

Speaking, Thinking, Being: Learning the Language of Optimism

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Sometimes, things happen to us that are good, but we may not do enough in our minds to let those things lift our spirits. On the other hand, according to Bodhisattva, “The first noble truth is the existence of sorrow.”¹ So, things that are bad also happen to us throughout our lives; and, in those cases, we may tend to ruminate excessively on these misfortunes. This paper is about linguistic tools that can help us and our families put both *good* and *bad* events into a mentally healthier total perspective. These linguistic tools come from a system most prominently popularized by Martin Seligman for analyzing people’s *explanatory styles*. In my research in counseling psychology, I used the analysis of explanatory styles to examine how counselors in training are affected by their counseling training. The discussion of explanatory styles below is extracted from this research.²

Explanatory Style

Explanatory style is defined to be the way people tend to describe their experiences of good events and bad events.³ An event is any occurrence—in the surroundings of individuals, in the conditions in which they live or operate,

or in their thoughts or feelings—that “has a good or bad effect from an individual’s point of view.”⁴ A good event is an important discovery or development, an accomplishment of a personal aim or purpose, the mastery of a skill, or a personally perceived favorable outcome according to the individual who experiences it. A bad event is a disappointment, complication, upset, non-fulfillment, privation or loss, or a personally perceived unfavorable outcome according to the individual who experiences it.⁵ Developing an optimistic or positive explanatory style about good events can allow us to more thoughtfully process good life events by celebrating our personal, varied, and consistent favorable outcomes. Similarly, developing an optimistic or positive explanatory style about bad events can help us to find ways to externalize, compartmentalize, and temporally diminish the impact of bad events, thereby enabling consideration of systematic, cognitive problem-solving strategies and alternative behaviors to promote our present and ongoing success.

The theoretical framework for explanatory styles appears in Figure 1. The foundation of explanatory style is Positive Psychology, which

is the “scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive.”⁶ Optimism is depicted with an arrow leading upward from Positive Psychology, highlighting its positive “contributions to the strengths of individuals in supporting their ability to thrive.”⁷ Optimism is the way people explain the causes of events, emphasizing the impact and importance of good events and de-emphasizing the impact and importance of bad events.⁸ Optimists view the causes of good events as (1) derived from their personally developed skills and abilities; (2) permanent parts of their lives; (3) evident across different personal, professional, academic, and recreational activities in which they engage; and (4) occurring across personal and professional relationships. Conversely, optimists view bad events as circumstances that can be conquered, that are time-constrained, and that are

relevant to only one aspect of their work or their relationships with others.⁹

In comparison, pessimism is depicted in Figure 1 with an arrow leading downward from Positive Psychology, highlighting how people explain the causes of events, de-emphasizing good events and emphasizing bad events in their lives.¹⁰ Pessimists view the causes of good events as being due to the contributions of others (not themselves) or due to circumstances in the environment. They also see good events as happening only at a certain time, with no lasting impact, and as happening in only one area of their lives. Conversely, pessimists view bad events as something they directly caused, as enduring, and as occurring in all areas of their work or relationships.¹¹

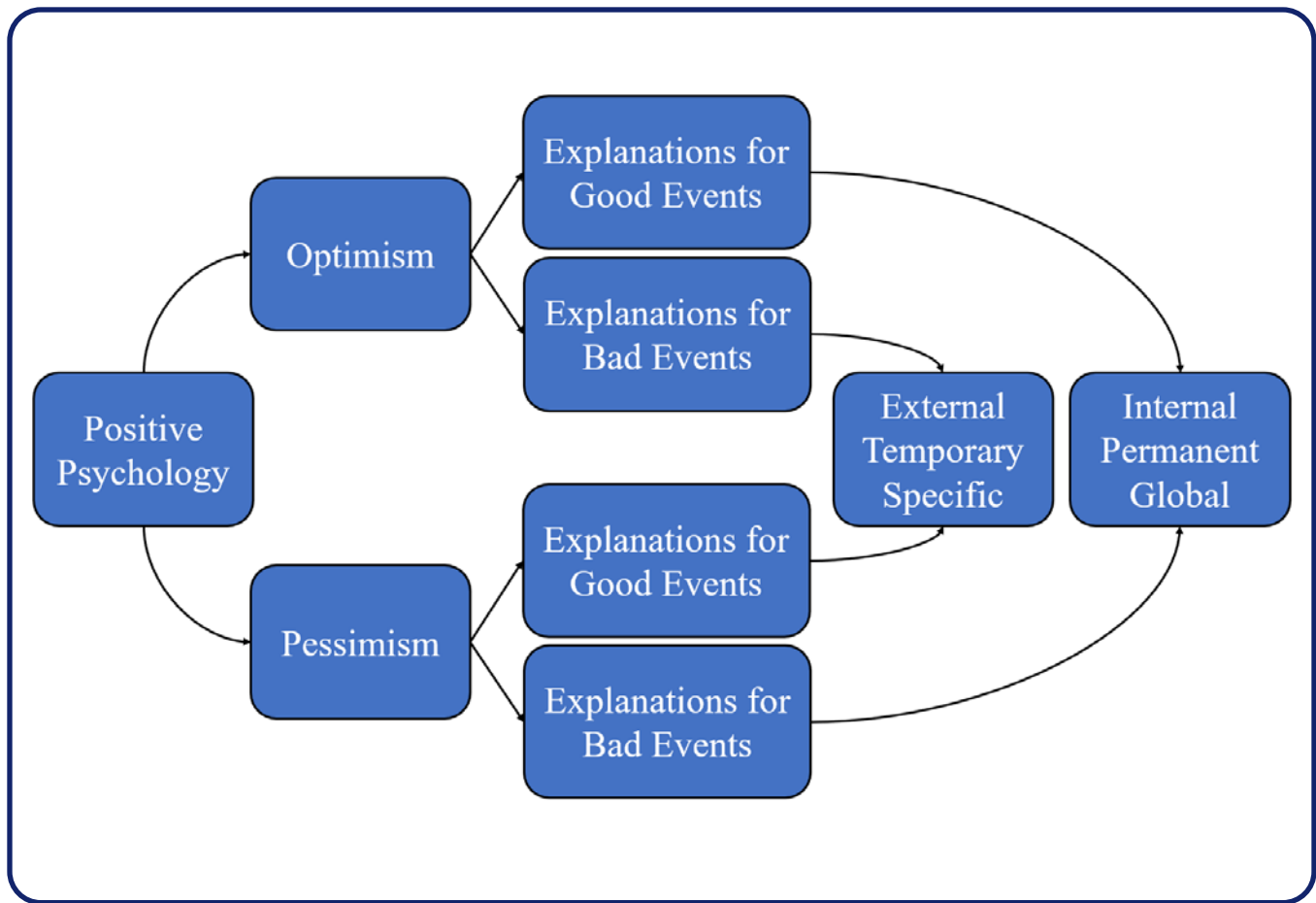


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for Explanatory Styles¹²

(Note: This depiction is based on the work of Schulman, Castellon, Seligman, and Peterson.¹³)

The Three Dimensions of Explanatory Style

Explanatory style comprises three dimensions: personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness.¹⁴ Names for the value ranges of these dimensions appear in the rightmost two boxes of Figure 1. Optimism across these dimensions can be learned, developed, and enhanced, beginning at an early age and nurtured across the lifespan.¹⁵ In this section, I will define each dimension and will present multi-age examples of how we can learn to use optimistic language in that dimension to support our positive thoughts, emotions, and actions. I will use square brackets to demarcate examples that can be substituted into the same sentence for three different age groups.

Personalization

Personalization, as a dimension, indicates the degree to which an individual internalizes or externalizes the *cause* of a good event or bad event.¹⁶ When an individual discusses good events, optimistic language includes attribution of the event to “any behavioral, physical, or mental characteristic about the self...” and specifically includes “references to the individual’s own personality or physical traits, behavior, decisions, ability ... motivation, knowledge...”¹⁷

For example, an individual with a positive explanatory style who has experienced a good event may say, “I did well today

[sharing my toys with friends]

[working in groups in school]

[solving a challenge at work]

because I

[took my time to think about what I needed to do to share my toys].”

[systematically identified and unified the working group’s goals].”

[systematically explored my goal in solving the challenge and the steps to solve the challenge most efficiently].”

In these multi-age examples, the language that the individuals use attributes their success to a particular behavior or to a physical or mental characteristic that they manifest. The emphasis is on the individuals’ accepting the positive result as an outcome of *their own* personal effort, abilities, or achievement. Attributing the good event to personal choices or actions has the potential to increase the expression of positive, self-supporting emotions and further solution-focused, self-directed behaviors.

When individuals experience and then discuss bad events, the use of optimistic language encourages them to take responsibility for the outcome and for their behavior, and to adjust their “behavioural trajectory, and form a plan of action that may help...”¹⁸

For example, individuals who have a positive explanatory style and have just experienced an event they consider bad may say, “I lost

[my favorite toy teddy bear]

[my completed math homework]

[the bid for a work contract]

because

[I put teddy down somewhere at the store. Next time, I’m going to hold on to teddy’s paw and cuddle him the whole time I’m out. I’ll ask my parents if we can go back to the store together to look for my teddy bear].”

[I didn’t put my homework in my binder. Next time, I will put my completed work in the binder as soon as I finish it. Right now, I’ll have to speak to my teacher to see if I can redo my work and then submit it tomorrow].”

[I needed to do more than to research only the contracting company. Next time, I'll do research on the strengths of my *competition*, and then I'll figure out how I can make a cutting-edge difference to the contracting company. Right now, I'm going to search for other requests for proposal that I should consider next]."

In these examples featuring multiple ages, the individuals (a) recognize that the event was bad, (b) determine what they did or what happened to make the experience bad, and then (c) find a solution or action plan that they could put into place now and going forward. This systematic analysis of bad events gives individuals personal agency and a more positive attitude and emotional response to bad events because they know that they have the personal power to make the circumstances more acceptable now and better in the future.

Permanence

Permanence is the stability or lack of stability of the *cause* of a good event or bad event for the individuals and can be determined by asking both "if the cause can be changed or modified..." and "In the future, when this event occurs, *will this cause again be present?*"¹⁹

For example, individuals with a positive explanatory style who experience a good event of receiving an award may say, "I won this achievement award *because*

[I like to do special projects to learn more about my community, my city, and the world]."

[I am very diligent and enjoy learning new things in my science and math classes and putting them into practice in my computer programs]."

[I spend my spare time reading journals and then implementing what I learn in projects that I am doing at work]."

In each of these multi-age examples, the individuals use the present tense to describe a cause that is likely to recur or is continuous rather than intermittent. For example, "explaining an event by a characterological trait (e.g., I am smart...) is more stable than attributing an event to a behavior (e.g., I did a smart thing...)." ²⁰

When bad events happen, an individual with an optimistic explanatory style will creatively and deliberately make every effort to see and find ways for the cause to be changed or modified. For those reading this paper, I realize that you may be thinking of bad events that relate to chronic and debilitating health conditions that may be unalterable, continuous, and degenerative. We all hope that these sorrows never happen, but they are an unavoidable part of living life fully. However, it is how we take a bad event and break it down into a systematic solution which can allow us to see and get beyond the pain.

For example, an individual with a positive explanatory style who has experienced a bad event may say, "My mum is sick, and I was depressed *because*

[my parents were fighting, so I couldn't wake up in the morning to get to school. I talked to my grandmother, and now I live with her and I am rested and happier. I get to school on time, and we visit Mum and Dad on the weekends]."

[I take care of Mum, so I wasn't doing well in math. A friend suggested I talk to the school counselor about my feelings. So, I did, and now I have a math tutor, and I am so relieved to have this help while Mum goes for treatment]."

[I had to take a leave from work so I could take care of Mum full time. I realized that I needed help, so I talked to a neighbor who also has a mum she cares for. Now we share the caregiving, and I have been able to go back to work half-time. Mum and I are happier]."

In these multi-age examples, the cause is expressed in the past tense and the circumstances have been modified by the individual's actions, behaviors, and emotions to limit the probability or impact of re-occurrences of the cause.

Pervasiveness

Pervasiveness is the extent to which the *cause* of a good event or bad event impacts “an individual's whole life (global) or just a few areas (specific) ... It is useful to think of how a cause impacts the broad scope of an ‘average’ individual's life in terms of two major categories—achievement and affiliation.”²¹

For example, individuals with a positive explanatory style who experience a good event may say, “Someone recommended this really interesting book, and I started reading it *because*

[I wanted something good to read during quiet reading time in my new school and to spend time talking about the book with my new friends].”

[I was really keen to learn how to use the online public library service to choose and read this book. So far, the characters and plotline are exciting, and the characters have great emotional depth, so I am thinking about using this book for my book report in English class].”

[I wanted to share the reading experience with my family. I value our shared family reading time where we sit as a family and take turns reading to one another. We have read about five books together. My children have written schoolbook reviews and shared these books with their classmates and my partner, and I have told people at work about this fun, free, family activity].”

These examples broadly impact the lives of young children, young adults, and adults in both achievement and affiliation. In the area of achievement, the individuals think about reading with appreciation to take action to accumulate knowledge or develop skills. In the area of

affiliation, the act of reading can help to support emotional connectedness and belongingness with friends, family, virtual communities, and colleagues.

When individuals use positive explanations for bad events, they may say, “When I weighed myself, I discovered that I am overweight, and I felt it was *because*

[I stopped running when some kids made fun of me in PE class for running too slowly. When I run after school, I like it better. So, I could practice running after school when I feel less nervous, and then, once I lose some weight, I'll be able to run faster and will feel better about running with all my classmates].”

[I eat when I am feeling anxious. Lately, I've been handing in some homework assignments late, which makes me anxious. I think that I should start doing all my homework right after school and wait until supper to eat].”

[it's hard to regularly get away to spend 30 minutes in the gym when a lot of work comes in. But I've heard about this new app that helps me to do arm, leg, eye, face, and hand exercises, in addition to stretches, boxing, and yoga, unobtrusively at my desk. I'm hoping this app will help me get exercise even when extra work comes in].”

In these examples, the individuals consciously ensure that the impact of the bad event is less global and more specific, such as limiting it to one area—either achievement or affiliation—or only a part of that area, such as “some kids” or “when extra work comes in.” The individuals also consider solutions and actions that they can personally implement to promote calmness and change.

Conclusion

Developing optimism and a positive explanatory style requires cognitive work. It isn't easy, but it

can help us to help ourselves and others. Burns and Seligman noted that a positive explanatory style can be developed and enhanced over time and in situations when we cognitively attend to what we say about good and bad events.²² The great part is that we do not have to be perfect, only willing to recalibrate our thinking and behaviors. Optimists seek to explain good events as being achieved through personal effort, permanent across time, and pervasive across many aspects of their lives. An optimist views bad events not as personal but as circumstances that can be explored to systematically name the problem, claim the problem, and tame or solve the problem with a plan of action.²³ An optimist puts bad events in their place as temporary or something that one has the power to change or the power to accept. Optimists recognize that a bad event does not need to impact all areas of their lives. Optimists see bad events as relegated to either a specific area of achievement or a specific relationship or affiliation. Bad events may happen to all of us and to those we love; and, therefore, it is vital to have language that helps us to celebrate good events and put bad events in their place. As Bodhisattva indicates, “The fourth noble truth is the eightfold path that leads to the cessation of sorrow.”²⁴ The steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are

Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration... There are three themes into which the Path is divided: good moral conduct (Understanding, Thought, Speech); meditation and mental development (Action, Livelihood, Effort); and wisdom or insight (Mindfulness and Concentration).²⁵

When we aim to understand and use optimistic explanations for both good and bad events in our personal and professional lives, and when we modulate our thoughts, attitudes, and speech accordingly, then we are making efforts to act mindfully and to concentrate on both mitigating sorrow and maximizing joy and peace for ourselves and our loved ones.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the memory of my mum, the late Barbara Rumson (Barb), who has always been an inspiration to me, as a mother, author, and researcher. Mum took an avid interest in explanatory styles and optimism, and it was she who first introduced me to earlier editions of Martin Seligman’s work. Thank you, Mum.

NOTES.....

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