



THE SOCIAL CONCEPTS OF OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM, AND REALISM

PRO

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Aims and Hypotheses

The major aim of our research was to explore the social concepts of optimism (O), pessimism (P), and realism (R). More specifically, we wanted to investigate

- the "acts" (thoughts, feelings, goals, and actions) laypersons regard as prototypical of O, P, and R.
 - how the prototypical behavioural patterns distinguish the three concepts, and in particular
 - how realism, which is generally considered the reference point against which optimism and pessimism are measured, is differentiated from optimism and pessimism
 - whether the context (controllability of the situation) effects the behaviour pattern regarded as prototypical of O, P, and R.
- We expected that O, P, and R are natural categories that are used in everyday language to describe the typical behavior of a respective personality type.
 - We expected the social concepts of O and P to converge on the related scientific concepts.

Methods

We used a modified version of the Act Frequency Approach (Buss and Craik, 1983). Our research proceeded in a series of three studies:

Study 1: Act nomination

Goal and procedure: The goal of this study was to generate thoughts, feelings, goals, and actions that exemplify O, P, and R. Given that controllability was found to affect the behaviour of optimists in previous research, laypersons (N = 67 students, 76% women, Ø age = 23) were instructed to nominate acts that are prototypical of optimists, pessimists, and realists in responding to two target situations that differ in controllability.

Controllable: You have fallen in love with someone and told this to the relevant person. However, you are rejected, because he/she wants to get to know you better first.

Uncontrollable: You have fallen in love with someone and told this to the relevant person. However, you are rejected, because he/she doesn't return your feelings.

Results: Subjects generated 57 acts for O, 74 for P, and 65 for R in the controllable situation, and 77 for O, 69 for P, and 58 for R in the uncontrollable situation. Parts of the acts were similar across the concepts. Therefore we assembled two act lists - one for each situation- containing all acts nominated for the three concepts, resulting in two lists each consisting of 156 acts.

Act examples (controllable situation):

The optimist ...
 ... thinks: he/she will opt for me later.
 ... is hopeful.
 ... will date the beloved person.

The pessimist ...
 ... thinks: I made a fool of myself.
 ... is depressed.
 ... wants to forget the whole story.

The realist...
 ... thinks: I have to resign to the fact.
 ... is neither happy nor dissatisfied.
 ... shows understanding for the person's decision.

Study 2: Prototypicality Ratings

Goal and procedure: The goal of Study 2 was to obtain the prototypicality ratings for the act lists created in Study 1. The participants (N = 152 students, 61% women, Ø age = 24) were instructed to rate how typical each act was for an optimistic, pessimistic and realistic person in the target situations on a 7-point scale.

Results: We used a score of M > 4.5 (7-point scale from 1 to 7) as cut-off point for defining high prototypicality. Based on this criterion, we obtained 31 (uncontrollable: 28) acts that were judged as highly typical of both O and R, 5 (10) acts typical of both P and R, and one (2) acts highly typical of all three concepts. The overlapping typicality ratings suggested overlapping concepts, in particular for O and R; to further examine the extent to which the three concepts can be distinguished in terms of their acts, we conducted Study 3 in which we employed an act sorting method.

Study 3: Act Sorting

Goal and procedure: The goal of Study 3 was to examine to which extent acts would be sorted into only one or multiple categories. Subjects (N = 60 students, 60% women, Ø age = 23) were asked to decide for each act whether it was typical either of an O, P, or R and sort it into the corresponding category. Multiple-category placement was permitted.

Results: 88% (87%) of all placement decisions turned out to be single-category placements, indicating that most of the acts were seen as predominantly representing one concept. These findings suggest considerable conceptual distinctiveness, at least based on the sorting task.

Results and Conclusion

Final Act Lists

If more than 50% of the subjects judged an act as belonging to a certain category and if the prototypicality rating for the same category was M > 4.5 (7-point scale from 1-7), we assigned the act to the according category. Based on these two criteria, we obtained the final act lists (Tab. 1).

These act lists encompass the acts that best exemplify the six person-in-context concepts. The act lists suggest three major findings:

1. The numbers of prototypical acts nominated for each concepts –their category volume– indicate that the three concepts are likewise cognitively available and used in common language to describe the respective personality types.
2. The mean prototypicality ratings are remarkably high, indicating that the acts were seen as highly prototypical of the respective concept.
3. The acts were sorted into the respective category with a high agreement among the raters, suggesting that they were seen as clearly distinctive of the respective category.

	N of acts	Prototypicality	Agreement
Optimism			
controllable	16	5.77 (1.22)	76%
uncontrollable	11	5.07 (1.37)	81%
Pessimism			
controllable	16	5.80 (1.17)	85%
uncontrollable	15	6.05 (.99)	82%
Realism			
controllable	11	4.97 (1.48)	70%
uncontrollable	9	5.33 (1.29)	70%

Tab. 1: Statistics of the final act lists

Act Content Analysis

We compared the social concepts of O, P, and R with their scientific counterparts (Tab. 2).

Optimism was represented by acts reflecting positive construal of the situation, positive outcome expectancies, optimistic explanatory style, positive feelings, persistent goal pursuit, and active efforts toward goal attainment. Whereas thoughts and feelings were less positive in the uncontrollable compared to the controllable situation, goals and behavior did not differ.

Pessimism was exemplified by acts reflecting negative construal of the situation, negative feelings, negative outcome expectancies, pessimistic explanatory style, giving up on the goal, withdrawal and focus on distress. The behavior pattern did not differ for the two situations.

Realism was exemplified by acts expressing acceptance, and neutral or mixed feelings. Rs were characterized by adjusting their goals and actions to the situation: they were seen as pursuing the goal when attainable, and disengaging from the goal when unattainable.

	Optimism		Pessimism		Realism	
	controllable	uncontrollable	controllable	uncontrollable	controllable	uncontrollable
Thoughts						
Construal of situation	positive	-	negative	negative	acceptance	acceptance
Outcome expectancy	positive	positive	negative	negative	-	-
Exploratory style	-	optimistic	pessimistic	pessimistic	-	-
Feelings	positive	pos + neg	negative	negative	neither nor	pos + neg
Goals	pursue goal	pursue goal	disengage	disengage	wait-and-see	disengage
Actions						
Problem-focused	active effort	active effort	withdrawal	withdrawal	wait and see	-
Emotion-focused	-	-	focus on distress	focus on distress	-	affect control

Tab. 2: Content Analysis

Conclusion

The social concepts of O, P, and R suggest:

1. Realists (not optimists, as is suggested in the scientific literature) perform the most adaptive behavior in terms of cognitions, goals, and actions.
2. Optimists partly adjust their feelings and cognitions to the situation, but not their goals and actions (persistently pursuing their goals even if unattainable).
3. Pessimists show a rigid and dysfunctional behavior pattern that is highly affine to neuroticism.

Reference

Weber, H., Vollmann, M., & Renner, B. (in preparation). The spirited, the observant, and the disheartened: Social concepts of optimism, realism, and pessimism. Contact: weber@uni-greifswald.de