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The Egalitarian Optimist and the Confrontation of Prejudice

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Abstract

Standing up against prejudice often requires one to surmount powerful inter- and intra-individual forces. Egalitarian standards alone are often insufficient to surmount these forces. As individuals high in dispositional optimism vigorously pursue valued goals, even when threatened with obstacles, we propose that the combination of high optimism and salient egalitarian goals predicts the confrontation of prejudice. In the present study, individuals high and low in both optimism and prejudice were randomly assigned to hear a racist joke followed by an argument, or to hear the same joke but without the argument. We found that low-prejudice optimists who had their chronic egalitarian values made salient by hearing the argument were highly likely to confront a later act of prejudice. Self-report data closely mirrored this behavioral finding. These findings support a self-regulatory approach to confrontation and suggest new avenues for combating prejudice.

Keywords

optimism; pessimism; personality; self-regulation; prejudice reduction; confrontation; racism

Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was one of the most optimistic views for the future of race relations that was presented during the American Civil Rights Era. The impact of Dr. King's expectation for positive intergroup relations continues to reverberate to the present day. Although Dr. King's message led many to follow in his footsteps by standing up against prejudice, it is clear that individuals often fail to act when they encounter prejudicial remarks or discriminatory behavior—despite holding strong desires to behave in an egalitarian manner. Early research on prejudice theorized that there was an underlying personality factor that characterized most prejudiced individuals (e.g. Allport, 1954), but recent research attempting to identify a prejudice-prone personality has largely stalled (e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Interestingly, one personality factor that may be critical in facilitating the confrontation of prejudice is dispositional optimism. Perhaps it was the *optimistic* outlook of Dr. King that turned his egalitarian values into egalitarian action. Drawing from self-regulatory theory, we examine the hypothesis that dispositional optimism can serve as a useful propellant for upholding egalitarian values.

The Confrontation of Racism

Although most individuals report having egalitarian values, these values do not always translate into behavior (e.g., Devine, 1989; for a review, see Kunda & Spencer, 2003). For example, prior studies (Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001) show that, in most cases, even individuals high in chronic egalitarian values do not stand

up and confront prejudiced behavior. One study showed that only four percent of individuals would directly confront an interviewer who made sexist comments (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). This low level of action should not be unexpected, as contradicting prejudiced individuals is a daunting task. Confrontation requires the overcoming of powerful social forces and persistence in the face of unpleasant circumstances and reactions.

This lack of confrontation is unfortunate, however, as confrontation may be a valuable vehicle for social change. Studies have shown that individuals who are confronted about a prejudiced action are less likely to perform future prejudiced actions and are likely to lower their level of prejudiced attitude (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). One could argue that confrontation of a racist joke may not be the most ideal response as confrontation can increase hostility towards the confronter in the short term (Czopp et al., 2006). However, we do not think silence is a better option, given the prevalence of the false consensus effects in social behavior (e.g., Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Consequently, silence is likely to be viewed as tacit agreement with a prejudiced remark and not a deterrent for future prejudice.

Although confrontation can reduce prejudice—as noted above—direct acts of confrontation are rare, because engaging in these acts typically require one to breach social barriers and to face unpleasant and threatening circumstances. As we now describe, however, individuals high in dispositional optimism have been shown to be highly successful at maintaining goal pursuit under just these conditions.

Optimism and the Pursuit of Valued Goals

Dispositional optimism refers to a generalized positive outcome expectancy (Scheier & Carver, 1985). An extensive literature now links high dispositional optimism with active goal engagement in the face of salient threats and challenges (for reviews, see Carver & Scheier, 2002). An illustrative example comes from a study of individuals undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery (Scheier et al., 1989). In this sample, high optimism was associated with less dwelling on the negatives of the experience, the setting of recovery goals, the generation of post-surgery plans, the seeking out of information about post-surgery procedures, faster recovery time (e.g., walking sooner), and better quality of life 6-months post-surgery.

The increased persistence displayed by dispositional optimists is explained in the behavioral self-regulation model (Carver & Scheier, 1998). According to this model, dispositional optimism influences behavior when individuals encounter an obstacle during goal pursuit. Specifically, when a desired goal appears blocked (e.g., due to a stressor), an individual assesses the likelihood of overcoming the obstruction. Because optimists expect desired outcomes to be obtainable, they persist in the face of the goal obstruction, resulting in increased goal-related activity. Less optimistic individuals are more likely to disengage from goal pursuit and to experience negative affect (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001).

Based on the self-regulation model, it can be anticipated that optimists will be more likely than pessimists to act out against prejudice—despite the clear challenges and impediments. Recent research (Geers, Wellman, & Lassiter, *in press*) suggests that high optimism alone will not lead to the confrontation of prejudice, however. These studies indicate that rather than exhibiting indiscriminate engagement to all goals, optimists tailor their efforts based on their evaluation of the goal under consideration. Specifically, optimists more actively pursue goals than pessimists primarily when they consider a goal to be high rather than low in worth. Combining this notion with research on individual-differences in egalitarian values (e.g., Devine, 1989; Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink & Elliot, 1991) leads to the hypothesis that individuals who are high in optimism and who also hold egalitarian values will be most likely to confront prejudice. This hypothesis is compatible with prior Value $\times$ Expectancy

formulations (for a review, see Feathers, 1982), in which goal-relevant responses are anticipated to be greatest when both value and expectancy for success are high.

A final variable we considered in the present research was the context surrounding the opportunity for confrontation. Prior research has found that the relationship between chronic values and standards, such as prejudice level, and behavior, such as standing up against prejudice, are generally weak (Wicker, 1969; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1973). Important situational moderators of this relationship have subsequently been uncovered, including the opportunity to consider one's attitude prior to the behavior. For example, in one study where participants evaluated a sexual discrimination case (Snyder & Swann, 1976), participants' views toward affirmative action were recorded in a preliminary session and later in an ostensibly unrelated session. Participants' views toward affirmative action predicted judgments regarding the case only when the participants were asked to gather their thoughts about affirmative action right before they read over the case information. This initial study, and conceptually similar studies (e.g., Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983; Kunda & Spencer, 2003), indicate that making chronic values and standards salient strengthens their predictive ability. We have uncovered a similar effect in a prior study on dispositional optimism. In this study, optimists who were concerned about their dental hygiene displayed a greater desire to attend a subsequent seminar on dental health as compared to optimists who were not concerned about their dental hygiene. This difference only held, however, when participants were first made to think about their dental hygiene (Geers, Wellman, & Fowler, 2009). Based on these earlier lines of research, we also included a variable to heighten the salience of participants' egalitarian values in the present study.

The Present Research

In the study reported in this article, we tested the hypothesis that optimism propels egalitarian individuals to confront prejudiced behavior. Participants were exposed to a series of jokes, one of which was racist. Following the racist joke, half of the participants witnessed an argument about the joke, whereas the other half witnessed no such argument. We predicted that low prejudice optimists would be more likely than low prejudice pessimists to later confront a racist joke told by a confederate. This prediction was made, however, primarily for participants who witnessed the prior argument. This is because the low-prejudice optimists not witnessing the argument would not have their chronic egalitarian values particularly salient. Consequently, their behavior should not be as influenced by this particular chronic value (cf. Snyder & Swann, 1976; Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven White psychology undergraduates (29 female, 28 male) participated for partial course credit. Participants were prescreened at the beginning of the semester using the Attitudes Toward Blacks Scale (ATB; Brigham, 1993), a 20-item questionnaire commonly used to measure egalitarian values (e.g., "Black people are demanding too much too fast in their push for equal rights"). Participants responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree very much*, 7 = *agree very much*). Items were reverse-scored when appropriate so higher scores indicate higher levels of prejudice. The 20 items were then averaged to create a composite prejudice scale ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.92$). The ATB demonstrated an acceptable level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$), and past research has shown that it is highly correlated with internal motivation to avoid prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998). Participants were also prescreened for dispositional optimism using the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). The LOT-R consists of six self-report items (plus four filler items); each rated on a five-point scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The three negatively worded items (e.g., I

hardly ever expect things to go my way) were reverse-scored and then averaged with the three positively worded items (e.g., I'm always optimistic about my future), so higher scores indicate higher levels of dispositional optimism ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.54$). The LOT-R demonstrated an acceptable level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .74$). Past research has demonstrated that dispositional optimism can be discriminated from other positivity-related constructs such as self-esteem, social desirability and positive affectivity (Geers, Handley, & McLarney, 2003; Geers, Wellman, Helfer, Fowler, & France, 2008; Scheier et al., 1994).¹

Procedure

Participants attended sessions as part of a dyad with an experimental confederate. Both the experimenter and confederate were White females who were blind to prejudice scores, optimism scores, and condition. After arriving, the participant and the confederate were greeted by the experimenter and were taken to separate rooms with computers running MediaLab Research Software® (Jarvis, 2004). Participants watched a video with a White male telling four jokes to a White female. The jokes varied in level of humor and offensiveness. One joke was racist in nature: *What is the most confusing holiday for Black kids? Father's Day*. Following the punch line, participants in the argument condition witnessed an argument between the joke-teller and joke-listener. The joke-listener responded in an argumentative tone: *That's not funny. People shouldn't tell jokes that use stereotypes like that*. To which the joke-teller responded, also argumentatively: *Oh come on! What's the big deal? Can't anyone take a joke?* The remaining participants—those in the no-argument condition saw no such interaction following the punch line.

Following the argument manipulation, participants returned to a waiting area with the confederate while the experimenter was supposedly adjusting the computer programs. As the participant and confederate waited for the experimenter, the confederate told the participant a different racist joke that she had purportedly learned from the video she watched. The confederate observed the participant's reaction to the joke. After allowing enough time for the participant to react to the confederate's biased behavior, the experimenter returned, and led the participant and confederate to the same separate experiment rooms they had each been in before. The confederate (still blind to condition, dispositional optimism and prejudice) immediately provided several evaluations of the participant's reaction to the joke, including a detailed written description of what, if anything, the participant said in response to the joke. Simultaneously, participants rated the joke-teller from the video on various personal characteristics. Specifically, participants rated the joke-teller on dimensions of friendliness, sociability, honesty, intelligence, funniness, and annoyingness (reverse scored) on a 7-point scale anchored by (1 = *not very*) and (7 = *very*). These items were averaged ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.85$) and displayed an acceptable level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .74$). Following this questionnaire, participants were systematically debriefed regarding the purpose of the study and the presence of the confederate. No participants reported having suspicion regarding the presence of the confederate.

¹Some researchers (e.g., Dember, Martin, Hummer, Howe, & Melton, 1989) characterize dispositional optimism as being composed of separate, but related constructs of optimism and pessimism, whereas others characterize optimism as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Rauch, Schweizer, & Moosbrugger, 2007). To assess this dimensionality issue within the current data set, the data were re-analyzed with both the optimism subscale (i.e., the positively worded items) and pessimism subscale (i.e., the negatively worded items) of the LOT-R. The two subscales produced results similar to each other and to the overall LOT-R. As such, the optimism and pessimism subscale items did not produce divergent results in the present study.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Preliminary analyses indicated that prejudice and dispositional optimism scores were not significantly correlated, $r(57) = -.161$, *ns*. There were also no differences between conditions on dispositional optimism or prejudice scores, $ps > .30$.

Confronting racism

After the study was completed, participants' verbal comments to the confederate were examined by a coder for verbal expressions of disagreement or dissatisfaction with the racial jokes. A variable was created in which participants were given a value of "1" if they verbally challenged or expressed disagreement to the confederate regarding the racist joke (e.g., "I have a hard time listening to racist jokes"), and a value of "0" if they did not verbally confront the confederate or express disagreement with the joke. Nonverbal reactions were not assessed by the coder. Confrontation data from two participants were lost because of a computer malfunction, and thus these participants were not included in the following analyses. To assess the reliability of these codings, a second coder independently rated the responses of the participants. Ratings of the primary and the second coder displayed an acceptable level of reliability ($kappa = .71$).

We then examined whether optimism, prejudice, and witnessing an argument predicted which participants confronted the confederate's racist joke. To make this determination, the dichotomous confrontation data were submitted to a hierarchical logistic regression equation. Sex of participant (0 = female, 1 = male) was included on the first step of the regression to control for known differences between males and females in their reactions to prejudice confrontations (e.g., Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Optimism scores (standardized), prejudice scores (standardized), and argument condition (0 = "no argument", 1 = "witnessed argument") were all entered into the second step of the equation. All two-way interactions were entered on the third step, with the three-way interaction term entered on the fourth step.

The first step of the equation indicated that males were marginally less likely to confront than females, $b = -1.05$, *odds ratio* = .351, $\chi^2(1) = 2.93$, $p = .087$. There were no other effects of sex. The second step of the model was not significant, $\chi^2(4) = 5.85$, *ns*, nor was the third step of the model significant, $\chi^2(3) = 1.56$, *ns*. As predicted, however, the fourth step of the model was significant, $b = -2.58$, *odds ratio* = .076, $\chi^2(1) = 4.66$, $p = .031$ (see Figure 1 for estimated probabilities of confronting). Because only one term was added to the model, this chi-square value also represents the likelihood ratio test (Agresti, 1996). In addition to the likelihood ratio test, we also computed the Wald statistic as it is particularly conservative when dealing with smaller samples, such as is present in this study. The Wald test was also significant, $p = .047$. Finally, an additional statistic indicated that the final model accounted for a substantial proportion of variability in confronting behavior, *Nagelkerke's* $R^2 = .281$.

To examine the precise nature of this interaction, simple slope analyses were computed separately for participants in the argument and no-argument condition. Within the argument condition, two significant slopes were observed. Firstly, for individuals high in optimism, there was the significant, predicted relationship between confrontation and prejudice level $b = -3.07$, *odds ratio* = 0.05, $\chi^2(1) = 7.88$, $p = .005$. This test indicates that low prejudice optimists were likely to confront a racist joke after having witnessed an argument, whereas high prejudice optimists were not. Also, as predicted, there was a significant relationship between optimism and confrontation for individuals low in prejudice who also witnessed an argument, $b = 3.31$, *odds ratio* = 27.24, $\chi^2(1) = 4.48$, $p = .034$. Low prejudice optimists were more likely than low-

prejudice pessimists to confront a racist joke after having witnessed an argument. Finally, none of the significant simple slopes in the no-argument condition were significant.

Evaluation of joke-teller

To determine the effect that optimism, prejudice, and argument condition had on appraisals of the joke-teller, appraisals were submitted to a hierarchical linear regression. The first step of the model controlling for sex was not significant, $\Delta R^2 = .038$, $F(3,52) = 2.18$, *ns*, the second step of the model was not significant, $\Delta R^2 = .037$, $F(3,52) = 0.68$, *ns*, and there was no significant change with the addition of the third step of the model, $\Delta R^2 = .036$, $F(3,49) = 0.66$, *ns*. There was, however, a significant change from the third to the fourth step of the equation, $\Delta R^2 = .076$, $\beta = .336$, $F(1,48) = 4.49$, $p = .039$, with the three-way interaction predicting appraisals of the joke-teller (see Figure 2).

To examine the precise nature of this interaction, simple slopes were again computed separately for individuals in the argument and no-argument condition. Within the argument condition, significant or marginally significant simple slopes were observed for each individual analysis (all $|\beta s| > .69$, all $ps < .07$). There was a positive relationship between prejudice and liking of the joke-teller among optimists; a negative relationship between prejudice and liking of the joke-teller among pessimists; a negative relationship between optimism and liking of the joke-teller among those low in prejudice; and a positive relationship between optimism and liking of the joke-teller among those high in prejudice. There were no significant simple slopes in the no-argument condition.

Discussion

Optimistic expectancies energize individuals to actively pursue valued goals in the face of threats and challenges. We hypothesized that optimists holding egalitarian values are more likely to confront a prejudiced act than less optimistic individuals holding egalitarian values. In support of this hypothesis, we found that low-prejudice optimists were more likely to challenge a prejudiced statement than low-prejudiced individuals holding more pessimistic expectancies. This result emerged for individuals who had these chronic egalitarian values made salient by observing a prior argument. The present research demonstrates, therefore, that dispositional optimism has a central role in the way that individuals pursue important interpersonal goals.

These results are closely in-line with the behavioral self-regulation model (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and underscore the difficulty of pursuing valued goals in the face of substantial social forces. Importantly, generalized positive outcome expectancies appear to assist in the initiation of behaviors that satisfy valued interpersonal goals. However, even for individuals possessing both high optimism and low prejudice, action initiation did require that egalitarian values be made salient. The fact that low-prejudice optimists acted only after the activation of their egalitarian values is consistent with recent research demonstrating that conscious intentions mediate the relationship between optimism level and goal pursuit (Geers et al., *in press*). As such, it may be that conscious intentions mediated the present effect. Additional data is needed, however, to explore the issue of mediation. Tests with larger sample sizes would also help examine such mediational issues.

This research also provides support for the stress and coping model of prejudice confrontation (see Kaiser & Miller, 2004). This model suggests that positive expectancies are related to fewer perceived negative consequences of confrontation, which in turn, relates to more confrontations. Evidence for this prediction was initially found in a correlational study, using self-report measures (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). The present research is consistent with this model and extends the prior findings in several ways. First, the present study revealed effects of

optimistic expectancies on direct behavioral observations, as opposed to self-report alone. Second, dispositional optimism was examined in the present research rather than situation-specific expectancies. Third, the current results indicate that optimistic expectancies are not always associated with greater confrontation. Instead, it appears that optimistic expectancies increase confrontation behavior when an individual holds chronic egalitarian values and these values are made salient. This evidence for a personality-situation interaction involving dispositional optimism adds significantly to our understanding of when individuals will confront prejudiced behavior.

In the present study, confrontation by optimists occurred when they had low prejudice scores and also witnessed an argument over a prejudiced joke. The argument manipulation was used in the experiment to make chronic egalitarian values salient. We should note that this does not mean that witnessing an argument is the only way to make egalitarian values salient among optimists. Rather, other routes for promoting awareness of one's egalitarian values are likely and could produce similar effects.

As past research indicates that chronic values are better predictors of behavior when they are made salient, we included the argument manipulation into our design. The findings of the present study are consistent with prior research (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1976) which suggests that the link between chronic values and behavior is stronger when values are made salient. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this is not the only viable explanation for the effects generated by the argument manipulation. As we have yet to collect process variables, several alternative explanations are plausible. One possible alternative explanation for the present findings would be that participants witnessing the argument were more responsive to the racist joke because the argument served as observational learning or modeling (Bandura, 1977). Further, as modeling works best for similar targets, optimists holding egalitarian values may have been more receptive to this confrontational model, perhaps because they were most likely to perceived the model as similar. Although this is clearly a possibility and bears further investigation, we think it is a less likely explanation for the present findings than our salience explanation. One factor leading us to this conclusion is comes from the analyses of participant sex. Prior studies have found stronger modeling effects when the model and perceiver are of the same sex (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). Given that the joke-listener (the potential model) was female, one would thus expect an interactive effect between sex of participant and argument condition, such that females confronted more in the argument condition. However, only a weak main effect of sex was found ($p = .087$) with no sex by argument condition interaction when possible interaction effects involving sex were separately examined ($ps > .90$). This result makes the observational learning interpretation of this manipulation less plausible, in our eyes, although it certainly does not rule it out completely.

Clearly, future research is required to examine the mechanisms underlying these results as well as to explore potential alternative explanation for the effect of the argument manipulation. Such research will increase our understanding of how dispositional optimism assists in the confrontation of prejudice. For example, there are a number of ways in which future research might better examine a possible alternative explanation of the present findings that is based on modeling. Attempting to directly prime participants with egalitarian values using a subliminal or supraliminal priming manipulation would be one such way to address this concern (cf. Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996).

Attempts should also be made to generalize the present findings using different prejudices and different samples. One potential limitation on the generalizability of the present research was that there were only female experimenters and confederates. It is possible that the participants found a female confederate less threatening and were thus more likely to confront the racist joke.

Further research should also be devoted to discovering under which conditions pessimists are most likely confront prejudiced behavior. Although the effects were not significant in the present research, there was a trend for low-prejudice pessimists to confront prejudiced behavior when they *had not* witnessed an argument. It is worth further investigation to determine the reliability of these trends and through which processes this phenomenon, if replicable, may operate. Being able to predict when both dispositional optimists and pessimists act in an egalitarian manner is important and should ultimately help promote our most optimistic dreams of intergroup relations.

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Figure 1.

Sigmoid curves predicting the probability of confronting the confederate. Prejudice (x-axis) and dispositional optimism (separate lines) are expressed in standard deviation units. The top panel represents participants who had witnessed an argument, while the bottom panel represents participants who had not witnessed an argument.

Watched Argument

No Argument

Figure 2. Regression lines predicting ratings of the joke-teller. The top panel represents participants who had witnessed an argument, while the bottom panel represents participants who had not witnessed an argument.