Is it better to be realistic or optimistic? A realistic outlook improves chances to negotiate the environment successfully, whereas an optimistic outlook places priority on feeling good. But are realistic and optimistic outlooks necessarily in conflict? The author suggests that the fuzzy nature of accuracy typically places only loose boundaries on what it means to be realistic. As a result, there are many forms of optimism that do not, in principle, yield unrealistic assessments. Nevertheless, there remain numerous “optimistic biases” that do involve self-deception, or convincing oneself of desired beliefs without appropriate reality checks. The author describes several ways that realistic and unrealistic optimism can be differentiated and explores the impact of this distinction for current views of optimism. This critique reveals how positive psychology may benefit from a focus on personal meaning and knowledge as they relate to making the most of life.

Up until recently, the typical hallmark of mental health has included a firm grasp on reality. The mentally healthy person could be identified as one who accurately assessed information available in the environment (Jahoda, 1958). Taylor and Brown (1988) shook the establishment view by suggesting that people were actually healthier mentally if their sense of reality was biased in a positive direction. They bolstered their claim with a review of literature suggesting that healthier people tend to underestimate the degree of control they have on the environment, tend to see themselves in an overly positive light, and tend to be unrealistically optimistic about the future.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Seligman, Abramson, Peterson, and their colleagues (e.g., Buchanan & Seligman, 1995) have popularized the notions of optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles. In their search for the source of learned helplessness responses, they discovered that people’s tendency to give up efforts to change bad outcomes was due to a predisposition to view bad outcomes as being caused by internal, stable, and global characteristics. Research into this pessimistic explanatory style has linked it again and again to heightened risks of both physical and mental disorders (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Peterson, Seligman, & Valliant, 1988; Peterson, Seligman, Yurko, Martin, & Friedman, 1998; Weisse, 1992). An optimistic explanatory style, on the other hand, in which people tend to take credit for their successes and blame failures on situation-specific external factors (i.e., self-serving bias), has been associated with better outcomes in terms of health and achievement. According to Peterson et al. (1998), people who espoused an optimistic perspective in childhood outlived their more negatively oriented counterparts by an average of almost two years. Here again, the research seems to suggest that an optimistic outlook is superior to one that is more realistic.

During roughly the same time period, Scheier and Carver (1985, 1987, 1992) were studying optimism using the now-popular Life Orientation Test. They defined optimism, not as a function of causal attributions, but as a general disposition to expect good outcomes. They found that optimists reported fewer physical symptoms, better health habits, and better coping strategies. Even among a group of women who had experienced the recent bad outcome of being diagnosed with breast cancer, Carver et al. (1993) found that those with an optimistic personality experienced less distress, engaged in more active coping, and were less likely to engage in avoidance or denial strategies.

Of course, other scholars have argued that research does not convincingly show an advantage of optimism over more realistic perspectives. Colvin and Block (1994) contended that the arguments concerning the benefits of optimistic biases or illusions often lack logical force. Their primary concerns included problematic criteria for identifying optimistic illusions and the lack of evidence for a causal link between these illusions and improved mental health. Among other things, they pointed out that there are rarely clear criteria for assessing accuracy in the context of trait descriptions (see also Hayes & Dunning, 1997), which is one of the most common contexts for work on overly positive self-views. Even when an illusion can be verified,
a causal connection to mental or physical health can rarely be shown.

There are others who have focused on demonstrating the dangers of optimistic illusions. In his studies of unrealistic optimism, Weinstein (1980, 1984; Weinstein & Klein, 1996) has provided evidence of the harmful effects of optimistic biases in risk perception related to a host of health hazards. Those who underestimate their risk are routinely less likely to show interest in taking preventive action. For example, Weinstein, Lyons, Sandman, and Cuite (1998) found that those who optimistically underestimated the risk of radon in their homes were less likely than others to engage in risk detection and risk reduction behaviors. In related research, Kunda and Klein (Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990) have provided several examples of defensively motivated reasoning that helps maintain a positive self-view, but is likely to have harmful long-term consequences. For instance, cigarette smokers may avoid thinking about or trying to quit smoking by adopting self-serving biases that discount their personal susceptibility to the risks of smoking or by boosting their self-view through a variety of personal affirmations (Gibbons, Eggleson, & Benthin, 1997; Steele, 1988).

In a similar vein, Robins and John (1997; John & Robins, 1994) have found that optimistic illusions of performance are more likely to be associated with narcissism than mental health. Shedler, Mayman, and Manis (1993) have repeatedly found that those who provide optimistically biased reports of their mental health are less resistant to stress as measured by coronary reactivity (i.e., changes in heart rate and diastolic blood pressure) than either truly healthy or manifestly distressed participants. Similar findings have been observed among those who repress negative emotions (L. Brown et al., 1996; Gross & Levenson, 1997).

Those who present an optimistic assessment of their emotional state by denying their negative emotions, even to themselves (Derakshan & Eysenck, 1999), tend to have significantly stronger physiological reactions to stress than those who are more realistic about their negative emotions.

Covering the middle ground are those who argue that slight optimistic illusions are beneficial, but only if they do not distort reality in ways that might be harmful. Epstein (1992) argued that, “In many ambiguous real-life situations . . . moderate self-overestimation is intrinsically self-rewarding and produces no unfortunate consequences . . . However, this does not necessarily mean that reality orientation is an unimportant component of mental health” (p. 832). Similarly, Baumeister (1988) suggested that there may be an optimal margin of illusion that allows people to see themselves as slightly better than they really are, but does not typically lead to behaviors based on false assumptions.

Most views, whether in support of or in opposition to the value of optimistic biases, seem to be based on the assumption that optimistic and realistic perspectives are mutually exclusive. In what follows, both optimistic biases and realistic assessments are explored to help identify whether and when optimism and realism can peacefully co-exist. This exploration suggests several implications for the role of optimism in well-being.

**The Fuzzy Nature of Reality**

How realistic can people be? There seems to be a common assumption that people can usually be accurate in their judgments if they want to be. Being accurate typically means that one has arrived at a position that is truthful or captures the reality of the situation. However, it also implies that there is one exact knowable truth or reality. But therein lies the rub. There is very little evidence that this kind of accuracy exists in many of the situations that humans regularly encounter. Even if it sometimes does, it may be rare for humans to be in a position to access this objective or accurate assessment.

Consider, for instance, one of the research paradigms used to document the existence of optimistic biases (e.g., Alicke, 1985; J. D. Brown, 1986). In the typical study, participants might be asked to judge how friendly they are relative to some reference class. One of the first issues to spring to mind is that social judgments of this type do not have easily identifiable objective criteria for establishing truth (Colvin & Block, 1994; Dunning, 1999; Kenny & Albright, 1987). We may not even agree on what behaviors contribute to friendliness. If a person calls herself very friendly and someone else claims she is not, there is no clear-cut way to resolve the difference of opinion. Although there may often be indicators about which most of us can agree, there is considerable latitude in how we may reasonably define states of the world.

Because of this latitude in social judgments, the evidence used to demonstrate the existence of a positive bias in this research paradigm is only indirect. The standard result is that the vast majority of people report being above average or above the 50th percentile in friendliness. The
conclusion is that an optimistic or self-enhancing bias must exist because the vast majority of people cannot be friendlier than average. But why can't they? If people's criteria for friendliness differ from one another in any way, everybody could be friendlier than average (even without having to stipulate a negatively skewed distribution of friendliness).

As a simplified example, imagine that one half of the group in question believes friendliness rests primarily on being helpful and, because they want to be friendly, they do routinely go out of their way to be helpful, more so than the other half of the group. Suppose that this second half of the group believes friendliness is primarily a function of being pleasant and, because they want to be friendly, they routinely go out of their way to be pleasant, more so than the group focused on helpfulness. Now both halves can accurately report that they are above average or among the top 50% in friendliness because according to their own criteria, they are. To say that there is an error requires that there be clear-cut and agreed-upon criteria (not to mention cutoffs).

But problems associated with the lack of just these types of criteria have plagued virtually every domain within the social sciences (see, e.g., Smithson, 1989; Stanovich & West, 2000). Even the guidelines set forth in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.; DSM–IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) demonstrate that exacting criteria for categorization cannot be expected:

In DSM–IV, there is no assumption that each category of mental disorder is a completely discrete entity with absolute boundaries dividing it from other mental disorders or from no mental disorder. . . . The clinician using DSM–IV should therefore consider that individuals sharing a diagnosis are likely to be heterogeneous even in regard to the defining features of the diagnosis and that boundary cases will be difficult to diagnose in any but a probabilistic fashion. (p. xxii)

Often, those studying accuracy seem to overlook the possibility that one specific, objectively verifiable state of affairs may not exist and that, even if it did, people might lack the necessary tools to become completely aware of it.

Truth is imprecise in a social world in which meaning is created through agreed-upon symbol systems. Moreover, the passage of time ensures a constantly changing environment, and the myriad of causes underlying any given experience is largely inaccessible to the human individual's perceptual and cognitive systems (ergo the need for social science). However, this complexity does not imply that truth and accuracy are fictions. It simply suggests that there may be considerable leeway in what it is reasonable to accept as true or accurate.

Philosophical approaches to epistemology often lead to the conclusion that we cannot define knowledge as a particular point, but that knowledge, or lack thereof, is more reasonably captured as a space, range, or continuum (see Smithson, 1989, for a review). In a recent example, Yaniv and Foster (1995) have suggested that knowledge can be characterized according to its graininess. The larger the grain, the less precisely defined is our knowledge.

Suppose a person knows that the first walk on the moon took place in the 1960s. The person is correct, but the graininess of his or her knowledge is more coarse than that of someone who can specify the exact year, or day, or hour, et cetera.

Fuzzy set theory and fuzzy logic (Zadeh, 1965, 1982) take into account that information can be more-or-less true. In an early study of fuzzy sets in humans, Oden (1977) found that classification of different liquid-holding vessels as "mugs" was not all or none; there are many things that are more-or-less mugs. Studies of concepts and categorization have routinely confirmed the existence of graded and ill-defined boundaries of membership (e.g., Rosch, 1978). Fuzzy rules have made it possible to model this human flexibility in representation. For instance, handwriting recognition systems can use a small number of fuzzy rules to recognize handwritten numerals written by thousands of different individuals with accuracy rates above 95% (Chi & Yan, 1995). Even with simple concepts, reality can be fuzzy. How much more so in the case of complex concepts and interpretations?

**Distinguishing Fuzzy Meaning and Fuzzy Knowledge**

Fuzzy or not, there is a reality. Not all optimistic thinking is realistic, even if we concede that reality is at least partially negotiable and subjective. So, what does it mean to be realistic? Criteria for being realistic typically include objectivity and rationality, but defining these concepts is a topic of long-standing philosophical debate (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2000; Hollis & Lukes, 1982; James, 1907; Megill, 1994b; Moser, 1990; R. W. Newell, 1986; Simon, 1981; Wittgenstein, 1969). Roughly, the former concept requires that information be represented as it actually is in the environment (e.g., Megill, 1994a), and the latter concept requires logical consistency in the process of decision making (e.g., Baron, 1985). A person is realistic to the extent that his or her actions are sensitive to experienced contingencies in the environment and are guided by a coherent value system.

Being realistic also requires negotiating the uncertainty and lack of specificity that is a part of our environment. I suggest that there are at least two distinct types of fuzzy boundaries. One type, labeled *fuzzy meaning*, provides the leeway for each of us to extract personal meaning from our experiences. The other, labeled *fuzzy knowledge*, characterizes situations in which our knowledge of the environment is lacking in precision.

**Fuzzy Meaning Arises From Interpretive Latitude**

DeGrandpre (2000; see also Gibson, 1979) recently provided a persuasive case that the action–consequence contingencies that form the basis of objective reality also form the foundation of our sense of meaning. He posited that phenomenological responses to environmental stimuli are largely responsible for our conscious experience, but that
the motivational qualities of experienced contingencies guide our decisions. From this, he argued that reality is a
function not only of the information in the environment but also of what it means to the individual.

[Me]aning remains a crucial dependent variable in psychological science because, without the concept of meaning, psychologists lack the vocabulary for distinguishing between stimuli, which are measurable phenomena situated in the physical and social world, and the acquired significance of stimuli, which is both dynamic and variable across individuals. (DeGrandpre, 2000, p. 733)

Reality is fuzzy not so much because we disagree on the measurable characteristics of the stimuli we perceive (although this may occasionally happen), but because we have different views of what the stimuli mean. (Movie
trends come to mind as an obvious if simplistic example. Everyone agrees on what events took place in the movie, but few may agree on the movie’s strengths and weaknesses or its significance.) Ultimately, our sense of meaning rests on subjective evaluation criteria that depend on our personal history of experiences, on our momentary and enduring values, and on perceived situational constraints. Because of the inherent variability in people’s experiences, values, and situational constraints, the concept of accuracy has only limited applicability with respect to meaning. If our experiences, values, and situational constraints did not contribute to our sense of meaning (e.g., if we were in denial or experiencing a dissociative disorder) or if we were wholly indifferent to the loose social boundaries on meaning (e.g., if we decided friendliness involves hurting others), then our judgments of meaning would, by definition, be inaccurate. Otherwise, we have considerable latitude in deciding what significance we assign to events and what lessons we choose to learn from our experience.

Fuzzy Knowledge Arises From Factual Uncertainty

Not all fuzzy boundaries on reality involve subjective evaluation of the meaning of experience. Some fuzzy boundaries represent a lack of information or uncertainty about the likelihood that some as yet unperceived event will or has occurred. For instance, judgments of the likelihood that we have contracted (or will contract) the HIV virus or that our boss will judge our performance as acceptable involve fuzziness due to an absence of needed information. In this case, we are not trying to extract the personal meaning of an event that has been or is being experienced. Instead, the event of interest is not currently observable to or known by the individual, and the fuzzy boundary circumscribes the individual’s beliefs about the event’s likelihood of occurring.

Fuzziness in knowledge captures the extent to which we do not know about a given state of affairs, whereas fuzziness in meaning represents the latitude we have in interpreting the significance of a known state of affairs. Fuzzy knowledge and fuzzy meaning have different implications for being realistic. Given the constraints of reality, we do not have the liberty to decide that we do not have HIV in the same way that we have the liberty to decide that particular types of behavior meet our criteria for being friendly. Moreover, our interpretation of the meaning of potential symptoms has no impact on whether the symptoms are actually being caused by HIV, just as our interpretation of the meaning of the boss’s behavior does not change what the boss really intended. Realistically responding to fuzzy knowledge requires sensitivity to our lack of information about an object, state, or event that may be well defined. In contrast, realistically responding to fuzzy meaning requires sensitivity to the lack of rigid constraints on how we choose to interpret the personal implications of an object, state, or event (cf. Zadeh, 1978, 1980; Zhang, 1998).

Fundamentally, the accuracy of judgments involving fuzzy knowledge does not depend on the idiosyncrasies of our experiences, values, and situational constraints in the same way that the accuracy of meaning does. Instead, the accuracy of knowledge depends on the quality, quantity, diagnosticity, and specificity of the information on which judgments are based. Nevertheless, assessing the accuracy of knowledge-based judgments is often difficult because we rarely have access to the kinds of complete causal models of the environment that would enable us to gauge the value of our predictions as a function of the available information. Reality is fuzzy in these instances because of our uncertainty about the situation of interest.

Defining Realistic Optimism

If we define optimism broadly as the tendency to maintain a positive outlook, then realistic optimism is the tendency to maintain a positive outlook within the constraints of the available “measurable phenomena situated in the physical and social world” (DeGrandpre, 2000, p. 733). With respect to fuzzy meaning, realistic optimism involves enhancing and focusing on the favorable aspects of our experiences. Examples include being lenient in our evaluation of past events, actively appreciating the positive aspects of our current situation, and routinely emphasizing possible opportunities for the future. With respect to fuzzy knowledge, realistic optimism involves hoping, aspiring, and searching for positive experiences while acknowledging what we do not know and accepting what we cannot know. In dealing with unresolved uncertainties, realistic optimism involves hoping for and working toward desired outcomes without having the expectation that particular outcomes will occur, especially with little or no effort to bring them about. Instead, the hopes and aspirations associated with realistic optimism are coupled with a focus on possible opportunities to increase the likelihood of desirable and personally meaningful outcomes contingent on situational constraints.

Realistic optimism includes all of the optimistic processes that can be shown to operate within the constraints of fuzzy reality. Several of the processes and products described in the optimism literature are examples of realistic optimism. In many cases, however, research results combine processes or participants in such a way that it is not possible to parse out the data that represent realistic as opposed to unrealistic forms of optimism. In principle,
realistic optimism can be expected to yield the positive outcomes of optimistic processes (Folkmann & Moskowitz, 2000; Peterson, 2000; Scher & Carver, 1992; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000) without simultaneous exposure to the disadvantages of reality distortions that characterize many of the so-called optimistic biases. The goal, then, is to examine both meaning-based and knowledge-based fuzzy boundaries on reality to distinguish between realistic and unrealistic optimism.

Realistic Optimism Need Not Be an Oxymoron

Because accuracy is often loosely bounded, an optimistic viewpoint can be simultaneously positively biased and within the limits of what it is reasonable to conclude. Hence, optimism can represent a rational perspective on underdetermined circumstances. At other times, optimism can represent a form of self-deception in which one convinces oneself that things are different from what available information would suggest (see, e.g., Greenwald, 1997; Mele, 1997; Paulhus & John, 1998; Wright & Schneider, 1999). This happens when optimism is not constrained even by the loose boundaries of fuzzy accuracy, or when fuzzy meaning and fuzzy knowledge become confused with one another. Because of this fuzziness in the nature of reality, it is often difficult to tell the difference between optimism that remains realistic and optimism that supports self-deception.

Below, I describe three forms of realistic optimism, in which optimistic thinking need not depart from reality. For ease of exposition, these have been tied to assessments of the past, present, and future. In the subsequent sections, I differentiate realistic optimism from related optimistic and defensive biases that often lead to unrealistic conclusions. Finally, I suggest how the construct of realistic optimism can further our attempts to develop a positive psychology.

Leniency for the Past: The “Benefit of the Doubt” Principle

Although optimism is often characterized as a positive outlook with respect to the future, the concept can be extended to experiences in the past by acknowledging the fuzzy boundaries on interpreting events. When we evaluate past performances or events that we have experienced, we can take advantage of the latitude in potential reasonable interpretations to select an interpretation that focuses on the positive aspects of the situation. Hence, a man can conclude that he gave a good talk or that his daughter played well in the soccer game or that the weather was nice—provided in each case that there is some arguably reasonable set of criteria on which one could base those judgments and a lack of overwhelming evidence in opposition. Obviously, both the criteria for the judgments and the cutoffs for evaluation are subjectively determined. Hence, there is considerable latitude in what one can conclude without exceeding the bounds of the potential reality. We can reasonably choose to give ourselves, others, or the situation the benefit of the doubt.

Leniency involves allowing a larger set of outcomes and events to be classified as subjectively positive—giving potentially questionable outcomes and events the benefit of doubt. One way that this can happen has been referred to by Ashford and Kreiner (1999) as reframing. This process involves the search for positive aspects of a situation to neutralize or balance negative aspects. In the case of stigmatized jobs, for instance, an otherwise undesirable menial task might be reframed in terms of the task’s essential role in some larger goal or process. When it is realistic, this sort of reframing does not involve fabricating positive attributes (e.g., pretending or telling oneself that a boring activity is exciting); rather it transforms the meaning of a behavior by discovering a perspective that is simultaneously truthful and favorable.

Leniency can also correspond to the adoption of relatively modest thresholds of minimum acceptability. A drizzly day can either ruin or save the family reunion, depending on whether one considers it relative to sunshine or a downpour. This is not to say that leniency causes us to deny the fact that sunshine would be better or to focus on the fact that a downpour would be worse. The acceptability threshold simply determines whether we are satisfied with a drizzly family reunion and, as a result, whether we enjoy the event. The process of leniency involves accepting the reality of the current situation and finding a satisfying meaning therein, as opposed to misconstruing or denying the facts of the situation. To feel better about the family reunion one could deny that it is drizzling, but that would be self-deception, not leniency.

Leniency and future-oriented optimism may work together to enhance favorable interpretations that converge on being realistic, especially in the context of achievement. The future-oriented aspects of optimism are likely to support relatively high, and even potentially unrealistic, aspirations (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Given fuzzy knowledge about what we will be able to accomplish, however, aspirations themselves are likely to be fuzzy or graded, so that different potential outcomes will be viewed as more or less acceptable. The specific value we choose a priori as the stated aspiration is likely to be close to the best possible outcome, reflecting the hope that our efforts will be maximally effective and situational constraints on success will be minimal. On occasions when performance falls short of aspirations, leniency can manifest itself as a flexible lower bound on acceptable performance. Hence, the realistic optimist might shoot for an “A,” but, when it happens, be satisfied with a “B.”

When our hopes for performance are not completely met, realistic optimism involves accepting what cannot now be changed, rather than condemning or second-guessing ourselves. Focusing on the successful aspects of performance (even when the success is modest) promotes positive affect, reduces self-doubt, and helps to maintain motivation (e.g., McFarland & Ross, 1982). In this way, leniency may prevent minor downward fluctuations in performance from becoming reasons for questioning general goals or abilities. Leniency also prevents the debilitating effects of perfectionism (e.g., Pacht, 1984). Nevertheless,
realistic optimism does not include or imply expectations that things will improve on their own. Wishful thinking of this sort typically has no reliable supporting evidence. Instead, the opportunity-seeking component of realistic optimism motivates efforts to improve future performances on the basis of what has been learned from past performances.

Although more will be said in the discussion of self-deception, it is important to note that leniency, in and of itself, represents realistic optimism, but phenomena related to leniency can produce distorted thinking. If leniency is not recognized as a subjective evaluation or it is not applied to self and others equally, it can lead to erroneous impressions about differences. For instance, if a woman playing tennis gives her own performance, but not that of her opponent, the benefit of the doubt, she may erroneously overestimate her own ability relative to her opponent’s. Realistic optimism requires sensitivity to the difference between perception of a phenomenon and evaluation of its meaning. To prevent distortion, leniency must be based on the motivation to accurately apprehend the state of affairs, coupled with some level of awareness that the evaluation or subjective meaning of this state is in large proportion a matter of personal choice.

**Appreciation for the Present: The "Appreciate the Moment" Principle**

Appreciation involves being alert to the positive aspects of the current situation and feeling thankful for what one has and for one’s circumstances. This requires not only a positive perspective in the present but also conscious awareness of features in the surround. The latter, in fact, is something that may be surprisingly rare. Especially when we are engaging in routine activities, we often do so mindlessly (Langer, 1997) or as though we were on automatic pilot (Cialdini, 1993). If we learn to bring our attention to the current state, we can choose to focus on positive aspects of the situation and to remind ourselves of the potential sources of good feelings that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

Appreciation can often serve as a cognitive form of dishabituatation wherein routine people, places, things, and events that are typically taken for granted can be brought into awareness and acknowledged as important and positive contributors to one’s experience. Appreciating what we like about our home, our family, and our job—and even about ourselves—can promote positive affect, more satisfying relationships and improved coping with stress (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Fincham & Beach, 1999; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Murray, 1999). Feeling good in the moment has also been associated with an increase in helping behavior (e.g., Isen, 1993), suggesting that others may reap the benefits of this type of realistic optimism as well.

Appreciation may be especially important in situations of long-term commitment or difficult-to-reverse situations (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). In this case, realistic optimism corresponds to an attempt to make the best of a situation. Research on decision making, for instance, has documented that people often tend to inflate the quality of an item they have chosen relative to the other options available for choice. In one study, Svenson and Shamoun (1997) found that, after selecting which university program they would attend, students gradually enhanced their evaluation of the selected program by (a) increasing their assessment of the relative value of advantages, (b) more heavily weighting dimensions that represented advantages, and (c) even reframing potential disadvantages as advantages. Similarly, Ashford and Kreiner (1999) have suggested that workers transform the meanings attached to stigmatized jobs through processes such as recalibrating to find a reference point that increases satisfaction with the job and refocusing to direct attention to the better rather than poorer characteristics of the job. These same sorts of shifts in subjective values and attention have been found among those who are most satisfied with their marriage partner (Murray, 1999) and among those who have most effectively adjusted to traumatic events (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Although often characterized as illusions, it is not clear that changes in the subjective meanings and importance of phenomena is unreasonable in response to changes in personal commitments or existing conditions.

Appreciation helps to improve satisfaction and can remain within the limits of reality to the extent that we remain aware of the objective facts of the situation, even as we choose to focus on positive implications of those facts (cf. Norem, 1998). Changes in subjective evaluations have often been characterized as indicative of limited cognitive abilities or even irrational processes (Fischhoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 1988; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1992; Slovic, 1995). However, in many cases, their adaptive significance may be better understood as a flexibility in focus that helps maximize enjoyment in circumstances that can readily support any number of subjective interpretations (see Markman & Breidl, 2000, for a related view on the influence of goals on subjective values).

Just as leniency judgments often rely on flexible evaluations that help us to accept less than ideal outcomes, appreciation typically involves the selection of a reference point for evaluation that emphasizes the positive aspects of our current state. So, for example, there may be little or no fuzziness in our perception of how much water is in a glass, but the subjective meaning of that quantity, whether it leaves the glass half full or half empty, is a matter of one’s chosen perspective.

In his article describing reasons why wealth does not necessarily increase happiness, Csikszentmihalyi (1999) pointed out that when people evaluate their own wealth, they tend to choose anchors that focus on the negative:

> When resources are unevenly distributed, people evaluate their possessions not in terms of what they need to live in comfort, but in comparison with those who have the most. Thus, the relatively affluent feel poor in comparison with the very rich and are unhappy as a result. (p. 823)

The dictates of rationality have no say over which reference points are appropriate nor can they address how we ought to feel about our circumstances (see, e.g., Zeelenberg,
1999). We have considerable freedom to choose how we will evaluate our status. Anchors that promote appreciation for our situation are more likely to encourage a sense of happiness.

However, not all seemingly positive anchors lead to appreciation. Anchors that encourage social comparisons may be especially troublesome. In the previous example, for instance, people might compare their possessions to those of the less affluent and experience a sense of superiority. This type of social comparison breeds adversarial competition and contributes to the motivation to engage in self-serving—and self-deceptive—biases (Covington, 2000; Klein & Kunda, 1993; Suls & Wills, 1991). Social comparison is not purely appreciation, because the positive evaluation of one’s own situation comes into relief only by evoking negative evaluations of others. Reference points based on one’s own previous situation, or other modest or neutral criteria as suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1999), may be more likely to result in appreciation without simultaneously provoking self-serving and antagonistic biases.


Realistic optimism may be particularly important when we are considering future goals and plans. Here, realistic positive thinking creates an overriding perspective on goal-striving or problem solving that depicts the situation as a challenge or an opportunity rather than as a chore or a problem. The term *problem* (with synonyms such as *predicament, obstacle, and difficulty*) implies that the current state is negative and that actions must be successful to establish a satisfactory state. A challenge, on the other hand, implies an acceptable current state that offers a potential opportunity for bringing about a beneficial change. This framing can be quite powerful. Even a simple reframing of hypothetical decision scenarios has been shown to influence willingness to take risks, perceived decision conflict, and aspiration levels (e.g., Schneider, 1992), as well as the perceived favorability and persuasive appeal of messages (see Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998, for a review).

When applied to an individual’s perspective on goals, dozens of studies of achievement motivation and self-regulation demonstrate that goal frames focused on approaching positive states are functionally superior to goal frames focused on avoiding negative states (Atkinson, 1957, 1964; Covington, 2000; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997; Higgins, 1996, 1999; Nicholls, 1984; Scheier & Carver, 1992, 1993; Weiner, 1980). In comparison with negative avoidance motivation, positive approach motivation leads to greater persistence, greater flexibility in strategies to reach a goal, greater creativity in solutions, better outcomes, and higher subjective well-being. Approach motivation is also associated with a greater desire to obtain information about how to reach the goal, selection of more realistic aspiration levels, and greater internal motivation.

An opportunity-seeking or approach mentality also helps to make the problem-solving process itself enjoyable (Covington, 2000; Higgins, 1996, 1999). Positive affect and approach motivation are highly related and may have similar causes and consequences (e.g., Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Isen, 1984, 1993). The search for opportunities can in itself be fulfilling, not to mention providing reinforcement for future goal-striving. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggested that happiness depends in large measure on the extent to which one can become engrossed and enjoy the process of working toward goals. He argued, “People are happy not because of what they do, but because of how they do it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 826). An approach to goal-striving that emphasizes hope and opportunity-seeking can support both happiness and accomplishment without compromising realism—again, because people have considerable latitude in realistically choosing how they will construe, respond to, and interact with the world that they encounter.

A focus on opportunity-seeking also encourages a mindful learning perspective by focusing on the dynamic and changeable properties of actions and the environment (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Langer, 1997; Nicholls, 1984). This perspective encourages development of skills for mastering an area and invites continued learning and adapting as situations change. In academic settings (see Covington, 2000, for a review), for instance, learning-oriented students are better and more persistent at monitoring how well they are doing and at adjusting their strategies to improve performance. They are also more apt to view failure in terms of what it can teach them about how to gain mastery in future attempts (rather than as a reason to question overall ability). Affectively, learning-oriented students are more likely than others to experience pride and satisfaction (rather than relief) with success, and they are not as likely to experience anxiety with failure. Students who are less learning oriented tend to do less well academically overall, and even in cases in which they do well, the learning process is largely unpleasant because efforts are driven by fear and doubts about ability.

When a goal is interpreted as a challenge, it imparts hope that opportunities providing some control are likely, and it concentrates attention on accurately diagnosing details of the situation that will be instrumental to achieving the goal (Covington, 2000). Almost paradoxically, then, an optimistic outlook on a problem (i.e., seeing it as a challenge) may actually heighten the desire to make realistic assessments of the steps required to solve the problem. Here, optimism may actually produce increased realism rather than encourage illusory thinking or wishful fantasies. (See Oettingen, 1996, for evidence contrasting the beneficial effects of optimistic aspirations and detrimental effects of wishful fantasies.) In addition, envisioning details of the goal-striving process promotes the creation of plans to implement actions; and this type of planning has been linked to much higher rates of goal attainment (Gollwitzer, 1999).
Reality Checks as the Key to Avoiding Motivated Self-Deception

So how can we tell the difference between realistic optimism and optimistic thinking that is likely to be unrealistic or self-deceptive? The answer has to do with whether or not we have our eyes open to reality (cf. Cramer, 1998). It should come as no surprise that being realistic requires monitoring experience to find out what is going on in the environment. Realistic optimism relies on regular reality checks to update assessments of progress, fine-tune one's understanding of potential opportunities, refine causal models of situations, and re-evaluate planned next steps. This involves attention to both environmental and social feedback about whether beliefs fall outside the range of plausible (positive) possibilities.

Self-deception, on the other hand, is marked by the lack of attempts to gain reality checks. Self-deception relies on an exclusively confirmatory approach to information processing and may even involve an active attempt to avoid information inconsistent with desired beliefs (Baumeister, 1993, 1996; Greenwald, 1997; Gur & Sackeim, 1979; Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Mele, 1997; Wright & Schneider, 1999). There are numerous times when we deceive ourselves using stories that we want to believe (including wishful thinking) for which we actively avoid reality checks. Consider the child who has a magic ring but refrains from using its magic. Until tested, the child can continue to believe in its powers.

The fuzzy boundaries of reality provide the gray areas that cause us to wonder at times if we are being honest with ourselves. Often we may have trouble determining whether our ideas are within reasonable bounds. Even when we suspect we might be deceiving ourselves or holding unfair biases, we may not be in a position to fully "decontaminate" our views (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In addition, the more powerful the motivation to believe something, the more invested we become in convincing ourselves that our stories are within the realm of possibility (Mele, 1997). Deviant behaviors, such as child molesting, are often justified through cognitive distortions that seem ludicrous to most people but that have become part of the offender's belief system through chronic processes of motivated self-deception (Murphy, 1990; Wright & Schneider, 1999). These processes, however, are distinct from realistic thinking in that they are systematically driven to avoid information that would provide insight into what the reality is.

Why Self-Deception Is Unrealistic

The strong motivation we all have for positive, ego-protected, and nondissonant self-views commonly leads to self-deception in the form of self-serving biases (Baumeister, 1993, 1996; Dunning, 1999; Gur & Sackeim, 1979; Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Liberman & Chaiken, 1992). Although self-serving biases are often characterized as optimistic biases, they frequently are not candidates for realistic optimism because the biases involve mental pro-

cesses that (a) are designed to distort or filter out awareness of unwanted environmental information or (b) are insensitive to the implications of fuzzy meaning (interpretive latitude) and fuzzy knowledge (factual uncertainty).

Negative stereotyping, for instance, is likely to involve self-deceptive processes in which judgments about the group in question are based on insufficient and biased information from the environment, replacing leniency and appreciation with harsh criteria such as intolerance and depreciation (Ditto & Lopez, 1993; Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Klein & Kunda, 1992, 1993; Kunda & Sinclair, 1999; Munro & Ditto, 1997). There is no acknowledgment of the subjectivity of these evaluation criteria (fuzzy meaning), and there is no consideration of the uncertainty in knowing the causes of or intentions behind behaviors of the stereotyped group's members (fuzzy knowledge). Although an immediate benefit may be a feeling of superiority, it comes at the very real expense of provoking intergroup conflict that could escalate into violence or other harmful consequences.

Self-deception is also common in the form of dissonance reduction, in which thought processes are commonly used to eliminate negative or uncomfortable feelings about oneself caused by behaviors that are in some way inconsistent with an existing attitude or belief (Festinger, 1957). Some characterize these dissonance reduction techniques as optimistic biases because they allow the person to regain a positive view of himself or herself in the moment. Although dissonance reduction techniques lead to positive outcomes with respect to the immediate experience of the individual, they often have negative implications for other goals, attitudes, or beliefs. For instance, cigarette smokers minimize the perceived self-relevance of the harmful effects of smoking to reduce their uncomfortable feelings enough to enjoy a cigarette in the moment (Gibbons et al., 1997; Steele, 1988). The rewarding immediate experience of smoking comes to dominate by denying or ignoring the long-term requirements for maintaining good health.

Deciding that events, such as particular health hazards (e.g., lung cancer), are less likely to apply to us than to similar others is equivalent to treating fuzzy knowledge as though it were fuzzy meaning. Although we can use subjective interpretation (i.e., fuzziness in possible meaning) to choose how we will cope with exposure to risk, we cannot use subjective interpretation to decide what our level of risk exposure is. Risk exposure is determined by causal factors that are largely independent of our thought processes. To assess our risk, we need to gather relevant information to try to reduce the fuzziness in our knowledge about the factors causing the threat and their applicability as a function of our previous experiences (or genetic propensities). It may be reasonable to hope that our chances of an illness are relatively low or to aspire to low chances, but not to expect that chances will be low unless we have reliable evidence to that effect. Ignoring evidence to the contrary is unrealistic because it represents an attempt to dismiss reality.
Optimism: Unrealistic Expectation or Adaptive Motivation?

The distinctions between hope, aspiration, and expectation are critical for distinguishing realistic and unrealistic optimism when predicting risk levels for specific events. People who are optimistic in the sense that they expect their risk of some threat to be low without considerable supporting evidence are being unrealistic because they are not acknowledging that they do not have enough information to accurately make that assessment. Most often, even after accruing relevant facts and data, there is insufficient information available to isolate all of the causes of a threat or the diagnosticity of possible causal factors.

Although no one likes to admit it, the most realistic response in most cases is, “I don’t really know my risk level.” (For related arguments and evidence in the context of confidence judgments, see Schneider, 1995; Schneider & Laueron, 1993.) Because the “I don’t know” option is rare in research on risk perceptions, people are seldom given the opportunity to provide the most realistic response. The fuzzier our knowledge of the causes of a threat, the less realistic it is to have strong expectations of any kind. With fuzzy knowledge, people who are optimistic in the sense that they hope for a low risk are not being unrealistic, provided that they are sensitive to their lack of knowledge about their actual risk level. Coupled with opportunity-seeking, we can move beyond hope to realistically aspire to low risk by using whatever information we can obtain to try to limit our exposure to the threat.

Often, approaches to measuring perceived risk make it impossible to determine the extent to which responses reflect relevant knowledge or actual efforts to reduce risks. Moreover, positive responses are assumed to represent expectations, rather than hopes or aspirations. But expectations, hopes, and aspirations are qualitatively different things. Those who base their responses on uninformed positive expectations are probably not anxious to seek out evidence about reality. It seems they would rather cognitively discount their risks than behaviorally minimize them. This type of response is self-deceptive and discourages important preventive behaviors. In contrast, those who base their responses on hopes and (especially) aspirations for low risks are likely to be interested in learning more about the reality of the threat and potential behaviors to further reduce those risks.

The mobilizing effects of aspirations (the “I can do it” attitude), as opposed to the unrealistic sense of control in expectations (the “it will happen” attitude), may drive many of the benefits associated with an optimistic outlook. Even when people say, “I will beat this disease,” they may be talking about their determination to fight for survival and not about an assumption that they are somehow immune to the disease. In this way, what sounds like an unrealistic expectation may actually be an adaptive motivating force that helps the individual marshal his or her resources to maximize chances of survival. Because fuzzy knowledge makes it virtually impossible to know precisely what our chances are, an optimistic motivational strategy, focused on searching for opportunities to improve our chances, may not be unrealistic after all.

Being Realistic Is Difficult When Goals Conflict

Even in cases when we are motivated to seek opportunities to improve our situation, being realistic is not always easy. Opportunities that move us toward one goal may simultaneously move us away from another goal. This conflict among goals is another powerful motivator that can promote distorted thinking and self-deception. For instance, strategies for dissonance reduction often pit powerful immediate goals such as mood maintenance (Ison, 1984) and visceral urges (Loewenstein, 1996) against less salient long-term goals such as health and social relationships.

With so much goal conflict in everyday life, it seems that we are constantly in need of dissonance reduction. If suddenly awarded a free hour, should we spend it on a work project, in an exercise workout, or conversing with a loved one (and then which one)? Balancing multiple goals may not be easy, even for an optimist. But there are methods available that do not involve the distortion of reality or the denial of goal conflict. In fact, those who adopt strategies that are likely to help satisfy, rather than deny, multiple goals tend to be happier and healthier (Sheldon & Emmons, 1995; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Valliant, 2000). An opportunity-seeking attitude may make it less tempting to try to avoid those goal conflicts and may help in generating creative solutions. Creativity, in turn, has been related to higher levels of perceived comfort in handling and resolving goal conflicts (Sheldon, 1995). In general, using metacognitive processes to consciously consider and establish priorities may be a critical first step in developing a workable and balanced set of goals that allow us to reduce goal conflict and to prevent cognitive dissonance. (For a related argument, see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000.)

Engagement and Feedback as Keys to Realistic Optimism

Realistic optimism can confer both motivational and emotional benefits (see Shapiro, Dorman, Burkey, & Welker, 1999, for an example). By making the goal-striving process agreeable, opportunity-seeking promotes active engagement in life tasks and continuing efforts toward goals (e.g., Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Covington, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Higgins, 1996, 1999). Of course, those who keep trying are more likely to succeed, especially if they set attainable goals and routinely seek feedback to fine-tune their performance and to recalibrate their goals (e.g., Neubert, 1998).

Is an Optimistic Explanatory Style Realistic?

With realistic optimism motivating routine efforts toward goal attainment, an optimistic explanatory style (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995) may be justifiable. Those with an optimistic explanatory style tend to attribute unexpected bad outcomes to external, unstable, and specific factors but tend to attribute unexpected good outcomes to internal, stable,
and global factors. This asymmetry in attribution may be reasonable for those who routinely put forward an earnest effort in their endeavors and regularly experience some success. If there is at least some control in the situation, effort will typically bring about improvement in performance through learning and practice (A. Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981); effort would certainly not be expected to be systematically associated with declines in performance. On the basis of experience, people who routinely put forth effort—or are routinely engaged or involved—may come to view this engagement propensity as one of their internal, stable, global attributes and may have accrued substantial evidence that their effort is most often the primary cause of improvement (cf. Story & Dunning, 1998).

If an attempt does not yield success, it would seem strange to conclude that not reaching the goal was caused by one’s efforts in pursuit of the goal. Assuming that a person is and has been earnestly trying, the occurrence of an undesirable outcome suggests that there is some external factor that he or she has not previously encountered, learned to reliably control, or learned to adjust to if control is not feasible. Thus, an external attribution in the face of an undesirable outcome makes sense if the focus is and has been on discovering how to improve one’s interactions with the environment.

From another perspective, though, it seems that the optimistic explanatory style is a recipe for chronic blaming, which is one of the primary characteristics of cognitive distortion and self-deception (e.g., Murphy, 1990). Blaming has been linked to maladaptive consequences ranging from health problems (Tennen & Affleck, 1990) to relationship difficulties (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Indeed, some of the most obvious identifying features of the criminal personality include an unwillingness to take responsibility for self-initiated behaviors and a steadfast tendency to blame circumstances and others for negative outcomes related to their own transgressions (Samenow, 1989). Although Seligman (1990, p. 52) cautioned against using an optimistic explanatory style to avoid taking responsibility for actions, he offered no criteria for distinguishing who is being adaptively optimistic from who is responding pathologically.

One of the key differences is likely to be the presence or absence of active engagement in discovering and altering the malleable aspects of the environment. Realistic optimism involves the search for environmental constraints and opportunities to learn about new action–consequence contingencies, whereas blaming relies on presumptions of untested environmental constraints and on avoidance of available information about action–consequence contingencies. Criminals, for instance, blame others because they are motivated to avoid considering their own culpability, not because they are motivated to discern the consequences of their behaviors in order to recalibrate for future success.

**The Inductive Rationality of Realistic Optimism**

There is at least one model of rationality that implies that the optimistic explanatory style is reasonable under certain conditions, provided one is exerting effort toward a goal. A Bayesian model of inductive rationality suggests that our degree of belief about something should be adjusted up or down as we gain evidence about the belief (see, e.g., Glymour, 1992, for a description of the Bayesian perspective). The more that evidence accrues in favor of the belief, the stronger one’s confidence should be about the truth of the belief (although we can never be completely certain). For the person who routinely experiences good outcomes in some domain, the experience of a single bad outcome should do little to alter confidence in his or her ability.

So, for instance, an accomplished student who receives a poor grade on a test has little reason to attribute the poor grade to lack of scholastic ability. This is because the vast majority of the tests he or she has taken still provide a preponderance of evidence in favor of being a good student. Because leniency, appreciation, and opportunity seeking all contribute to an increase in the experience of some degree of success, the realistic optimist may often be in a position to rationally conclude that his or her occasional failures are aberrations caused by some change in condition.

When a bad outcome occurs on the heels of a series of bad outcomes in some domain, an optimistic explanatory style gradually becomes unrealistic as evidence contrary to the “good performer” hypothesis mounts. Under these continuing unfavorable conditions, if an optimistic explanatory style is maintained, it produces blaming. In these types of situations, one can remain realistic but avoid a pessimistic explanatory style by using the preponderance of negative evidence as a signal to recalibrate or refocus goals to find alternative avenues to success. A shorter man, for instance, may learn from repeated experience that he does not have the ability to master the slam dunk in basketball; instead, he may more advantageously channel his efforts into practicing shots from outside.

Thus, an optimistic explanatory style can be associated with realistic responding, but only if the response style is accompanied by active engagement in establishing reachable goals and routine search of the environment for feedback to improve the effectiveness of efforts. This feedback is especially useful for assessing whether the amount of effort exerted feels like it is worth the judged degree of success. In this way, reality checks also provide information needed to choose how to channel one’s energies into efforts that yield more satisfying successes (e.g., Aspinwall & Richter, 1999).

**Engagement May Be More Realistic Than Either Internal or External Attributions**

The immense attribution literature has promoted what, in essence, may be an unrealistic dichotomy between internal and external causes. Research participants are often asked to decide whether outcomes are primarily caused either by something about the individual or by something about the environment. But outcomes are almost always defined by the interaction between the individual and the environment. What it means, for instance, to successfully take a drink depends on whether one has a drinking vessel, or is orbiting...
the earth, or is paralyzed, or is riding whitewater rapids, etcetera. A causal model can be realistic only to the extent that it captures the essential interdependence between the individual’s behavior and environmental constraints (see also DeGrandpre, 2000; Gibson, 1979; Gigerenzer, 2000; Gigerenzer, Todd, & the ABC Research Group, 1999; Simon, 1981).

As we have just seen, chronic blaming is an unwillingness to consider the individual (i.e., oneself) in the causal model of outcomes. By representing only external factors as possible causes of events, the essential interplay between the individual and the environment is lost. Because this causal model of the world is chronically missing one of the two essential components, it cannot accurately capture the actual state of affairs.

What if the causal model of the world were chronically missing the environmental component rather than the role of the individual? In this case, a person would habitually ignore the environment and look for explanations of outcomes only in terms of his or her own ability. The result is a rigid perspective that presumes an individual’s performance should be invariant across situations. This causal model of the world is recognizable as what Dweck (1996) called an implicit entity theory, wherein people assume that an individual’s abilities are fixed or invariant over time and across situations. The dynamic features of the environment are not considered important influences on performance. Hence, a failure or bad outcome indicates incompetence in the domain.

This exclusive focus on the individual is unrealistic because it fails to acknowledge the context-dependence of behavior, and it ignores the potential for changes in ability to gradually develop through practice. The view leads to extreme judgments (e.g., “I am great/ lousy at this”) based on only one or a few performances (which in some cases is inconsistent with principles of Bayesian rationality). A rigid focus on the individual also eliminates many important methods for meaningfully assessing the success of interactions. Valuable benchmarks for performance, such as improvements over time or adaptations to changing conditions, may not be recognized because they are not lasting features of the individual. As a consequence, an entity perspective discourages goals focused on practice or on achieving one’s personal best. Instead, it promotes competitiveness by limiting options for assessing performance to comparisons with the performance of others (i.e., comparisons of one’s own fixed ability to the fixed abilities of others). Hence, outperforming others (an inherently antagonistic goal) becomes the only avenue for feeling good about one’s own ability (Covington, 2000; Skaalvik, 1997; Thorkildsen & Nicholls, 1998).

Aspiring to Find Effective Action-Consequence Contingencies

The current description of realistic optimism implies a focus on active engagement, emphasizing the potential of the individual given the constraints imposed by the environment. Both reality checks and opportunity-seeking promote active engagement as a means to discover controllable aspects of the situation. This search for control may lead to what appears to be overconfidence in judgments of controllability. As mentioned earlier, however, whether response measures assess expectations (i.e., predictions based on fixed beliefs) or aspirations (i.e., hopes based on motivation) is often difficult to discern.

Regardless of the measurement issue, a bias in favor of anticipating controllability does not necessarily reflect misplaced overconfidence. In fact, the bias may be more adaptive—and arguably more rational—than a neutral position. In signal detection terms (see, e.g., Swets, Dawes, & Monahan, 2000), it may be less costly to experience anticipatory errors that are false alarms (searching for control when there is none) than misses (not searching for control when it is available). Without perfect knowledge, we cannot help but make errors in our predictions. Given this, it may be optimal to bias our predictions in favor of anticipating some control. This seems especially likely given that control is not an all-or-none phenomenon; those who search for control will be more likely to discover at least some aspect of the situation that is amenable to change.

Moreover, the fuzzy nature of reality may allow us to exercise more control over our experiences than is typically acknowledged. Consider a person who expects good things to happen. At first glance, this seems like wishful thinking about events that are out of the person’s control. In some cases, that might be what it is. But for someone who has a consistent history of good experiences, it seems reasonable (and may be inductively rational) to expect that good experiences will continue, just as we all expect the sun to continue to rise every morning. (See Constant, 1999, for an interesting Bayesian analysis of the relationship between reliable experiences and rational beliefs.)

Given this, a person would be realistic in his or her optimism with a consistent history of (a) experiences that most everyone would agree qualified as good experiences, (b) experiences that commonly had a positive subjective meaning due to interpretive processes such as leniency and appreciation, or (c) experiences that had been improved by the individual through opportunity-seeking. The person has at least some control over Criteria b and c. Because of the self-fulfilling prophecies enabled by Criteria b and c, the person may also have some impact on Criterion a. In this sense, each of us can be considered an active player in the quality of our experiences, with at least partial control of whether good things happen. Realistically, having a good attitude is likely to pay off.

Toward a Realistically Optimistic Science of Psychology

The science of psychology shapes how we come to understand mental and behavioral processes. We can take advantage of the benefits of realistic optimism to inject psychology with a positive and energizing outlook, without blinding ourselves to human flaws. Psychological science can take a lenient perspective in understanding human mistakes and frailties, cultivate appreciation of human strengths and achievements, and actively create opportunities for improving people’s life experiences.
In our attempts to identify what it means to be a well-adapted individual, we will need to explore the nature of human reality. Understanding the different implications of fuzzy meaning and fuzzy knowledge may help us to better predict the impact of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors under a variety of constraints. Within our reality, we may often be able to discover a positive perspective on our situation—not a distortion or illusion, but a legitimate evaluation, within reasonable limits of what we do and do not know about our reality—that helps us to achieve peace of mind, appreciation for our experiences, and mobilization for future endeavors. This perspective invites emotions such as hope, pride, curiosity, and enthusiasm, which are likely to be powerful motivators to the essence of meaning, as well as powerful motivators (Cafray & Schneider, 2000; Lea & Webley, 1997; Snyder, 2000).

We each have the opportunity to guide the direction of our own lives and subjective experiences, both in our day-to-day choices and in our long-term plans. We are also capable of fooling ourselves into believing things that are unlikely based on the information that we could have if we chose to access it. The illusion of the good life is likely to break down for those who pull themselves into complacency with self-deceptive beliefs, but the illusion is likely to become reality for those who are optimistic within the fuzzy boundaries established by active engagement in life.

REFERENCES


