste and climate change, as the latter risks, single individual action has a far lesser influence.

Why does it matter?

Evidence suggests that optimists are more resilient to adversity. A study of people that were hit by the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York shows that more optimistic people were more resilient and more capable of overcoming the emotional effects of the terrorist attack. A wealth of evidence reveals that optimistic people exhibit higher life satisfaction, better health, live longer, and have lower stress and blood pressure. As a result, they engage in less risky behaviours (they sleep more and smoke less), and, when they are affected by a health shock such as cancer, they recover earlier and spend more time understanding treatment alternatives. Finally, given that optimism breed optimism, optimists tend to develop stronger social ties and support networks, which are helpful in times of pandemics.

Optimism in different domains and forms

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Nonetheless, optimism bias varies across domains such as health, longevity, income and relationships. In my own research I have examined the effect of longevity and health optimism. We show that individuals are optimistic towards their health and disability, and that current health plays an important role in understanding such optimism. Longevity optimism reflects the fact that individuals hold private information on their capacity to deal with health threats and adversity more generally. In more recent and still unpublished research, we show that optimism plays a role in risk-related and financial behaviours, but it depends on the domains. When we compare longevity optimism with weather or meteorological optimism we find important differences. For instance, whilst longevity optimism leads individuals to engage in healthier (lower weight, less smoking) behaviour and more prudent financial decisions (fixed rate mortgages and bonds), we find no effect of meteorological optimism on health behaviours.

That said, it is important to distinguish optimism from wishful thinking, which some refer to as unrealistic optimism. Unrealistic optimism can explain some unhealthy behaviours such as alcohol intake. True optimists do understand and ponder the risks and benefits of the events and action they face. They take a more 'positive' reading of their actions, and hence overcome the evolutionary negativity bias we are all subject to — a way of looking at life that helps us survive. Unrealistic optimism, in contrast, is the result of unrealistic narratives or fake news (or 'alternative truths'), which commonly explain the development of negationism of the COVID-19 pandemic altogether.

How does optimism matter for policy during pandemics?

Studies using twins suggest that 25% of optimism is not inheritable, which suggests that optimism can be learned, especially during an individual's impressionable years (e.g., during their late upbringing), at home or at school or college. This can be an important personal trait, which proves essential during pandemics, and more generally in one's professional life (e.g., more entrepreneurship). If governments expect to have resilient individuals during current and future pandemic, we should invest in developing the resources to produce more 'optimistic' individuals. This includes more optimistic narratives that overcome fatalistic interpretations of reality. The role of risk communication is essential, as unrealistic optimism towards risk is more common when people know little about it, and can breed 'risk negationism', which has devastating consequences for any society. So rather than just telling people 'keep calm, and carry on" we should tell them, "*when life hands you lemons, make lemonade".*

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Notes:

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