Optimistic about pessimism (and vice-versa)

- *Don't ever become a pessimist. A pessimist is right oftener than an optimist, but an optimist has more fun…* - Robert A Heinlein
- *Pessimism is an excuse for not trying and a guarantee to personal failure.* - William Clinton.
- *There is no sadder sight than a young pessimist*. - Mark Twain.

The three quotations above are representative of the words of a vast number from people who caution against pessimism and recommend, instead, an optimistic outlook on life and its possibilities. Given that I am usually found with a spring in my step, and am regularly teased by colleagues about whether any work gets done at all in my lab, because it seems to be such a place of laughter, I might be expected to agree with these ideas. But I don't and, the more I find myself in a position of trying to help or advice unhappy undergraduates or PhD students or sometimes members of staff (in the university as a whole, I mean, not my group), the more I feel that optimism is the surest route to unhappiness, and that pessimism is a much better bet for finding genuine joy.

One definition of optimism, the definition that applies well to ordinary life rather than to abstract philosophy, is that it is a “disposition or tendency to… expect the most favourable outcome” (quoted from dictionary.com) or an assumption that “good things are more likely to happen than bad things” (Cambridge English Dictionary). This sounds fine. Who, after all, wants to go round always expecting the worst? But the problem with the rather saccharine version of optimism that seems to be promoted in British and American schools, and in many television programmes, websites and films, is that “expecting the most favourable outcome” morphs into expecting it as a right, at least subconsciously.

It is commonplace, in universities today, to be confronted by undergraduates upset or angry that they were not awarded an A or a 'first', and whose feelings of injustice are not reduced at all by an explanation of precisely where their work fell short of the rare excellence that this grade demands. Anger is OK and usually passes – what worries me more, and takes a lot more time, is the deep existential upset of someone who always expected they would be at or near the top of the class,

expected it since before they even came here. Just to be clear, in Medicine only about 8% of our pre-clinical students are awarded a distinction, despite the fact that one requires stellar school grades, and many other positive attributes, to get into the place in the first place (it has always been thus: Edinburgh stands firm against the nonsensical grade inflation that is such as feature of some other alleged places of learning). So while it makes perfect sense for everyone to strive for this excellence, it does not make sense for 200 people to *expect* to succeed in achieving it. Hope in a not-too-demanding way, yes; expect, no. So we have these students, who are bright and high-achieving individuals set to be very effective young doctors, who are really sad and upset and feel diminished self-worth because they got a B (= 'very good'!) not an A. Contrast this with the wide-eyed delight of another student I met in the summer, who bounced in to my office to say she had got a B, and had never expected to do that well, and was really happy. To me, and probably to most staff who had taught them, these characters were well-matched in ability but it was the pessimist who experienced real joy.

It's not all about academic things, either. Grad students and post-docs are at the stage of life when many people try setting up a shared home with a partner (whether in marriage or civil partnership or just by what was called 'jumping the broom' where I grew up). Many, I am glad to say, seem to be genuinely happy but some go from happiness to evident disappointment and bitterness. In two cases, those people have described to me how unfair partnered life had turned out for them. I asked them to say out loud what they expected of their shared life: in both cases, they had genuinely expected a 'happy ever after' in which the blinding, self-erasing romantic infatuation of courtship lasted for ever and ever and ever, unsullied by any discussion of whose turn it is to wash up or to visit the parents in law, or who is tired and just wants to go to sleep. Fortunately, I think that in both cases the simple act of stating expectations out loud was enough for the person involved to see how unrealistic they had been, which may have helped with the feelings of being cheated, even if it still left the problems of the washing up and visiting parents in law to solve in the realism of human compromise. But the cause of the trouble in the first place was the wild optimism. A pessimist, who thought that their partnership would probably not be very different from those they had observed in their parents or parents' friends, would be equipped to experience far more joy in those moments that things went just right.

Staff, too, at first over-the-moon at finally gaining a faculty position and being a 'principal investigator' (PI) nominally in charge of a lab and a research programme, can become cynical and

bitter all too quickly, as they face rejections of grant applications, arguments with editors about getting journal articles published, trouble with unproductive or otherwise 'difficult' students and no obvious evidence that they are themselves being hailed as a genius. Again, I think the thing that hurts them is the gap between what they experience and their *expectation* of easy success. Someone who is more of a pessimist, but who still has the strength of character to carry on, can really enjoy the happy surprise of seeing something new under the microscope, of having a grant awarded, or a paper accepted for publication without the usual annoying fight.

Maybe that's why there is a lot of laughter in the lab. Our culture has never been one of expecting predictable, ever-onwards progress to the sunny uplands of rarefied genius, with new discoveries as an expected right. When does a ‘right’ give one joy anyway? Instead, the culture is a combination of playing around and doggedly plugging away at things; of being pleasantly surprised when the data show us something that nobody has ever seen before. Such moments, hard-won, come as a gift, and gifts like that can and do make people happy. And, of course, this way of working also means that people do not tend to take themselves too seriously.

So I really do think that optimism, at least the silly, over-done kind that so many people seem to be wedded to nowadays, is a recipe for gloom. Mild pessimism, or at least what an optimist calls 'pessimism' but which is probably just 'realism', is a much surer path for at least some moments of joy, and is a shield from the bitterness of an expectation denied. I am not, of course, the first person to say such things, and I will finish with a quotation from Havelock Ellis;

The place where optimism most flourishes is the lunatic asylum.

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