



## What is unrealistic optimism?



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### ABSTRACT

Here we consider the nature of unrealistic optimism and other related positive illusions. We are interested in whether cognitive states that are unrealistically optimistic are belief states, whether they are false, and whether they are epistemically irrational. We also ask to what extent unrealistically optimistic cognitive states are fixed. Based on the classic and recent empirical literature on unrealistic optimism, we offer some preliminary answers to these questions, thereby laying the foundations for answering further questions about unrealistic optimism, such as whether it has biological, psychological, or epistemic benefits.

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## 0. Introduction

In this paper we are interested in the nature of unrealistic optimism and other positive illusions as discussed in the psychological literature. There is an ongoing debate in philosophy and psychology as to whether false beliefs are epistemically irrational and whether they can have pragmatic benefits, even if they are epistemically irrational (Bortolotti & Sullivan-Bissett, 2015; Craigie & Bortolotti, 2014; Haselton & Nettle, 2006). Beliefs exhibit epistemic irrationality to the extent that they are badly supported by the evidence available to the agent, or are maintained despite counter-evidence which is available to the agent. It is sometimes claimed that positive illusions generally, and unrealistic optimism specifically, are systematic tendencies to form beliefs that are biased, and often false, but have significant benefits (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994), because they increase wellbeing, contribute to mental and physical health, and support productivity and motivation (cf. Bortolotti & Antrobus, 2015).

In order to assess such claims, we need to explain what unrealistic optimism is, whether the cognitive states that are unrealistically optimistic are belief states, and to what extent they are false. If such cognitive states can be said to be false or epistemically irrational beliefs, then they are candidates for being false or epistemically irrational beliefs that are useful. Whether they do indeed have positive effects is beyond the scope of this paper.

In Section 1, we distinguish between unrealistic optimism and other positive illusions and explain different ways of operationalizing unrealistic optimism. In Section 2, we ask how we should think about positive illusions. Are they tendencies to adopt and maintain positive beliefs and to make predictions that are optimistically biased, or to express desires and hopes about the self and the future? We suggest that we should understand optimistically biased cognitive states as beliefs and predictions. In Sections 3 and 4, we consider their epistemic status. Are they typically false? Are they epistemically irrational? The answers to these questions will be informed by an analysis of the extent to which optimistically biased beliefs

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and predictions are fixed. In Section 5 we discuss two ways of understanding fixity of beliefs, i.e., whether beliefs are responsive to evidence and whether they are sensitive to life circumstances. Throughout the paper we reflect on a number of methodological challenges in the empirical study of optimism.

## 1. Unrealistic optimism and other positive illusions

While several other forms of positive illusions have been identified in the psychological literature (e.g., self-serving bias and wishful thinking, [Krizan & Windschitl, 2009](#); [Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeny, 2008](#)), we will consider the following three forms: (1) the illusion of control, which is an exaggerated belief in one's capacity to control independent, external events (e.g., [Langer & Roth, 1975](#)); (2) the better than average effect (sometimes also called the superiority illusion), which is the perception of oneself, one's past behaviour, and one's lasting features as more positive than is the case ("I am more talented than the average person") (e.g., [Brown, 2012](#)); (3) unrealistic optimism, which is the "tendency for people to believe that they are less likely to experience negative events and more likely to experience positive events than are other people" ([Shepperd, Carroll, Grace, & Terry, 2002, p. 65](#)). In our paper, we use the expressions 'unrealistic optimism' and 'optimism bias' interchangeably, which is common practice in the literature.

Here are some examples of positive illusions. Instances of the illusion of control can be found in a casino, where people tend to think that they have a better chance at winning when they are the ones rolling the dice, and thus they bet more money in those circumstances ([Vyse, 1997](#)). An example of the better-than-average effect is when college professors are asked whether they do above-average work, and 94% of them say they do ([Cross, 1977](#)). They cannot all be right about that. An example of the optimism bias is when people underestimate the likelihood that their marriage will end in divorce or that they will develop a serious health condition during their lives ([Weinstein, 1980](#)).

There are a number of different phenomena which are normally grouped under the heading 'optimism bias'. [Shepperd, Klein, Waters, and Weinstein \(2013\)](#) distinguish between unrealistic comparative optimism, and unrealistic absolute optimism. On the former definition, people evaluate their own prospects as better than those of similar others (or another specific reference group), in other words, they expect that positive outcomes are more likely and negative outcomes are less likely to occur for oneself than for others. On the latter definition, people's risk assessment is unrealistically positive when compared to an objective criterion, such as an actuarial risk assessment or actual outcomes (e.g., a grade at the end of a college course). These forms of optimism bias need to be distinguished from dispositional optimism. Dispositional optimism is conceptualized as a personality trait, which people exhibit to different degrees. Broadly defined, it is a generalized tendency to expect positive outcomes ([Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010](#)). This expectation need not be unrealistic, and the Life Orientation Test measures a generally positive outlook which does not include predictions regarding specific life-events ([Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994](#)).

All three positive illusions are taken to give rise to beliefs that are badly supported by the evidence and that leave the person with a more positive outlook than is warranted. These positive illusions can interact with one another. For instance, an unrealistically positive view of the quality of one's research is also likely to lead to unrealistic expectations regarding the likelihood of one's research being published. Similarly, if a person believes that they can control events more than they can in fact, this belief will lead them to be more optimistic about their chances of avoiding undesirable outcomes and achieving desirable ones ([McKenna, 1993](#); [Shepperd et al., 2002](#)).

## 2. Are positive illusions beliefs?

What is the status of the assertions research participants make in the positive illusions literature? Are they statements about what people think of themselves and about what they think will happen? Are they mere expressions of hope or desire, or guesses about what could happen? Taylor defines positive illusions as "enduring patterns of beliefs" about self, world, and future (1989, p. 44), and as "systematic small distortions of reality that make things appear better than they are" (1989, p. 228). Based on Taylor's account of positive illusions, in this paper we understand positive illusions as systematic tendencies either to adopt and maintain excessively optimistic beliefs about the self or to make excessively optimistic predictions about the self, where we understand predictions as beliefs about what will happen or what is likely to happen. This understanding of positive illusions as patterns of beliefs is largely shared in the psychological literature, and compatible with common assumptions about how positive illusions work (cf. [Collard, Cummins, & Fuller-Tyskiewicz, 2016](#); [Makridakis & Moleskis, 2015](#); [McKay & Dennett, 2009](#)).

As with other cognitive states that are likely to be biased, illusory, or simply badly supported by the evidence, such as self-deception, prejudice, superstition, and delusion, there is some debate about the status of the cognitive states studied in the positive illusions literature ([Flanagan, 2009](#)), and often positive illusions are described as things people just hope for in the context of health (e.g., [Paley, 2014](#)) or relationships (e.g., [Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996](#)). Some of the methodological challenges to the positive illusions approach imply that the participants' reports are expressions of their desires or hopes for positive outcomes, and thus are not subject to an assessment of rationality in the same way as beliefs would be.

People can have different attitudes towards the same propositional content. For instance, take the content "Mary won't get a divorce". Mary can believe that she won't get a divorce. In this first case, Mary is committed to the truth of "Mary won't get a divorce", and, if she is a rational believer, her commitment should be guided by her weighing up the evidence for and

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