

As good as it gets?

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Albert Einstein once quipped, "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." The famous scientist might have added that the illusion of reality shifts over time. According to a new Brandeis University study in the September issue of *Psychological Science*, age influences how we perceive the future. When thinking about the future, some people seem pessimistic, while others' optimism seems to border on fantasy. Whether a person is naturally a pessimist or an optimist, the study suggests there are other factors at work in determining the way people consider how satisfying their future lives may be.

Brandeis University psychologist Margie Lachman along with Christina Röcke, University of Zurich, Christopher Rosnick, Southern Illinois University, and Carol Ryff, University of Wisconsin, wanted to see if there were differences in actual and perceived ratings of how satisfied Americans were with their lives over a nine-year period. To test this idea, the researchers conducted two surveys, the first in 1995-1996, and the second nine years later, between 2004 and 2006.

In the first survey, participants (between the ages of 24-74) completed a telephone interview and questionnaire. They were asked to rate how currently satisfied they were with their lives, how satisfied they were with their lives 10 years earlier and how satisfied they expected to be 10 years later. In 2004, the participants were asked those same questions.

The experiment enabled the researchers to measure how closely the actual life satisfaction ratings matched the perceived ratings (those from the past or 10 years into the future). With both sets of questionnaires in

hand, Lachman and her colleagues were able to compare how subjects felt during the second survey with how they had predicted they would feel at that time.

The results suggest that there are age-related differences in how we view the past and the future. Older Americans (65 and older) viewed the past and the present as being equally satisfying, but believed that the future would be less satisfying than the present. Americans younger than 65 viewed the present as more satisfying than the past and were more optimistic about the future than their older counterparts, believing they would be more satisfied with life in ten years.

When comparing both sets of questionnaires, Lachman and colleagues discovered that younger and middle-aged adults showed great illusion (that is, they had major differences in their ratings): Both groups believed life would be better than it turned out to be. Older adults, on the other hand, were more realistic and gave accurate predictions about how satisfied they would be. Moreover, older Americans were consistent in how they viewed the past compared with how they actually answered at that time (during the first survey).

"The older adults appeared wiser with greater self-knowledge and a more astute sense of their past and future feelings; they may strive for acceptance of present circumstances as a way of regulating emotions," said Lachman.

The researchers also concluded that across all age groups, "being realistic about the past and future was associated with the most adaptive functioning across a broad array of variables including good health, a well-adjusted personality, supportive social relationships, high well-being and perceived control, and the absence of depression."

In short, those who were doing well were less likely to imagine that things are going to get even better. This research has interesting implications for goal-setting and motivational behavior. These results suggest that younger adults' optimism about the future motivates them to try to achieve high levels of satisfaction. The research also shows that older adults are not as sanguine about the future as younger adults, perhaps because they have become aware or have experienced the height of life satisfaction and may realize this is as good as it gets. The authors suggest that older adults may be satisfied as long as they can maintain the status quo while they prepare themselves for future losses.

"These more negative expectations from older adults may be their way of bracing for an uncertain future, a perspective that can serve a protective function in the face of losses and that can have positive consequences if life circumstances turn out to be better than expected," says Lachman.

Source: Brandeis University

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