Toward a Positive Psychology of Coping With Anticipated Events

Christopher G. Davis and Ersin Asliturk
Carleton University

Many people appear to be quite resilient to significant stress suggesting that they may possess an orientation to events and life that is resistant to such threats. We propose that one significant aspect of this orientation is the tendency to view adversities as something that can happen to anyone and is reflected in the tendency of people entering uncertain contexts to prepare by imagining a range of possible outcomes, both desired and undesired. This preparatory work facilitates the immediate implementation of effective problem solving and support seeking strategies should the desired outcome seem in doubt. We refer to this orientation as the *realistic orientation* and review evidence suggesting that such an orientation is associated with realistic—but not unrealistic—optimism and smooth adaptation to adversity.

Keywords: proactive coping, realistic orientation, optimism

Research on the psychological dimensions of human stress has been rooted historically in clinical psychology, where, understandably, the concern has been with alleviating distress and facilitating adaptation (Seligman & Csikzszentmihalyi, 2000). Presented with clients suffering from debilitating grief, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and a variety of other distressing conditions with psychological aspects, psychologists' attention focused on ways to understand stress and coping, and how they might help alleviate the distress they saw in their clients. Psychologists' attempts to understand what it means to adapt were therefore based on the experiences of those who were seeking help. As has been noted, *such an understanding may lead to a view of coping and adjustment that does not apply outside of the help-seeking or clinical domain* (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). As research turned to understanding how people who do not seek treatment adjust to adversity and grow, a positive psychology of human adaptation was born.

Positive psychology represents a branch of psychological science concerned with understanding the development of well-being, virtue, and resilience. Our perspective is that well-being, virtue, and resilience are achieved by complex strivings that are not attributable merely to being optimistic, focusing on the positive, and expressing positive emotions. Rather, well-being, virtue and resilience come by a variety of means, some of which include thoughtful reflection on a wide range of positive and negative personal experiences (past and present), by pursuing intrinsically meaningful and challenging goals, and by developing a realistic

understanding of oneself (one's abilities, strengths, weaknesses) and the context or environment in which one finds oneself (Colvin & Block, 1994). This is not to say that optimism, focusing on positive, and expressing positive emotions are not involved in the development of well-being, virtue, and resilient outcomes, but rather that they do not tell the whole story. Thusly, our notion of positive psychology does not ignore or downplay negative thoughts, negative emotions, or doubts. Indeed, a number of studies suggest that active processing or contemplation of negative and threatening information plays an important role in health, well-being, and personal growth (e.g., Davis & Morgan, 2008; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009; Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, & Cacioppo, 2003).

The focus of much of our work concerns the processes by which everyday people appraise and respond to the particular meanings engendered in major stressful events and situations (e.g., Davis & Morgan, 2008; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007; Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000). The death of one's spouse, for instance, carries many meanings (the loss of a soulmate, the loss of shared memories, perhaps a loss of faith or hope, the shattering of dreams), and each one of these meanings represents an issue that may need to be addressed in coping with "the loss." The search for meaning following such an event in part represents the survivor's attempts to mentally process these different losses and come to some resolution about what it means to lose this particular person. This resolution may indicate a degree of personal growth as people come to a new understanding of themselves, the value of relationships, or their meaning and purpose in life (Davis, 2008).

Yet in doing this research, we came to realise that many people who have experienced sudden and unexpected adversities do not seem to spend a lot of time processing the meanings of their adversity—for instance, they do not seek to understand why—and seem to adapt very well (Davis et al., 2000, 2007). These resilient individuals seemed to possess a worldview that included the possibility that events like these might happen. Even when the loss was sudden and unexpected, many seemed to take it in stride and accept the outcome. Although they may not have expected their loved one to die at that time, it seemed as though they had

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher G. Davis, Department of Psychology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6, Canada. E-mail: chris_davis@carleton.ca

considered the possibility that something like this might happen at any time. Far from being a cynical or fatalistic view of life, these individuals seemed to possess a particular wisdom about life. This way of thinking was intriguing, and we set about trying to better understand the mindset and approach to coping of these individuals.

What Makes Some People Resilient?

In a series of articles, Bonanno and his colleagues have made the case that resilient outcomes following severe stress are a lot more common than one might expect (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005). For instance, drawing from a prospective study of conjugal bereavement amongst older American adults, Bonanno et al. (2002) showed that a resilient course of adjustment (featuring low distress preloss and postloss) was the most common of five grief reactions. A variety of individual difference variables seemed to discriminate this resilient group from others, including greater acceptance of death, greater perceived coping efficacy, belief in a just world, and less interpersonal dependency. In other studies, Bonanno and colleagues have demonstrated that resilience to loss is linked to the use of self-enhancement strategies, the ability to cope flexibly, a clear sense of self that is not shaken by the loss, and *a priori* worldviews that readily incorporate adversity (for a review, see Mancini & Bonanno, 2009).

Reker and Wong (1988) have also observed that some individuals have a meaning or purpose to their life that seems to make them resistant to the debilitating effects of significant life events. According to their research, individuals who have a sense of order in their social world, sense of coherence, purpose in life and a sense of fulfillment seem to be able to appraise stressful events more positively than individuals who lack a sense of meaningfulness in life (see also Kobassa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982). Thinking about ultimate concerns in life (e.g., considering death, acknowledging the importance of present existence, having meaning and finding purpose in life) appears to help people accept adversity as part of life, which seems to allow them to efficiently make sense of their experience.

An optimistic orientation also predicts a resilient outcome. Several studies show that people who possess an optimistic orientation are more resilient in the face of significant adversity (e.g., Quale & Schanke, 2010; for a review, see Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009). Particularly convincing is research that shows that those who are more optimistic before an adversity report greater use of active, planful problem-solving coping strategies, report greater acceptance of their situation and report less distress before and after the adversity (Carver et al., 1993).

In trying to understand the resilience shown by some participants in our studies of loss and disability, we have focused on the particular orientations that these people appear to possess that facilitates their coping once the event has occurred. To do this research well, however, it is important to assess orientations before the adversity. We have therefore been drawn to study the orientations of people who are about to experience events and situations that they know will probably be stressful, and where effort and ability are not sufficient to guarantee success. In fact, the situations we look for are those that are personally significant and where luck plays a bigger role than is generally acknowledged. There are many situations that fit this description: People frequently enter

situations that they know in advance will be challenging, where they may not succeed. For instance, people choose to enter demanding careers, try out for competitive teams, and have children. Rather than asking people in these situations which coping strategies they are using in anticipation of the approaching stressful situation, we were particularly interested in how people differ in the thoughts that they have about the situation, and how they were thinking about it. The intent has been to capture individual differences in the mental representations or schemata that people develop as they approach a particular stressful situation. These different ways of thinking about future situations, we assumed, would lead to different expectancies, differences in proactive coping, and ultimately in different reactions to the challenges as they arise.

A growing body of research suggests that people who approach challenging situations intending to succeed, but nevertheless seeking information, planning different courses of action, and developing resources in anticipation tend to adjust more successfully than those who do not. Greenglass and Fiksenbaum (2009), for example, have shown that people in stressful contexts who adopt a proactive coping style[1] tend to report more positive affect and more social support. In other research, Greenglass (2002) has found that proactive coping tendencies are associated positively with self-reported use of active coping strategies and life satisfaction, and negatively associated with indicators of depression and burn-out. Aspinwall, Sechrest, and Jones (2005) have shown that in the lead up to the turn of this century, when many feared that the so-called Y2K computer glitch would derail computers around the world, those reporting a proactive coping style, although more worried, were taking active preventative measures including preparing for the worst, asking for help from others, and gathering as much information as possible. In a sample of students preparing for an exam, Sohl and Moyer (2009) demonstrated that proactive coping was associated with greater well-being, and that this association was mediated by proactive copers' more effective use of resources and more realistic goal-setting. Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) argue that individuals with a proactive coping style tend to engage in efforts to remove the potential future obstacles to reach their goals, build up their personal resources continuously, and tend to report personal growth. In summary, the research indicates that people facing difficult and uncertain situations who act proactively by developing social and informational resources are better prepared for what may transpire, and thusly are buffered if and when the difficulties arise.

Being a proactive coper requires that one attend to, appraise, and deliberate upon potential threats in the environment on an ongoing basis. Proactive copers not only need to be adept at reading their current social environment, they also need to have a future temporal orientation—one that anticipates situations and has the capacity to consider alternative plans of action and their possible consequences (Ouwehand, de Ridder, & Bensing, 2008; Taylor,

---

[1] Proactive coping has been defined somewhat differently by different researchers. Greenglass (2002) and Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) distinguish proactive coping (which emphasizes generalized self-efficacy) from "preventative coping" (i.e., doing things to minimize a stressor) and "anticipatory coping" (i.e., getting oneself "psyched"). Others, like Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) do not make these distinctions. Our view of proactive coping is similar to the broader conception used by Aspinwall and Taylor.

Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). For example, it is not sufficient for the proactive student to merely know that an exam is imminent, he or she must also recognise that this exam will likely be particularly difficult, that failure to thoroughly prepare could result in an unsatisfactory grade, which itself has implications for his or her chances of getting into law school. In other, less predictable circumstances, such as bereavement, one may not be able to plan in advance. Nonetheless, our research suggests that some individuals appear to have considered in some detail the possibility that something drastic could happen. The proactive coper thinks ahead.

In many respects, the prototypic proactive coper is one who has a clear understanding of his or her capabilities and weaknesses, and a reasonably accurate (or realistic) view of what to anticipate in the future (see, e.g., Wong, 1993). This view of the prototypic proactive coper might be contrasted with the portrayal of the well-adjusted person described by Taylor and Brown (1988) as one who has an unrealistically optimistic, exaggerated view of his or her abilities and future. Reviewing a great deal of social-psychological research, Taylor and Brown (1988, 1994) argued that well-adjusted people tend to have overly positive self-evaluations, an exaggerated sense of personal mastery, and unrealistic expectations about their ability to avoid misfortune in the future. However, research suggests that proactive coping is consistently correlated positively with an optimistic, overly positive view of one's self and one's future (e.g., Aspinwall et al., 2005; Sohl & Moyer, 2009). Can one be realistically attuned to the range of possible outcomes, accurate in one's assessment of one's abilities, yet still unrealistically optimistic about one's future? We would argue that proactive copers have a clear sense of their own abilities, and the confidence to expect that they will be able to handle exigencies as they arise. In this sense, they are realistically optimistic—confidently aiming for success but taking nothing for granted (Schneider, 2001).

Shades of Optimism

Although many studies indicate that people who are optimistic tend to use more effective coping strategies, and adjust more successfully to adversity relative to those who are pessimistic (e.g., Carver et al., 1993; Taylor et al., 1992), some have suggested that people who are too optimistic might not always adjust well given adversity, particularly when optimism is combined with low sense of control (Norem & Chang, 2001; Peacock & Wong, 1996; Tennen & Affleck, 1987). Consistent with this, Chang and Sanna (2003) found that although optimistic students reported high levels of physical and psychological well-being when stress over the previous year was relatively modest, they reported less well-being than pessimists when life stress in the previous year was high. Relatedly, Cheng, Fung, and Chan (2009) showed with a sample of elderly adults that possession of too optimistic a view of the future was linked with a decrease in well-being over time. On the other hand, those who had more realistic expectations about what they would be able to do in the next year had greater psychological well-being at the 1 year follow-up.

Arguing that not all pessimism is maladaptive, Norem and associates have demonstrated that a particular form of pessimism, which they refer to as defensive pessimism, can be quite adaptive (Norem & Cantor, 1986; Norem & Chang, 2002). According to Norem and colleagues, defensive pessimists set unrealistically low

expectations but use this fear of doing poorly as a motivation for pursuing their goals, and tend to perform as well as strategic optimists. Norem and Smith (2006), for instance, have argued that defensive pessimists tend to adapt well to challenging situations because they anticipate failure rather than success, and use the resulting anxiety to motivate performance. Strategic optimists, on the other hand, set high expectations and avoid extensive reflection. A number of studies demonstrate that although defensive pessimists may feel more anxiety leading up to a difficult task, they tend to perform as well as strategic optimists (Norem & Illingworth, 1993, 2004).

Recent research by Gasper, Lozinski, and LeBreau (2009) suggests that a key adaptive feature of defensive pessimism is a tendency to reflect on alternative outcomes. According to this research, defensive pessimists do not necessarily expect to fail, but they are much more likely than their opposites (strategic optimists) to consider the real possibility of failure. The reflective tendencies of defensive pessimists are positively (not negatively) correlated with outcome expectancies, which in turn are associated with better performance (Gasper et al., 2009).

In summary, these studies suggest that a closer look at the advantages and disadvantages of positive and negative anticipations may be warranted. We are not suggesting that it is good to be pessimistic about the future; only that it is important that anticipatory thoughts about the future have some balance. Many optimistic individuals possess this balance, but others—perhaps like Norem's strategic optimists—do not want to consider the possibility that things will not work out as expected. Such single-mindedness may not serve one well.

Toward a Realistic Orientation

In our research into the mental representations that people hold as they approach challenging situations, we draw a distinction between expectancies and anticipations. Anticipations, to us, represent the set of possibilities that one has considered, independent of their perceived likelihood of occurrence. Expectancies are the weighting of anticipations by their perceived likelihood. In developing the idea of anticipations, we were guided by George Kelly's personal construct theory. Kelly (1955/1991) argued that people have anticipations based on certain constructions of reality or *personal constructs*. According to a Kelly, people use personal constructs (e.g., good and bad; easy and difficult) to evaluate elements of their life (e.g., courses, friends, and cars). The way one constructs the social world gives a shape to one's anticipations of the future, and in turn, these anticipations have an impact on one's psychological reactions to future events. In his book, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Kelly (1955/1991) argued, as his fundamental postulate, that "a person's processes are psychologically channelised by the way in which he anticipates events" (p. 32). For example, a couple considering the birth of their first child typically develop and share idealized images of life with baby. These anticipations may be biased not only in the sense that they are likely exceedingly positive and void of negative possibilities (e.g., the many challenges of parenting), but also biased in the sense that they are likely relatively narrow as they do not consider a broad range of reasonably likely situations. As many seasoned parents will attest, the reality of raising a child is much different

and more complicated than one initially thinks, and these biased and narrow thoughts can cause disappointment.

Individuals who do not consider the possibility of experiencing adversity or who possess naïve perceptions of life-stage transitions are likely to be shocked when adversity strikes or unanticipated challenges arise (Sewell, 2003). Constructivist psychologists continue to emphasise the importance of acknowledging negative future possibilities (Butt & Parton, 2005; Neimeyer & Baldwin, 2003; Sewell, 2003). For instance, developing a constructionist model of trauma, Sewell (2003) gave central focus to *constructive bankruptcy*, which he defined as the inability to make sense of a traumatic experience (and inability to accommodate it into one's perceptual system). According to Sewell, those individuals who do not give thought to the possibility of experiencing trauma in life may have to go through an emotionally painful period of destruction and deconstruction of their meaning system.

According to Personal Construct Theory, just like scientists who adjust their theories to explain their observations, people tend to improve their understandings of reality or reconstruct their perceptions of social phenomena on the bases of various experiences in their lives (Kelly, 1955/1991). This process of reframing one's view of social reality (i.e., accommodation) is sometimes interrupted, and the new experiences might be incorporated into one's already existing worldview (e.g., assimilation). In this case, one might be protecting one's view of reality, although this conservative mindset can be costly. For example, in the context of substance abusers, Klion and Pfenninger (1997) referred to the *anticipatory failures* of those who retain their invalidated constructs without revision, and are thusly resistant to intervention. According to Klion and Pfenninger, faced with invalidating experiences, it is important for people to adapt and revise their perceptual system.

This idea that people will feel profound distress when their experience violates their core personal constructs has been discussed at length by Parkes (1971) and by Janoff-Bulman (1992, 1999). According to both Parkes (1971) and Janoff-Bulman (1992, 1999), much of the distress experienced by people coping with loss or trauma is attributable to the effect these events have on one's fundamental assumptions or schemas about how the world is supposed to work. Reflecting this, comments like "I never thought it could happen to me," "I never expected . . ." are common following victimization. One of the important tasks of adjustment, then, is to reinterpret the event as more "expectable" or benign—or to revise one's worldview and self-view to accommodate events such as these: "Sometimes bad things do happen to good people." Although initially unable to make sense of their experience within their fundamental schemas, people may eventually develop a more differentiated and complex set of schemas that, although less positive, are not necessarily negative either; in a word, they are more realistic in the sense that they can now accommodate a wider range of information. We suspect that many people who seem to be resilient in the face of unexpected loss or adversity (see, e.g., Bonanno et al., 2002; Davis et al., 2000; Quale & Schanke, 2010) possessed a realistic worldview—one that acknowledges the distinct possibility of personal misfortune.

It is important to note that this view is not pessimistic. These individuals do not expect misfortune and disaster, but they do acknowledge that bad things or even tragic events do happen, and they are not immune. This particular understanding of the future,

which encompasses both negative and positive aspects of human existence, is described as *tragic optimism* in the work of Victor Frankl (1959/1984) and Paul Wong (2006). Rather than being pessimistic with a sense of depression and helplessness in challenging situations, or being naively optimistic, people who are tragically optimistic accept reality, and stay courageous and hopeful in the face of unexpected adversities (Wong, 2006).

If one's view of future events is positively biased or cognitively naïve then one is apt to be unprepared and shocked should events not unfold as anticipated. However, to the extent that one possesses a broad set of constructs that incorporate the possibility of a variety of outcomes, then one ought to be better prepared should one experience a less than desired outcome. The broader construct system allows for greater flexibility in one's response and less disappointment, frustration, or distress when the course of events takes an unexpected turn. Thusly, we have proposed that individuals who approach a difficult situation having thought through a variety of possible outcomes will be more likely to adjust, particularly when the situation is fluid and unpredictable. We refer to this orientation as one that is *realistic*, and contrast it to orientations that are overly positive or overly negative (Churchill & Davis, 2010). It is important to note that our use of the term "realistic" is not assessed in light of a particular outcome, nor is it an outcome expectancy. Rather, we use the term "realistic" to suggest a construct system that is sufficiently broad to accommodate a wide range of outcomes. Those with a realistic orientation hope for and direct their efforts toward achieving the best outcome, but they have also mentally elaborated upon other possible outcomes. They have not put all their eggs in one basket.

In our first studies in this line of research (Churchill & Davis, 2010), we asked first-time expectant mothers how often they had a variety of thoughts having to do with what life would be like once their baby had entered their life. We asked them how often, if at all, they thought about or imagined a range of positive possibilities, such as holding their beautiful baby, doing fun activities with their baby, and how special it will be to be a mother. We also asked them how often, if at all, they thought about or imagined a range of negative possibilities including how little sleep they will get once the baby is born, being isolated from friends, and how much energy it will take to care for this baby. Those reporting an overwhelming preponderance of positive thoughts about the baby prepartum, who we refer to as "positively oriented," adjusted well to the birth of their baby—but only when there were no complications or unexpected obstacles. Those reporting frequent negative thoughts and images but relatively few positive thoughts about life with baby prepartum, who we refer to as "negatively oriented," reported higher depression scores before and after the birth of their baby. On the other hand, our "realistically oriented" participants, who reported having thought frequently about a broad range of possibilities, both positive and negative in valence, tended to be a bit more depressed prepartum but adapted very well postpartum, particularly when there were complications or unexpected obstacles. By asking about their thoughts about future possible outcomes or scenarios, we were able to get an idea of the complexity or breadth of their personal constructs. It appeared that the more one thought about the possibility of particular outcomes (i.e., the more elaborate the construct), the less distress they felt post-partum particularly when events did not go as smoothly as desired. Those who mentally

elaborated only a limited (and entirely optimistic) range of possible outcomes appeared to be setting themselves up for disappointment.

Interestingly, those women in this study who were realistic in their orientation to motherhood were neither dispositionally optimistic nor pessimistic. Although pessimists (as measured by Scheier, Carver, and Bridges' [1994] LOT-R) reported fewer positive thoughts about the upcoming birth of their baby, those who were realistic and those who were positively oriented did not differ on dispositional optimism.

In a second study, we considered the anticipations of students enrolled in a teacher education program (Davis, Asliturk, & Kane, 2010). In this study, we were interested in understanding how orientations related to unrealistic optimism. It is well established that teacher education students tend to have idealized expectations about their own ability to teach (e.g., Weinstein, 1988), and these unreasonably high expectations have been cited as a possible reason for the high rates of attrition of new teachers from the profession within the first five years (Bullough, 1997; Ontario College of Teachers, 2003). In this study, students in a teacher education program were asked soon after they began their teacher training (before they entered their teaching practicum) how often they thought about or imagined themselves in each of a number of positive and negative teaching situations (e.g., inspiring students, having problems during lessons). Almost all student-teachers reported thinking a lot about the positive possibilities, but only about half reported giving much thought to the range of negative possibilities. Following the approach we took with expectant mothers, those teacher education students reporting frequent positive thoughts but few negative thoughts were regarded as "positively oriented" and those reporting frequent positive and frequent neg-

ative thoughts were regarded as "realistically oriented." We then compared these groups on a separate measure of unrealistic optimism for teachers—a measure that assesses the extent to which one believes that one is a better teacher than the average first year teacher (Weinstein, 1988). We found that those with a positive orientation were more likely than the realistically oriented student teachers to report such optimism on almost every dimension assessed (see Figure 1). They rated themselves as more likely than the average first year teacher to find a full-time teaching job, to earn the respect of the children, and to have an easy time using the skills they learnt in teachers' college. They also believed that they were less likely than first year teachers to have trouble maintaining discipline, planning lesson plans, handling the heavy workload and the like. On the other hand, teachers with a realistic orientation were much more moderate in their expectations, by-and-large seeing themselves as good as or just a bit better than average on most teaching-related expectations. It is important to note that those with a positive orientation were no more likely to actually find a teaching job by the following year, nor were they more experienced or better qualified to begin with. These data suggest that thinking realistically about the future is associated with a modest optimism that things will turn out OK; those who imagine predominantly positive outcomes, however, tend to set unrealistically high expectations.

Coming from a slightly different perspective, Pancer and his colleagues have illustrated the importance of integrative complexity as one goes through a difficult transition (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000). Rather than seeing a future transition from only one perspective or dimension (e.g., romanticized view of motherhood or naïve view of university life), individuals who hold an integratively complex
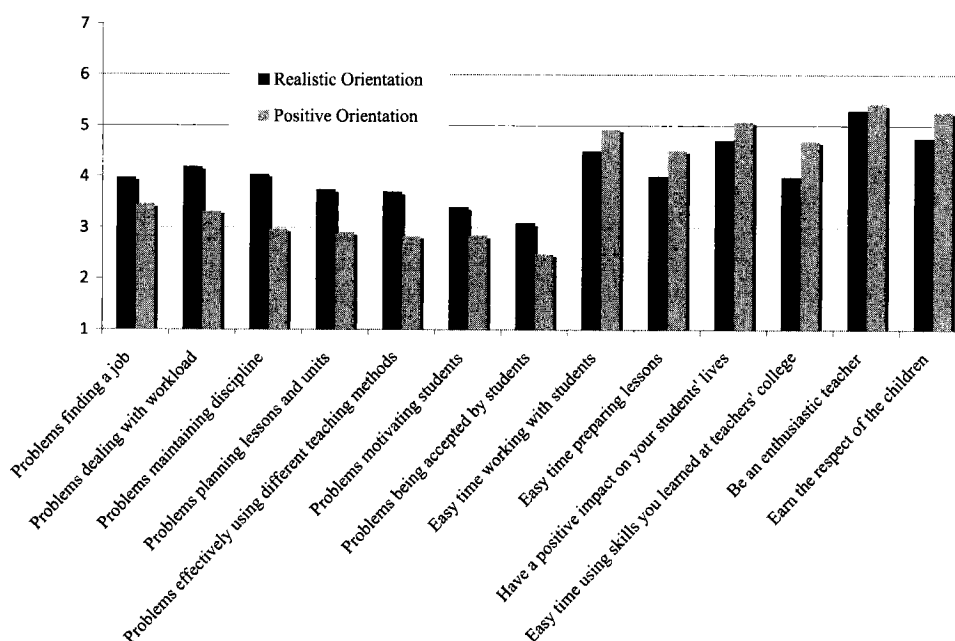

Figure 1. Comparison of unrealistic optimism in realistic and positively oriented teacher education students. *Notes:* error bars represent *SE*s; *N* = 122. Student teachers were asked, "Compared to the average first year teacher, to what extent do you think that you will . . ." Response scale ranges from 1 ("very much less likely") through 4 ("about the same") to 7 ("very much more likely"). Source: Davis, Asliturk, and Kane (2010).

account of a life transition tend to think about both positive and negative dimensions and they attempt to integrate these dimensions in their minds. Given that most transitions in life simultaneously involve both positive aspects (e.g., the opportunity for personal growth and development) and negative aspects (e.g., the chance of failure), an integratively complex view of a future transition should be adaptive in the long run. First, a complex awareness of a future event can lead individuals to develop (beforehand) strategies to solve potential problems. Second, if major obstacles emerge, individuals with cognitively complex views can more efficiently adjust or refocus their efforts, activities, or direction, including changing to Plan B when the A Plan is no longer viable. Focusing on the expectations of first time mothers, Pancer, Pratt et al. (2000) found that those with integratively complex expectations reported less depression, higher self-esteem, and improved marital satisfaction postpartum relative to those with a less complex, naïve view (see also Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000).

Pancer's research group has found similar results with students transitioning to university (Pancer, Hunsberger et al., 2000). Using cluster analysis, Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, and Hunsberger (2000) identified four clusters of students who shared similar orientations to university life. They found that although those sharing an "optimistic" view tended to do somewhat better than those with a "fearful" view, they also identified a group who shared a "prepared" view of university life, which combined optimistic expectations with an acknowledgement of one's active role in coping. This latter group reportedly adjusted to university better than any other view, including the "optimistic" one.

Integrative complexity, as described by Pancer and colleagues (see also Tetlock & Suedfeld, 1988) is close conceptually to our notion of realistic orientation. Individuals who think about an issue in an integratively complex manner recognise different views and aspects of an event (as opposed to seeing only one dimension) and integrate or relate these views and aspects with one another. The most significant difference between integrative complexity and realistic orientation appears to be methodological, such that the assessment of integrative complexity is based on qualitative coding of participant statements.

We have argued that realistically oriented people have less optimistic (but not pessimistic) expectations, and that they are more attuned to the possibility of failure than people who possess a positively biased orientation. We have also suggested that they might be better able to recognise when things are not going as planned. To directly test these propositions, we conducted an experiment (Asliturk, 2009). In this study, we challenged university students possessing a realistic orientation and those with a positively biased orientation with a difficult test of mental ability. Five minutes before the multiple-choice GRE-like test of mental ability, realistic and positively oriented participants were randomly assigned to one of two preparation strategies that correspond to what we believe are the anticipatory strategies of realistically oriented people (i.e., mentally elaborating a variety of scenarios involving success and failure) and positively oriented people (i.e., mentally elaborating scenarios that only feature success). Immediately before they received the challenging test, we asked them how well they expected to do (0–4 scale ranging from "poorly" to "really well"), and then immediately after the test we asked them (on the same scale) how well they thought they did. As one would

expect, realistically oriented participants expected to do well, but not as well as positively oriented participants and those asked to imagine a range of successful and unsuccessful possibilities set lower expectations than those asked to imagine only successful outcomes. As it turned out, the test was more difficult than participants expected, with a mean score of 11.6/25, and no group performed better than any other group. Most relevant to our discussion, however, is the finding that those who were realistic in their orientation, and those positively oriented participants asked to imagine both success and failure, recognised that they had not done well; those who were positively oriented who used their preferred, imagine success strategy were oblivious to the fact that they had not done well (see Figure 2).

These findings suggest that the realistic strategy of considering a range of possible outcomes as one approaches a challenging situation helps one more accurately track the unfolding situation. We would argue that this approach puts one in a better position to respond—either by redoubling efforts, changing course, or resetting goals and priorities—than those who are unrealistically optimistic. Although there might be short-term advantages of unrealistic optimism such as using positive emotions to increase a sense of control, in the long run, an unrealistically positive attitude may lead to negative outcome-related consequences. Unprocessed or denied negative future possibilities can be detrimental and overwhelming, especially when the repression of negative information is no longer possible or a viable strategy (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Robins & Beer, 2001).

Together, our work and that of Pancer and colleagues suggest that there are adaptive advantages to mentally elaborating on different possible scenarios as one prepares for stressful situations. It is important to note that it is not simply enough to imagine alternative outcomes. People who are realistic in their orientation to a particular context are not merely fantasizing. Based on Fantasy Realisation Theory, Oettingen, Pak, and Schnetter (2001) have made a link between fantasies about future and effortful problem solving. Fantasies are positively or negatively experienced images of future events that appear in one's stream of thought (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). According to this theory, people can effectively solve their future oriented problems only if they contrast fantasies about the positive aspects of the desired future with negative aspects of the present reality. In an analysis of the effects of one's fantasies on effort and success, Oettingen and Mayer (2002) found that relative to negative fantasies, positive fantasies predicted less effort and low success amongst undergraduates anticipating an exam and graduates looking for a job. Because positive fantasies can seduce a person to enjoy the present moment, they yield lower motivation to actively construct the desired future. On the other hand, Oettingen and Mayer argue:

> Negative fantasies about a desired future depict potential problems and setbacks related to an improved future. Though negative in tone, they should fail to be linked to depression and passivity, because they pertain to a constructive road to a better future. These negative fantasies about a desired future, then, seem to have the reverse effects than ruminative thoughts about one's present depressive mood (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002, p. 1210).

Hence, negative fantasies can orient people to the necessities of the here and now, and help people get ready for the anticipated future.
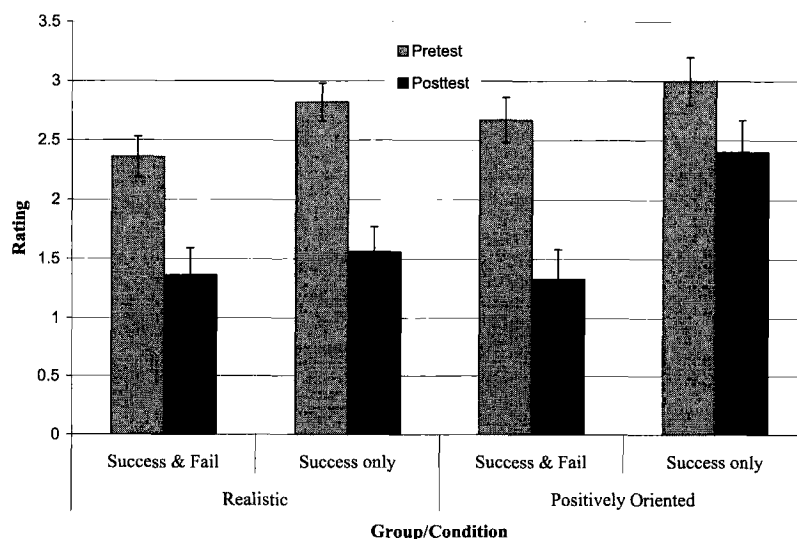
Figure 2. Estimated performance from just before to just after test as a function of orientation and preparation strategy. *Notes:* Error bars represent *SE*s; $N = 52$. Response scale ranges from 0 ("poorly") to 4 ("really well"). Source: Asliturk, 2009. Reprinted with permission.

Feldman and Hayes (2005) have also made distinctions in the nature of the thoughts one has about future situations. They distinguish between problem analysis, plan rehearsal, stagnant deliberation, and outcome fantasy. They found that whereas stagnant deliberation and outcome fantasy-type thoughts are associated with avoidant coping, worry, anxiety, and depression, problem analyses and plan rehearsal were positively associated with more problem-solving, engagement coping, and well-being. To be realistic in one's orientation means that one has not merely fantasized about possible outcomes, but elaborated these possibilities with mental simulations, plans of action, and their implications.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

This analysis suggests that an advantageous way to approach a looming adversity or a time of uncertainty is to prepare by elaborating mentally on multiple possible scenarios, appraising not only on their likelihood of occurrence but also what one would do in each case. This involves not mere idle speculation (e.g., "What if I fail?") but careful information seeking and planning. It involves the accumulation of resources (e.g., "Who can I count on to help me if this happens?"), preventative problem solving (e.g., "What can I do to reduce the likelihood that X will happen?"), and learning to read the signals along the way (e.g., "What are the clues that things might be heading off the rails?").

We believe that this way of anticipating challenge is not a fixed trait, but rather an acquired skill (Churchill & Davis, 2010). Kelly (1955/1991), for instance, believed that people need to continually adapt their personal constructs based on their experiences, noting that "all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 11). Likewise, Janoff-Bulman (1999) suggested that people often revise their worldviews and assumptions after trauma, hopefully in a way that makes them more realistic. And no doubt many new mothers who

were naively optimistic with their first child will be more realistic with their second. As people learn to extend their personal constructs to include a broader range of possibilities, we anticipate that they will also adopt the other proactive strategies—like accumulating resources, seeking information and taking precautions—that will help them successfully navigate their way through difficult situations.

Interestingly, recent research by Bode, de Ridder, Kuijer, and Bensing (2007) shows that these skills can be taught. Over four 2-hr sessions, Bode et al. significantly increased these proactive coping competencies relative to a waitlisted control group of middle-aged and older adults. Future research is needed to show if this intervention can improve well-being as people face adversity. As research in this area develops, we anticipate that group interventions like the one described by Bode et al. could be developed to help prepare people of all ages for the life stage transitions that they are facing, ranging from starting grade school to planning for the passing of one's spouse in old age. Such interventions would not simply focus on making negatively or positively oriented people more realistic, but also develop the strategies of proactive coping that naturally follow from thinking realistically about future events.

In our view, people who are proactive have a different way of looking at future challenges. Unlike the unrealistically optimistic, they recognise the possibility of loss and failure. And unlike the pessimistic, they anticipate but do not expect the undesired outcomes. They are not passive in coping, but actively read and respond to the environmental threats and exigencies by redoubling efforts, changing tactics, revising goals, and, where necessary, accepting reality. These individuals may not be as happy as naïve optimists, but they are likely the people you want to have around when "the going gets tough."

Rather than looking at this orientation as a general style of coping, we have focused on how people think about particular

situations, such as the future-oriented thoughts that pregnant women have about life with baby, or the future-oriented thoughts that student-teachers have about themselves as teachers. In this way, we have attempted to measure the personal constructs that these people have about the challenging context that lies ahead. People may generally be realistic (or not) in the way they approach situations, but it is not clear how one would assess the generality of such personal constructs. Following Kelly (1955/1991), we conceptualize personal constructs as unique and contextually bounded.

In conclusion, our research into the way that people adjust to difficult situations has led us to consider the idiosyncratic appraisals and interpretations that people draw from their experiences. The same event may be catastrophic to one person, be perceived by another as a test of his or her mettle, and seen by another as an opportunity. To others, it represents all of the above. How one perceives and anticipates an event is likely critical to understanding the way one copes before, during, and after the event. It is not enough to simply teach people how to cope proactively; we suspect that one also has to change the way people think about these events. One has to develop constructs that are sufficiently broad to facilitate the quick implementation of appropriate coping efforts at the appropriate time—to recognise when to persevere and when to switch to Plan B. In this sense, coping and growth can only be understood in the context of these meanings, perceptions, and anticipations. A positive psychology of coping, adaptation and growth cannot lose sight of the complex ways of thinking that underlie these processes. The orientations that we have proposed in this paper represent one way of understanding these ways of thinking.

Résumé

Certaines personnes semblent très bien composer avec de hauts niveaux de stress, ce qui laisse suggérer que leur attitude à l'égard des événements et de la vie leur permet de résister aux menaces. Les auteurs proposent qu'un élément important de cette attitude est la tendance à voir l'adversité comme étant quelque chose qui arrive à tout le monde, laquelle se reflète dans leur tendance, lorsqu'elles entrent dans des contextes incertains, à se préparer en imaginant divers résultats, favorables et défavorables. Ce travail préparatoire facilite l'application immédiate de stratégies efficaces de résolution de problèmes et de recherche de soutien si le résultat espéré n'est pas assuré. Les auteurs qualifient cette attitude de réaliste (*realistic orientation*) et examinent les éléments de preuve qui suggèrent qu'elle est associée à l'optimisme réaliste – et non irréaliste – et à une souplesse d'adaptation à l'égard de l'adversité.

Mots-clés : réponse proactive, attitude réaliste, optimisme

References

Asliturk, E. (2009). *The effects of constructive realism and attachment orientation on the adjustment of university students.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

Aspinwall, L. G., Sechrist, G. B., & Jones, P. R. (2005). Expect the best and prepare for the worst: Anticipatory coping and preparations for Y2K. *Motivation and Emotion, 29,* 357–388.

Aspinwall, L. G., & Taylor, S. E. (1997). A stitch in time: Self-regulation and proactive coping. *Psychological Bulletin, 121,* 417–436.

Bode, C., de Ridder, D. T. D., Kuijer, R. G., & Bensing, J. M. (2007). Effects of an intervention promoting proactive coping competencies in middle and late adulthood. *The Gerontologist, 47,* 42–51.

Bonanno, G. A., Moskowitz, J. T., Papa, A., & Folkman, S. (2005). Resilience to loss in bereaved spouses, bereaved parents, and bereaved gay men. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88,* 827–843.

Bonanno, G. A., Wortman, C. B., Lehman, D. R., Tweed, R. G., Haring, M., Sonnega, J., . . . Nesse, R. M. (2002). Resilience to loss and chronic grief: A prospective study from preloss to 18-months postloss. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83,* 1150–1164.

Bullough, R. V., Jr. (1997). Becoming a teacher: Self and the social location of teacher education. In B. J. Biddle, T. L. Good, & L. F. Goodson (Eds.). *International handbook of teachers and teaching,* (pp. 87–148). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Butt, T. W., & Parton, N. (2005). Constructivist social work and personal construct theory. *British Journal of Social Work, 35,* 793–806.

Carver, C. S., Pozo, C., Harris, S. D., Noriega, V., Scheier, M. F., & Robinson, D. S. (1993). How coping mediates the effect of optimism on distress: A study of women with early stage breast cancer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65,* 375–390.

Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., Miller, C. J., & Fulford, D. (2009). Optimism. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 303–311). New York: Oxford University Press.

Chang, E. C., & Sanna, L. J. (2003). Optimism, accumulated life stress, and psychological and physical adjustment: Is it always adaptive to expect the best? *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 22,* 97–114.

Cheng, S.-T., Fung, H. H., & Chan, A. C. M. (2009). Self-perception and psychological well-being: The benefits of foreseeing a worse future. *Psychology and Aging, 24,* 623–633.

Churchill, A. C., & Davis, C. G. (2010). Realistic orientation and the transition to motherhood. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 29,* 39–67.

Colvin, C. R., & Block, J. (1994). Do positive illusions foster mental health? An evaluation of the Taylor and Brown formulation. *Psychological Bulletin, 116,* 3–20.

Colvin, C. R., Block, J., & Funder, D. C. (1995). Overly-positive self evaluations and personality: Negative implications for mental health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68,* 1152–1162.

Davis, C. G. (2008). Redefining goals and redefining self: A closer look at posttraumatic growth following loss. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, & W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement: 21st century perspectives* (pp. 309–325). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Davis, C. G., Asliturk, E., & Kane, R. (2010). *From student to teacher: A challenging transition.* Unpublished data. Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

Davis, C. G., & Morgan, M. S. (2008). Finding meaning, perceiving growth, and acceptance of tinnitus. *Rehabilitation Psychology, 53,* 128–138.

Davis, C. G., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Larson, J. (1998). Making sense of loss and benefiting from the experience: Two construals of meaning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75,* 561–574.

Davis, C. G., Wohl, M. J. A., & Verberg, N. (2007). Profiles of posttraumatic growth following an unjust loss. *Death Studies, 31,* 693–712.

Davis, C. G., Wortman, C. B., Lehman, D. R., & Silver, R. C. (2000). Searching for meaning in loss: Are clinical assumptions correct? *Death Studies, 24,* 497–540.

Delmore-Ko, P., Pancer, S. M., Hunsberger, B., & Pratt, M. (2000). Becoming a parent: The relation between prenatal expectations and postnatal experience. *Journal of Family Psychology, 14,* 625–640.

Feldman, G., & Hayes, A. (2005). Preparing for problems: A measure of mental anticipatory processes. *Journal of Research in Personality, 39,* 487–516.

Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning.* New York: Simon & Schuster. Original work published 1959.

Gasper, K., Lozinski, R. H., & LeBreau, L. S. (2009). If you plan, then you can: How reflection helps defensive pessimists pursue their goals. *Motivation & Emotion, 33,* 203–216.

Greenglass, E. R. (2002). Proactive coping and quality of life management. In E. Frydenberg (Ed.), *Beyond coping: Meeting goals, visions, and challenges* (pp. 37–62). London: Oxford University Press.

Greenglass, E. R., & Fiksenbaum, L. (2009). Proactive coping, positive affect, and well-being: Testing for mediation using path analysis. *European Psychologist, 14,* 29–39.

Jackson, L. M., Pancer, S. M., Pratt, M. J., & Hunsberger, B. (2000). Great expectations: The relation between expectancies and adjustment during the transition to university. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 30,* 2100–2125.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma.* New York: Free Press.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1999). Rebuilding shattered assumptions after traumatic events: Coping processes and outcomes. In C. R. Snyder (Ed.), *Coping: The psychology of what works* (pp. 305–323). New York: Oxford University Press.

Kelly, G. A. (1991). *The psychology of personal constructs.* New York: Norton. Originally published 1955.

Klion, R. E., & Pfenninger, D. T. (1997). Personal construct psychotherapy of addictions. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 14,* 37–44.

Kobasa, S. C., Maddi, S. R., & Kahn, S. (1982). Hardiness and health: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42,* 168–177.

Larsen, J. T., Hemenover, S. H., Norris, C. T., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2003). Turning adversity to advantage: On the virtues of the coactivation of positive and negative emotions. In L. G. Aspinwall & U. M. Staudinger (Eds.), *A psychology of human strengths* (pp. 211–225). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Mancini, A. D., & Bonanno, G. A. (2009). Predictors and parameters of resilience to loss: Toward and individual differences model. *Journal of Personality, 77,* 1805–1831.

Neimeyer, R. A., & Baldwin, S. A. (2003). Personal construct psychotheraphy and the constructivist horizon. In Fransella, F. (Ed.), *International handbook of personal construct psychology* (pp. 247–256). Chichester: Wiley.

Niederhoffer, K. G., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2009). Sharing one's story: On the benefits of writing or talking about emotional experience. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 621–632). New York: Oxford University Press.

Norem, J. K., & Cantor, N. (1986). Defensive pessimism: Harnessing anxiety as motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51,* 1208–1217.

Norem, J. K., & Chang, E. C. (2001). A very full glass: Adding complexity to our thinking about the implications and applications of optimism and pessimism research. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism & pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice* (pp. 347–367). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Norem, J. K., & Chang, E. C. (2002). The positive psychology of negative thinking. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 58,* 993–1001.

Norem, J. K., & Illingworth, K. S. S. (1993). Strategy dependent effects of reflecting on self and tasks: Some implications of optimism and defensive pessimism. *Journal of Personality and Social Personality, 65,* 822–835.

Norem, J. K., & Illingworth, K. S. S. (2004). Mood and performance among defensive pessimists and strategic optimists. *Journal of Research in Personality, 38,* 351–366.

Norem, J. K., & Smith, S. (2006). Defensive Pessimism. In L. J. Sanna & E. C. Chang (Eds.), *Judgments over time: The interplay of thoughts,* feelings, and behaviors (pp. 34–46). New York: Oxford University Press.

Oettingen, G., & Mayer, D. (2002). The motivating function of thinking about the future: Expectations versus fantasies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83,* 1198–1212.

Oettingen, G., Pak, H., & Schnetter, K. (2001). Self-regulation of goal setting: Turning free fantasies about the future into binding goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80,* 736–753.

Ontario College of Teachers. (2003). *Transition to teaching: New teachers of 2001 and 2002 report on their first two years of teaching in Ontario.* Toronto, ON.

Ouwehand, C., de Ridder, D. T. D., & Bensing, J. M. (2008). Individual differences in the use of proactive coping strategies by middle-aged and older adults. *Personality and Individual Difference, 45,* 28–33.

Pancer, S. M., Hunsberger, B., Pratt, M. W., & Alisat, S. (2000). Cognitive complexity of expectations and adjustment to university in first year. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 15,* 38–57.

Pancer, S. M., Pratt, M., Hunsberger, B., & Gallant, M. (2000). Thinking ahead: Complexity of expectations and the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Personality, 68,* 253–280.

Parkes, C. M. (1971). Psycho-social transitions: A field of study. *Social Science and Medicine, 5,* 101–115.

Peacock, E. J., & Wong, P. T. P. (1996). Anticipatory stress: The relation of locus of control, optimism, and control appraisals to coping. *Journal of Research in Personality, 30,* 204–222.

Quale, A. J., & Schanke, A.-K. (2010). Resilience in the face of coping with a severe physical injury: A study of trajectories of adjustment in a rehabilitation setting. *Rehabilitation Psychology, 55,* 12–22.

Reker, G. T., & Wong, P. T. (1988). Aging as an individual process: Toward a theory of personal meaning. In J. E. Birren & V. L. Bengtson (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of aging* (pp. 214–246). New York: Springer.

Robins, R. W., & Beer, J. S. (2001). Positive illusions about the self: Short-term benefits and long-term costs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80,* 340–352.

Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): A reevaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67,* 1063–1078.

Schneider, S. L. (2001). In search of realistic optimism: Meaning, knowledge, and warm fuzziness. *American Psychologist, 56,* 250–263.

Schwarzer, R., & Taubert, S. (2002). Tenacious goal pursuit and striving towards personal growth: Proactive coping. In E. Frydenberg (Ed.), *Beyond coping: Meeting goals, visions, and challenges* (pp. 19–35). London: Oxford University Press.

Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikzszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist, 55,* 5–14.

Sewell, K. W. (2003). An approach to posttraumatic stress. In Fransella, F. (Ed.), *International handbook of personal construct psychology* (pp. 223–231). Chichester: Wiley.

Sohl, S. J., & Moyer, A. (2009). Refining the conceptualization of a future-oriented self-regulatory behavior: Proactive coping. *Personality and Individual Differences, 47,* 139–144.

Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. D. (1988). Illusions and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. *Psychological Bulletin, 103,* 193–210.

Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. D. (1994). Positive illusions and wellbeing revisited: Separating fact from fiction. *Psychological Bulletin, 116,* 21–27.

Taylor, S. E., Kemeny, M. E., Aspinwall, L. G., Schneider, S. C., Rodriguez, R., & Herbert, M. (1992). Optimism, coping, psychological distress, and high-risk sexual behaviors among men at risk for AIDS. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63,* 460–473.

Taylor, S. E., Pham, L. B., Rivkin, I. D., & Armor, D. A. (1998).

Harnessing the imagination: Mental simulation, self-regulation, and coping. *American Psychologist, 53,* 429–439.

Tennen, H., & Affleck, G. (1987). The costs and benefits of optimistic explanations and dispositional optimism. *Journal of Personality, 55,* 377–393.

Tetlock, P. E., & Suedfeld, P. (1988). Integrative complexity coding of verbal behaviour. In C. Antaki (Ed.), *Analysing everyday explanation: A casebook of methods* (pp. 43–59). London: Sage.

Weinstein, C. S. (1988). Preservice teachers' expectations and the first year of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 4,* 31–40.

Wong, P. T. P. (1993). Effective management of life stress: The resource-congruence model. *Stress Medicine, 9,* 51–60.

Wong, P. T. P. (2006). Existential and humanistic theories. In J. C. Thomas & D. L. Segal (Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of personality and psychopathology* (pp. 192–211). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

New Editor Appointed for *Canadian Psychology*, 2012–2015

The Canadian Psychological Association is pleased to announce the appointment of a new editor for *Canadian Psychology* for a 4-year term beginning in 2012. New manuscripts should be directed to:

Martin Drapeau, PhD
McGill University
Montréal, Québec

Electronic manuscript submission: Manuscripts should be submitted electronically to the new editor via the journal's Manuscript Submission Portal at http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/cap, under the Instructions to Authors.

Nomination d'un nouveau rédacteur en chef de *Psychologie canadienne*, 2012–2015

La Société canadienne de psychologie est heureuse d'annoncer la nomination d'un nouveau rédacteur en chef pour sa revue *Psychologie canadienne,* dont le mandat de quatre ans commence en 2012. Les manuscrits devront être envoyés à l'attention de la personne suivante :

Martin Drapeau, PhD
Université McGill
Montréal (Québec)

Soumission des manuscrits par voie électronique : Les manuscrits doivent être présentés par l'entremise du portail de présentation des manuscrits de la revue, à http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/cap, sous l'onglet *Instructions to Authors.*