

TW Notes on

Tali Sharot (2011) The Optimism Bias:  
A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain

Vintage Books

She's a neuroscientist at University College,  
London

The neural system responsible for  
memory may have evolved to imagine  
the future. They use the same brain  
structures

"optimism may be so essential to our  
survival that it is hardwired into our  
... brain" p xii

"... as we grow older ... we should  
be able to perceive the world more  
accurately ... but we don't" p xiv

Many aren't aware of this bias

"The optimism bias is so powerful, precisely  
because ... it is not fully accessible to  
our conscious deliberation" xiv

Optimism can change how we behave  
and make itself a self-fulfilling  
prophecy

The superiority illusion in brain  
is one of our most important cognitive  
illusions. We can see them in others  
~~for~~ but not ourselves. "We hold the illusion  
that we are immune to illusion" p 6

introspection illusion - that <sup>people</sup> ~~you~~ can  
"divinely access the processes underlying  
their mental states" ... [but] Most mental  
processes ... are largely unavailable  
for conscious interpretation ... people  
are unaware that they are unaware." p 18

"We can unknowingly create verbal  
rationalization for preferences and  
intentions and intentions that we  
do not actually possess" p 20 has  
been shown by Johansson and Hall  
"Studies show that thinking too  
much can lead to sub-optimal  
judgments" p 22

As we form or some type of knowledge  
that part of our brain grows while other  
some other parts shrink.

Endel Tulving coined the term  
'mental time travel'. The hippocampus  
hippocampus is involved with both  
memory and imagining the future.

Ajit Varki argue that without  
the optimism bias the awareness of  
mortality would have led us to  
an evolutionary dead end.

The term self-fulfilling prophecy  
was coined by Robert Merton (sociologist)  
in 1948

Stereotypes are an example

"Theory of mind is our ability to think about what other people are thinking" p 53

Defensive pessimism

Optimists tend to live longer than pessimists. p 57

Optimists also tend to make higher incomes p 54

"High levels of oxytocin reduce our uncertainty about social stimuli" p 63

"... private optimism ... is typically accompanied by public despair

People tend to be more optimistic about their own futures than for the country as a whole

People tend to be more optimistic about things which they believe they can control, even when this is an illusion

"the power of relativity" While we have optimistic biases about ourselves we have pessimistic biases about others

Our views about the future of society depends on which view "feels our private optimism best" p 71

A result is that public optimism increases when situations are bad.

We aren't good at predicting what will make us happy

Studies show that some of the things that make us happier are having a garden and a Ph.D and not having children! pp 74-5

Low income reduces happiness but super high income doesn't greatly increase it.

~~When~~ When we get things we want we tend to quickly adapt and they no longer enhance our pleasure p 80

Kahneman - the focusing illusion  
We give more weight to things we are asked about

"Relativity is a crucial aspect of human psychology" p 82

Andrew Youngman - memory retrieval involves two distinct processes, memory and recollection that rely on different brain regions

~~Our~~ Our memories are affected by our emotions

"The majority of people are happy most of the time" p 87

Rollo May - depression is the inability  
to construct a future

depressive realism - While  
severely depressed individuals are too  
pessimistic mildly depressed individuals  
are the most realistic p 89

optimistic and pessimistic  
explanatory styles

The value of anticipation - the cost  
of dread

anticipation and temporal discounting  
pull us in opposite directions

We have a powerful tendency to  
reevaluate our options once we have  
chosen. We usually think we made  
the right choice

The power of agency - once you select  
something you value it more  
decision alters preference

Cognitive dissonance theory - decision  
between attractive alternatives generates  
psychological discomfort

explanation: self-perception theory - people infer  
their preferences by observing their  
preferences

"The human brain is very efficient  
in turning lead into gold" 171

Unpaired bias - tendency to overrate  
the effects of an adverse event on our  
well being

With cognitive dissonance we may  
voluntarily reinterpret things so that  
we can keep our prior beliefs

"The human mind finds a quick  
and easy way to restore balance" p183

"It is not only beliefs, attitudes,  
and values that are subjective.

Our brains comfortably change  
our perceptions of the physical  
world to fit our needs" p185

Optimism can have a ~~dark~~  
dark side

People believe on average they are  
less likely than average to suffer  
misfortunes

Why do we keep misestimating  
in the face of evidence? The brain  
must process information in a selective

~~means~~ means - a bias that

"allows us to incorporate desirable  
information into our future

outlook but not undesirable  
information - resulting in optimism" p193

The brain tracks error in prediction but "the brain was pretty good at tracking mismatches only when the new information was positive"  
"Underestimating the probability of <sup>17</sup> ~~17~~<sup>25</sup> of future adverse events reduces our level of stress and anxiety, which is beneficial to our health" p 197

Moderate optimism correlated with sensible decisions while extreme optimism didn't

Herth Shefrin suggested that the optimism bias was the root cause for the financial crisis

"Although we are optimistic, our expectations do not usually border on accuracy" p 204

The hierarchical structure of the brain "allows our expectations to influence both our perception of reality and our ~~actions~~ - actions - thereby altering reality itself" p 204

"Via neuronal signaling, higher layer of the brain can convey expectations to lower levels, bearing their activity" 205