Present and correct: we kid ourselves less when we live in the moment

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between living in the present, a key manifestation of psychological well-being comparable with a flow state [Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). \textit{Flow: the psychology of optimal experience}. New York: Harper & Row], and positive illusion. Living in the present was measured with Shostrom's [Shostrom, E. L. (1964). An inventory for the measurement of self-actualization. \textit{Educational and Psychological Measurement}, 2, 207–218] Time Competence scale. Positive illusion was assessed with positive and negative trait ratings of the self and average others, where self ratings were more positive overall. Despite views currently in vogue that well-being is enhanced by illusory perceptions, it was predicted that illusions would be fewer for a high than for moderate living in the present group. The results supported the prediction. They were interpreted with reference to the theory that empowered individuals have relatively clear perceptions [Maslow, A. H. (1968). \textit{Toward a psychology of being} (2nd ed.). New York: Van Nostrand]. In line with depressive realism theory [Alloy, L. B. & Abramson, L. Y. 1988, \textit{Depressive realism: four theoretical perspectives}. In L. B. Alloy (Ed.), \textit{Cognitive processes in depression}. New York: Guilford Press], the results also showed that when low and moderate living in the present groups were compared, the low group had fewer illusions. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Do people see more or less of reality as their psychological well-being increases? The traditional view, held especially by those with a clinical orientation and expounded by a number of influential writers, is that well-being is associated with accurate perceptions (e.g. Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; John & Robins, 1994; Maslow, 1968, 1987; Rogers, 1951, 1980). Maslow (1968, 1987), for example, was a key proponent of the traditional view. He used the term ‘self-actualizing’ to

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describe a process whereby individuals who meet an innate need for self-evolution experience a state of self-fulfillment, equivalent to a high degree of mental health or well-being, and open to further development. Maslow proposed that self-actualizing individuals are more likely than others, for example, to perceive things clearly, live in the present, accept themselves and others as they are, and take responsibility for themselves. They are also more spontaneous and more capable of practising detachment. Maslow (1968) claimed: “Seeing is better than being blind, even when seeing hurts” (p. 80). He proposed that self-evolution involves discipline and struggle; otherwise, a person may simply be well-adjusted, “a very pale and doubtful substitute” (p. 5) for a self-actualizing state. In individuals who are merely well-adjusted, more defences are necessary because of fear, guilt, and anxiety experienced; for example, such individuals tend to engage in illusory thinking about themselves in order to prop themselves up.

Some recent research broadly supports views such as these. For example, Mirowsky and Ross (1990) found that individuals who took responsibility for negative as well as positive outcomes (instrumentalism) were less depressed than those who took responsibility for positive but not negative outcomes (self-defence). According to the traditional view, self-actualizing individuals are more aware of their negative as well as positive behaviours and more likely to take responsibility for them. Other researchers found that ‘repressors’, who demonstrated a tendency towards defensiveness, judged negative traits as more descriptive of others than of themselves, whereas ‘non-repressors’ did not show these differences (Myers & Brewin, 1996). Colvin et al. (1995) found that illusory ratings of the self, whereby self-perceptions were spuriously enhanced, were associated with negative ratings by observers several years later, and vice versa, that negative ratings by observers were associated with illusory ratings several years later. And John and Robins (1994) showed that illusory judgments of the self were associated with high narcissism scores whereas less illusory judgments were associated with moderate narcissism scores, implying that individuals with illusions about themselves experience less well-being than those with more accurate self-appraisals.

An opposing view, put forward relatively recently, is that well-being benefits from illusory thinking, or a rose-tinted view of the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988), at least for Westerners (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). This view received widespread attention as a result of Taylor and Brown’s (1988) review article. In their review, the authors claimed that people generally make inaccurate, positively biased judgments about themselves, their abilities, and their futures in comparison with their judgments of others, hence the term ‘positive illusion’: Individuals in general cannot rate above average. Taylor and Brown (1988) claimed that illusory belief systems operate within reasonable bounds and allow people both to feel good and have the confidence to meet challenges. Thus, positive illusions permit personal growth and development. Illusions may also have a positive role in physical health (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000).

The concept of positive illusion has been demonstrated in research. For example, Svenson (1981) showed that most participants in a group believed that their driving ability was better than the average driver’s. This study was supported by one conducted by McCormick, Walkey, and Green (1986). In a different vein, Perloff and Fetzer (1986) showed that most participants believed that they were less likely than others to experience aversive events, such as being a victim of crime. Brown (1986) found that when participants were asked to check off trait adjectives as true of themselves and most others, participants judged positive traits to be more characteristic of themselves than of others, and negative traits to be more characteristic of others than of them-
selves. Boyd-Wilson, McClure, and Walkey (2002) replicated this effect a number of times on large samples of university students. And Kirschenbaum, O’Connor, and Owens (1999) found that many golfers used positive illusions when they planned their shots.

Taylor and Brown (1988) cite many studies that they claim support the role of positive illusions in general well-being. The authors do not directly address the issue of illusion at high well-being, although in a reply to Colvin and Block’s (1994) critique, which raised issues of measurement and methodology, Taylor and Brown (1994) point out that high levels of illusion are maladaptive, and propose that illusion typically remains mild. This does not address the issue of whether illusion increases or decreases at high well-being, however, since in theory it could do either as well as remain mild. The relationship between illusion and high well-being can be determined only by examining illusion at different levels of well-being. If Maslow (1968, 1987) and other authors are correct in their view that illusions are less prevalent in individuals who experience high well-being, and well-being data are aggregated in research, then existing differences in illusion between different well-being groups will be masked (Colvin & Block, 1994; Compton, 1992; John & Robins, 1994; Myers & Brewin, 1996).

We investigated differences in positive illusion in low, medium, and high well-being groups. To measure well-being we used a scale of living in the present. The assessment of well-being is a complex undertaking (Myers & Diener, 1996), and as yet there is little consensus about how it should be carried out. Models currently in use range from affect and life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976) to multiple-scale models (e.g. Ryff & Keyes, 1995) to flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997, 1999) and spiritual serenity (Roberts & Aspy, 1993). We contend, with other authors (e.g. Bourne, 1998; Connors, Toscova, & Tonigan, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997, 1999; Roberts & Aspy, 1993; Ryff & Singer, 1998), that well-being is better conceptualized by the latter types of model. Bourne (1998) for example, proposed that a profound type of well-being can be achieved through strategies such as simplifying one’s life, developing self-awareness, being true to a life-purpose, and trusting in one’s direction. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) pointed out that material success brings only a temporary kind of happiness, and advocated the creation of an inner well-being which consists of an experience of the flow of life, or absorption in the present moment. A distorted perspective of time, with a preoccupation about the past or future, may be maladaptive. A more balanced focus, with an orientation towards the present predominant, predicts well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Maslow, 1968; Rappaport, 1990; Shostrom, 1974). We have found support for this in correlations between scores on Present-Orientation (giving an alpha of 0.80) and scores on various measures of well-being such as general happiness (Kammann & Flett, 1983) and life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) of $r = 0.30—0.54$ (Boyd-Wilson, Walkey, & McClure, 2002).

To measure living in the present we chose Time Competence, one of Shostrom’s (1964) two scales which together are said to measure self-actualization. Each scale can stand on its own, however (Damm, 1969). We had a second reason for using the Time Competence scale: it is a scale that assesses positive qualities. It may not be valid to measure well-being using scales that measure negative qualities such as depression because some research suggests that positive and negative factors, such as feelings and thoughts, are to some extent independent (see Taylor, 1991, for a review). “Time competence” is a quality similar to flow, which involves a strong orientation towards the present and which is a responsive state that can be achieved in physical, mental, or emotional involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). In both states an activity is enjoyed more for its
own sake than for how it turns out. Both states help to explain why people can find happiness in many different ways, for example, in solitude and in relationships, by achieving wealth as well as relinquishing it. As Csikszentmihalyi (1999) put it: “People are happy not because of what they do, but because of how they do it” (p. 826). Flow is characterized by a clear knowledge of what to do moment by moment, immediate feedback on activities, and abilities that match present challenges. Skills, concentration, and perseverance are required (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Shostrom (1974) described the qualities the Time Competence scale was designed to measure in the following way: “The self-actualizing person is primarily Time Competent and thus appears to live more fully in the here-and-now. Such a person is able to tie the past and the future to the present in meaningful continuity; appears to be less burdened by guilts, regrets, and resentments from the past than is the non-self-actualizing person, and aspirations are tied meaningfully to present working goals. There is an apparent faith in the future without rigid or over-idealistic goals” (p. 13). Shostrom adds: “The Time Competent person lives primarily in the present with full awareness, contact and full feeling reactivity” (p. 4).

Thus, the present study tested the relationship between well-being and positive illusion, assessing three levels of a positive well-being measure of Time Competence or living in the present so that the illusion scores of low, moderate, and high well-being groups could be compared. After Alicke (1985) and Brown (1986), illusion was assessed with positive and negative trait judgments of the self and average others, where perceptions of the self are more favourable overall than perceptions of others. It was predicted that individuals assessed as living in the present to a large extent would have fewer positive illusions than those who lived in the present to a moderate extent.

What of the relationship between low levels of living in the present and positive illusion? The phenomenon of ‘depressive realism’ points to lower levels of illusion in dysphoric individuals than in normals. For example, Brown found that participants with low self-esteem were more likely to show congruence in their trait ratings of themselves and others than participants with high self-esteem, who showed a positive bias favouring themselves. Based on this pattern of findings (Alloy & Abramson, 1988), it was predicted that those who measured low on living in the present would have fewer illusions than those with moderate levels of living in the present.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 134 students recruited on campus at Victoria University of Wellington. Of the 126 participants who filled out questionnaires satisfactorily, 54 were female and 70 were male, with the sex of the remaining two participants unknown. The mean age of women was 23 years and the mean age of men was 22 years.

2.2. Materials

Living in the present was measured with Time Competence, a scale in Shostrom’s (1964) Personal Orientation Inventory. The Inventory was developed in a clinical context to measure mental health in positive self-actualizing terms rather than as low psychopathology (Shostrom, 1974).
Items for the Inventory were based chiefly on Maslow's (1968) writings but also on those of authors such as May (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958), Perls (1947), and Riesman (Riesman, Glazer, & Denney, 1950). There is converging evidence in support of the Inventory's validity (Weiss, 1991).

The Time Competence scale consists of 23 pairs of forced-choice items. These are intermixed with remaining Personal Orientation Inventory items. Participants indicate which item of a pair is true or mostly true for them, and are asked to try to respond to every statement. Higher scores on the scale reflect a person who lives in the present to a large extent, plans effectively for the future, and is attached to the past through happy memories rather than regret or bitterness (Shostrom, 1964, 1974). Examples of items are: it is important to me how I live in the here and now, I prefer to use good things now, I spend more time actually living, and, I do not regret my past. Wise and Davis (1975) obtained a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.75 for Time Competence items over 2 weeks.

Positive illusion was measured with positive and negative trait judgments. Illusion is said to be found where trait ratings of the self are more positive overall than ratings of others. In a preliminary study where New Zealanders rated Alicke's (1985) 149 traits for four levels each of positivity and negativity (see Boyd-Wilson, McClure, & Walkey, 2002), the eight traits rated the most positive and the eight rated the most negative were selected to measure positive illusion. The highly positive traits were: Friendly, Reliable, Imaginative, Interesting, Considerate, Intelligent, Sincere, and Humorous. The highly negative traits were: Unkind, Insecure, Dishonourable, Dishonest, Mean, Deceitful, Phony, and Liar. Traits were presented in a random order except that positive and negative traits alternated. On a seven-point scale participants indicated the extent to which they considered that each trait was characteristic of themselves and of the average person of their age and sex.

Order of presentation of Time Competence items and traits was counterbalanced. Half of the participants made trait judgments about themselves first, and half made judgments about others first. This was so ratings of the self and others would be as independent as possible.

2.3. Procedure

Participants responded to recruitment notices placed around the campus of Victoria University of Wellington. These stated that the anonymous study was about people’s views. Participants were informed that the project had received ethical approval and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They filled in questionnaires on their own in a quiet room in the School of Psychology, and were asked not to alter the order of the pages. On completion of the questionnaires, participants were thanked and given a small sum of money. Those participants who wished it were given feedback about the study at a later stage.

3. Results

3.1. Reliability of living in the present measure

Cronbach’s alpha for Time Competence items was 0.61.
3.2. Living in the present and positive illusion

To obtain low, medium, and high Time Competence groups, Time Competence scores were divided at or as close as possible to the 33rd and 66th percentiles, giving three approximately equal groups for each measure (Table 1). Summary data were calculated for each Time Competence group for trait ratings of the self and the average person. Summary data were also calculated for a positive bias towards the self and a positive bias towards others in the trait ratings, and for positive illusion, found where positive bias towards the self was greater than positive bias towards others. Trait ratings of the self and others for Time Competence groups are depicted in Fig. 1, and positive bias and positive illusion for groups in Fig. 2.

Differences in positive illusion between Time Competence groups were tested for with 2 (Positivity: Positive, negative) × 2 (Target: Self, other) × 3 (Time Competence Group: Low, medium, high) mixed-design analyses of variance. Positivity and Target were within-subjects factors and Time Competence Group was a between-subjects factor. Differences in positive illusion between groups would be found in an interaction between Positivity, Target, and Group. There was such an interaction, \( F(2, 112) = 4.87, \ P < 0.01 \). (For remaining interactions and for main effects see Appendix.) Two-tailed \( t \)-tests to clarify the interaction showed that there were no differences between high and medium Time Competence groups in trait ratings of the self, either for positive ratings, \( t(83) = 1.6, \) ns, or for negative ratings, \( t(85) = 0.95, \) ns. Also, there were no differences between these two groups on positive ratings of others, \( t(84) = 0.19, \) ns. However, negative ratings of others were lower for the high than the medium Time Competence group, \( t(81) = 3.18, \ P < 0.01 \). Since illusion was defined as the extent of the difference between a positive bias towards the self and a positive bias towards others, this finding suggested that the high group had less positive illusion in their trait ratings than the medium group. A one-tailed test confirmed this, \( t(60.2) = 2.29, \ P < 0.05, \) supporting the key prediction.

Table 1

Summary data for low, medium, and high time competence groups for trait ratings of the self and others and for positive bias and positive illusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Competence group</th>
<th>Low (( N = 38 ))</th>
<th>Medium (( N = 41 ))</th>
<th>High (( N = 47 ))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( M = 11.32, ) S.D. = 1.92</td>
<td>( M = 15.02, ) S.D. = 0.82</td>
<td>( M = 18.43, ) S.D. = 1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait Ratings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Positive</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Negative</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Positive</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Negative</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Positive Bias</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Positive Bias</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Illusion</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ a \] Positive Bias = Positive Self (Other) Trait Ratings – Negative Self (Other) Trait Ratings. Positive Illusion = Self Positive Bias – Other Positive Bias.
Two-tailed tests were conducted to examine differences in the ratings between low and medium Time Competence groups. These tests showed that positive trait ratings of the self were lower for the low Time Competence group than for the medium group, $t(60.6) = 2.27$, $P < 0.05$. No other differences were significant, either for negative ratings of the self, $t(77) = 1.93$, ns (although this difference approached significance; $P = 0.06$), positive ratings of others, $t(76) = 0.15$, ns, or negative ratings of others, $t(74) = 0.77$, ns. The results for positive self ratings suggested that the low group had less positive illusion than the medium group, and a one-tailed test confirmed this, $t(71) = 2.72$, $P < 0.01$, supporting the second prediction.

4. Discussion

The key investigation of this study concerned whether positive illusions are fewer at high than at moderate levels of well-being. A scale of living in the present was used to measure well-being. Living in the present is similar to a flow state where individuals who appreciate the present moment, transcend fears of the future, and are not self-centred or controlled by outside factors experience increased self-confidence and enjoyment of life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997, 1999; Parr, 1997). In contrast to prevailing views that well-being is characterized by positive illusions, the key prediction was based on views that individuals with high well-being need less to enhance their positive qualities and defend against their negative qualities relative to how they

Fig. 1. Self and other trait ratings of low, medium, and high time competence groups.
perceive others (e.g. John & Robins, 1994; Maslow, 1968). A second prediction was that positive illusions would be fewer at low than at moderate levels of living in the present. Positive illusion was measured as a self-favouring bias when trait ratings were made of the self and average others.

The results supported the key prediction, showing that those assessed as living in the present to the greatest extent had fewer positive illusions than those assessed as living in the present to a moderate extent. The effect was due to less negative trait judgments of average others by those who lived in the present to a large extent. The finding of lower levels of illusion for individuals with high well-being conflicts with views that illusion is characteristic of well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988). If this were the case, then illusions should increase at high well-being, or at least remain the same.

The results also showed that, as predicted, illusions were fewer for those assessed as living in the present to the least extent than for those living in the present to a moderate extent. This effect was due to more positive ratings of the self by the moderate group (although the results for less negative ratings of the self for the moderate group approached significance). This finding supports claims that dysphoric or low well-being groups tend to hold positive illusions to a lesser extent than normal groups (Alloy & Abramson, 1988), and reflects the consensus that dysphoria is associated with a less positive self-image (e.g. Beck, 1972).

Fig. 2. Self and other positive bias and positive illusion in trait ratings of low, medium, and high time competence groups. Positive Bias = Positive Self (Other) Trait Ratings – Negative Self (Other) Trait Ratings. Positive Illusion = Self Positive Bias – Other Positive Bias.
Although both the low and the high living in the present groups demonstrated less illusion than the moderate group, the illusion of the high and low groups was formed in different ways: positive bias both towards the self and towards others appeared to be greater for the high group.

What do the results suggest overall about the usefulness of positive illusions? In contrast to the view that well-being is enhanced by illusory perceptions, albeit at moderate levels (Taylor & Brown, 1988), they suggest that although it is true that illusions are helpful, it is also true that their helpfulness is limited. Illusions are helpful in the sense that positive views and feelings promote positive experiences (McDonald & Hirt, 1997; Salovey et al., 2000). Firm conclusions cannot be drawn from a single study, but it may be that it is useful for individuals, as they struggle to make their way in the world, to put on a set of rose-tinted glasses. However, once those individuals have reached higher levels of self-development, although they may still use illusions to some extent, it may be constraining for them to have a lesser view of others than of themselves. Such views may involve defensive projection, that is, the suppression of a person’s negative qualities and their projection onto others (Newman, Duff, & Baumeister, 1997). Through the derogation of others, defensive projection permits a positive self-image when it is threatened by negative feedback (Fein & Spencer, 1997).

As well as involving more negative views of others, illusions sometimes may lead to harm. For example, if an individual believes erroneously that smoking will not damage his or her health although it may damage others’, that individual may not decide to stop smoking (Williams & Clarke, 1997; cf. Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996).

The reliability of the Time Competence scale was adequate for the purposes of this exploratory study, but could be improved by the modification of certain items that are dated or could be better expressed. One such item is, people need not always repent their wrongdoings. A second consideration is the forced-choice format of the scale. Better data would be obtained if instead of this format, single statements were presented accompanied by seven-point scales.

In conclusion, this study showed that a group of individuals assessed as living in the present to a large extent had less illusory perceptions about their own and others’ traits than a group who lived in the present to a moderate extent: The high living in the present group was less likely to see others more negatively than themselves. However, illusory views were more pronounced at moderate than at low levels of living in the present, where the self-image is relatively negative. In reply to Colvin and Block’s (1994) question then, Do positive illusions foster mental health? we propose, Yes, they do for an individual who wishes to have moderate rather than low well-being. However, in the pursuit of high well-being, individuals may benefit from cultivating as positive a view of others as of themselves. People may make significant progress towards excellent mental health or self-actualization, however the concept is expressed, only if they practise putting others on an equal footing to themselves.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix. Results of analyses of variance not directly relevant to predictions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Main effects</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>499.15</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Competence Group</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>2,112</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two-way interactions</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivity × Target</td>
<td>165.44</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity × Time Competence Group</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2,112</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target × Time Competence Group</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>2,112</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Positivity: Positive, Negative Trait Ratings. Target: Self, Other Trait Ratings. Time Competence Group: Low, Medium, High.

References


