



# *Optimism*

A report from the  
Social Issues Research Centre

Commissioned by  
The National Lottery ®

February 2009

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### 1 Foreword from The National Lottery

An optimistic approach to life is fundamental to being a National Lottery player. Around 70 per cent of the adult population play The National Lottery and by buying a ticket, they demonstrate a belief that they could become one of the four million winners created every week.

By being receptive to opportunities, lottery players are the epitome of optimism – giving something a go rather than never knowing what might have been.

So is this positive attitude something typical to the British way of life? Do we have an unfair reputation for being a country of pessimists when really we see the glass half full?

The National Lottery commissioned the Social Issues Research Centre to explore optimism in 21st Britain, questioning which aspects of our lives inspire a positive attitude and why, what causes us to have an optimistic outlook on life and how does this outlook, positive or negative, affect our relationships with others.

## 2 Executive Summary

### 2.1 Introduction

This report presents the first findings of research conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) into the nature of optimism in 21st century Britain. The research, commissioned by The National Lottery, provides a detailed account of the role that optimism plays in the lives of the British public, focusing on the importance of optimism both as part of individual identity and as a central factor in social relationships.

Through a combination of library research, qualitative material from focus groups and quantitative data from a national poll, the report explores different approaches to defining optimism before moving on to explore the social and psychological aspects of optimistic and pessimistic thinking. The various social factors that influence levels of optimism and pessimism are examined in order to develop SIRC's own typology of optimistic and pessimistic behaviour.

### 2.2 Key findings

#### 2.2.1 Britain is an optimistic nation

Findings from the focus groups and the national poll data indicate that British people are generally optimistic, although most consider their optimism to be tempered by a degree of pessimism or realism – what we define here as ‘situational’ or ‘concrete’ optimism, as opposed to ‘unabashed’ optimism. From the poll data, 21% of people see themselves as being generally optimistic with a further 54% being generally optimistic but also feeling pessimistic about some things. This contrasts markedly with the 6% who felt generally pessimistic and the 10% who were pessimistic but also optimistic about some things. Women were just slightly more likely than men to define themselves as optimists.

#### 2.2.2 British optimism

British optimism was defined rather ambivalently by participants, pointing to the understated nature of optimism in British society. While most people felt that they were generally optimistic, a large proportion of poll respondents also agreed that Britishness was characterised by a pessimistic ‘mustn’t grumble’ attitude and that we as a nation are less optimistic

than Americans or other Europeans. A very British trait, however, is also to play down achievements and to engage in rather self-deprecating behaviours. We are probably, in fact, as optimistic as any other national group, but we don’t want to admit or shout about it – that wouldn’t be British at all!

#### 2.2.3 Optimism is a combination of nature and nurture

The popular conception of optimism is that it is the outcome of both inherited characteristics and experience. While there is a belief that some people are more naturally inclined towards being optimistic, most people also believe that optimism is the result of social interaction. In response to the statement ‘people become optimists or pessimists mainly as a result of their life experiences’, 61% of poll respondents agreed.

#### 2.2.4 Socially contagious optimism

Both optimism and pessimism are considered to be ‘socially contagious’, although optimism is considered to be rather more so. Focus group participants identified contagious optimists as being ‘radiators’ of good feelings, while contagious pessimists were seen as ‘drains’.

#### 2.2.5 Optimists attract

In keeping with these findings, optimists were also considered to be much more attractive, broadly speaking, than pessimists. Over 50% preferred the company of optimists compared with a mere 3% who were more attracted to pessimists. Focus group participants pointed out that pessimists could be good company but only when blessed with a dark sense of humour. Women were considerably more positive about the attractive qualities of optimists than were men – 55% compared with 27%.

#### 2.2.6 ‘Big’ and ‘little’ optimism – the importance of control

There was a clear distinction among participants between ‘big’ and ‘little’ optimism – most felt pessimistic about society in general but were optimistic about their own lives, their families, and their immediate social contacts. Of participants in the national poll 35% agreed with the statement ‘I am optimistic about my own future’ while 39% agreed that ‘Society is getting worse and is unlikely to get better’. An important aspect of this

distinction is the extent to which people feel in control of different aspects of their lives.

### 2.2.7 Factors influencing optimism

In line with the distinction between 'big' and 'little' optimism, family (72%) and personal health (65%) were seen as key influences on how optimistic people felt. The global economy and global politics were important influences on levels of optimism for only 12% of poll participants.

### 2.2.8 The focus of optimism

Similarly, a majority of participants felt most optimistic about family life (61%), personal relationships (53%) and social life (31%). Only 4% were most optimistic about the future of the country.

### 2.2.9 The role of the media

The media were judged to have a large impact on how pessimistic we feel, with 53% of poll participants agreeing with the statement 'I think that TV and newspapers encourage me to have a more negative outlook on life'. A further 33% agreed that 'gloomy' media coverage did not present an accurate picture of the world.

### 2.2.10 The SIRC Optimism Spectrum

From an analysis of our in-depth discussions with focus group participants SIRC developed the following spectrum of character 'types' related to optimism. The number of people in the national poll who associated themselves with these different types is indicated below.

- **Fatalist (6%):** I accept that essentially I can't change what's going to happen to me, whether it's good or bad
  - **Individualist (3%):** I believe that essentially I have control over what's going to happen to me, whether it's good or bad
  - **Pessimist (3%):** I am generally pessimistic, whatever the circumstances
  - **Contagious optimist (2%):** I am always optimistic, and my optimism spreads to those around me
  - **Unabashed optimist (2%):** I am always very optimistic, whatever the circumstances
- 
- **Realist (24%):** I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but simply realistic about the good and bad things in my life
  - **Concrete optimist (19%):** I am optimistic, but I am realistic about the possible outcomes of events
  - **Cautious optimist (18%):** I am optimistic, but I am careful not to be complacent about my good fortune
  - **Situational optimist (15%):** My levels of optimism/pessimism change from situation to situation

### 3 Introduction

“... making optimistic symbols and anticipating optimistic outcomes of undecided situations is as much part of human nature, of the human biology, as are the shape of the body, the growth of children, and the zest of sexual pleasure...Neither the consciousness of mortality nor a cold sense of human frailty depresses the belief in desirable futures.” Lionel Tiger, *Optimism: The Biology of Hope*.

“I’m a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.” Antonio Gramsci, Italian political theorist

This report presents the first findings of research conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) into the nature of optimism in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. The research, commissioned by The National Lottery, has provided a distinctive and definitive account of the role that optimism plays in the lives of the British public, focusing on the importance of optimism both as part of individual identity and personal outlook and as a central factor in social relationships.

SIRC takes as its starting point the idea that optimism, or the ability to favour a positive perception of current or future events, is something that is experienced by most human beings. While optimism is a common human experience, however, it can take on a variety of forms depending on individual circumstances and particular social contexts. It is often combined with (or restrained by) varying degrees of realism, pragmatism, fatalism and even pessimism. Our ideas about optimism, and the extent to which we think optimistically, are formed both individually according to our personal idiosyncrasies and socially in relation to the social worlds in which we live. As individuals and in groups we learn on the one hand to be more wary of some types of risk and on the other to be more optimistic about particular outcomes or eventualities.

But what are people most optimistic about? Why is it we are more optimistic about some aspects of our lives and not about others? What, in the end, defines an ‘optimistic’ person?

In what follows we unravel these questions in order to explore the social importance of looking on the brighter side of life.

### 4 Defining ‘optimism’

‘Optimism’ is a rather ill-defined term that has been used to describe a range of different experiences, feelings and dispositions in various social and historical contexts. It appears, for example, as a theme in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) where the character Dr Pangloss exhibits an essentially flawed and naïve or ‘blind’ optimism. At the beginning of the twentieth century (1913), the American author Eleanor Hodgman Porter created another emblematically optimistic character in the guise of Pollyanna – a term now commonly used in the English language to refer to people of an overly-positive and cheery disposition. More recently, Terry Jones’ *The Life of Brian* (1979) has provided yet another – if slightly more ironic and surreal – example of how looking on the brighter side of life features ambiguously as both an admirable quality and as a source of personal failure. There are other examples from history, philosophy, politics, literature, film, music and popular culture where optimism serves as the principal theme.

Given its importance as part of the human condition and its relevance to issues of individual and social well-being, optimism has also received a considerable amount of attention among scholars and academics from a range of disciplines. Over time, this has led to a variety of understandings of how optimism can be defined.<sup>1</sup> As in popular culture, scholarly debate often portrays optimism either as a positive trait or, alternatively, as a kind of unhealthy self-deception. In what follows we explore both sides of the argument in order to find a point of balance between these perspectives. Importantly, we look not only at optimism at an individual level but also at its social aspects. In exploring the relatively uncharted social aspects of optimism this report makes a significant and original contribution to both academic and popular debate.

#### 4.1 The Psychology of Optimism: It’s all in your head

Perhaps more than any other discipline, psychology has dominated the study of optimism, being understood as an

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful overview of psychological thinking about optimism, see Peterson, C. (2000) The Future of Optimism, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 44-55.

aspect of cognition (how one's mind works, or how one thinks) and as part of one's personality. In the first half of the twentieth century, prominent psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson established the idea of optimism as an innate human characteristic. They also argued, however, that optimism was in essence a human characteristic to be controlled and guarded against because it encouraged the illusion of positive outcomes that could not always be demonstrated in real life. Being optimistic, they insisted, was dangerous for one's mental well-being because it encouraged a skewed perception of reality. Following this idea psychologists of the early twentieth century initially discouraged 'looking on the bright side' in favour of a more measured, if slightly gloomier and pragmatic outlook on the world. Similarly, therapists encouraged patients to think realistically, shunning the idea that optimistic thinking in itself could lead to positive outcomes.

In the second half of the twentieth century, in contrast, an increasingly large body of psychological research related to optimism and mental health began to move away from this negative perspective, instead focusing on the positive impact of optimism for well-being in many different aspects of life – from mental and physical health to job satisfaction and emotional balance. Psychologists began to argue that people are naturally inclined to think about life in a positive way, regardless of the objective evidence that might suggest otherwise.<sup>2</sup> This, they suggested, was essentially a 'good thing' because it motivated us to achieve positive outcomes. We continue to think positively, for example, about the idea of marriage, despite the increasing rate of divorce. Similarly, people generally underplay the likelihood of contracting particular diseases despite the statistical probability of this occurring. In a seminal study of attitudes among smokers conducted by the psychologist Neil Weinstein, for example, participants regularly considered themselves less likely than the average smoker to contract lung cancer, in spite of evidence to the contrary.<sup>3</sup>

This positive outlook on optimism remains popular among psychologists today, although most also recognise that optimism can be experienced in varying degrees, not all of which are beneficial to one's mental well-being. In her book *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*, for example, the UCLA psychologist Shelley Taylor points to the important difference between *illusion* and *delusion* in optimistic thought. While positive self-deception (our ability to remember selectively the best bits of our lives) can have beneficial outcomes, this is only the case when such illusions are based in some way on reality. When we begin to *delude* ourselves about completely unrealistic positive future outcomes, optimism – what we refer to below as *delusional optimism* – can begin to have a negative effect on mental and emotional well-being. Similarly, a measured realism or pessimism might complement our natural tendency towards looking on the bright side, while an overwhelmingly negative outlook on the future is often associated with various forms of depression and mental health issues.

### 4.2 Big and little optimism: dispositions and situations

Psychologists today also distinguish between different levels of optimism, acknowledging that optimism takes on different forms depending on how it is directed. American psychologists Michael Scheier and Charles Carver, for example, developed the term *dispositional* optimism (what the 'positive' psychologist Christopher Peterson refers to, essentially, as 'big' optimism) to describe a general sense of optimism or a generally optimistic outlook on present and future events.<sup>4</sup> *Situational* optimism (or 'little' optimism), on the other hand, describes optimism directed towards a specific event or eventuality. Along these lines, a person might be generally disposed towards optimism, but might be more pessimistic about the outcomes of a particular scenario or situation.

The degree to which one is optimistic on either a large or small scale is often associated with the level of control or agency (the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Weinstein, N. (1980) Unrealistic optimism about future life events, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(5), 806-820.

<sup>3</sup> Weinstein, N D, Marcus, S, & Moser, R. (2005) Smokers' unrealistic optimism about their risk, *Tobacco Control*, 14(1), 55-59.

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<sup>4</sup> Scheier, M., & Carver, C. (1987) Dispositional optimism and physical well-being: The influence of generalized outcome expectancies on health, *Journal of Personality*, 55, 169-210.

ability actively to take part in shaping events) that one feels in a particular situation. In this sense the choices that we make and the risks that we take are all carried out with optimism, or a lack thereof, in mind – either in relation to our own agency or in relation to forces (fate, luck, economics, biology, etc.) outside of our control.

### 4.3 Brains hard-wired for optimism?

It would appear, then, that optimism plays an important role in the human experience, either a) as a positive aspect of thinking about the future and achieving goals, b) as a negative influence on unrealistic hopes and aspirations, or c) in its absence, as the missing psychological element leading to depression and over-riding pessimism. But what is it exactly that makes certain people more optimistic than others? Are some people naturally more optimistic than others? Or do we all possess the ability to be optimistic?

Recent research in the area of neuroscience would seem to suggest that levels of optimism and pessimism are in fact regulated by activity in a particular part of the brain, meaning that optimism is, on its own, something hard-wired into the human consciousness.<sup>5</sup> According to research carried out by Dr. Elizabeth Phelps at New York University, varying levels of activity in the rostral anterior cingulate cortex of the brain (a bit roughly in the middle of the brain, behind and above the right eye) imply that some people are in fact more disposed than others to optimistic thought, just as some are prone to depression and other mental health issues.

For Phelps, optimism starts as a particular pattern of neurons firing in a particular part of the brain and optimists, quite simply, have brains that are designed to think more positively about current and future events. Those of us who are not wired in this way may have to try harder to imagine positive outcomes.

### 4.4 Learned optimism?

The psychologist Martin Seligman has championed the field of *learned* optimism, or the process by which the less optimistic

among us can train our minds to seek out positive outcomes for the future. This, he suggests, involves a positive move against *learned helplessness*, or the tendency to think pessimistically when faced with successive negative situations in which one appears to have no control over outcomes. Pessimists, Seligman argues, are prone to blaming themselves for bad things, while optimists are naturally inclined to be less affected by negative events, recognising the possible external factors involved.<sup>6</sup> By using his positive thinking techniques, Seligman suggests, optimism can be learned in order to improve mental well-being (which, ironically, implies that pessimists are rather optimistic about the curative powers of Seligman's solution to their negative thinking).

### 4.5 Optimism: the missing link?

Whether or not people can be divided into such clearly identifiable, innate categories of 'optimist' and 'pessimist' remains debatable, as does the notion that optimistic thoughts can quite so easily be traced back to a particular part of the brain. The idea of optimism as an innate human quality, however, is certainly an interesting one. Taking an evolutionary perspective some social scientists, including optimism expert and SIRC advisor Dr. Lionel Tiger, suggest that 'hard-wired' optimism is one of the distinguishing factors that has allowed humans to progress and evolve.<sup>7</sup> He argues that it is Man's *inability* to assess risks accurately – our tendency to think that we are better than we really are – that allows us to be innovative, creative and adventurous.

The power of positive thinking is to assume the best and, by virtue of taking this chance, to advance our hopes or aspirations which, in the final analysis, enables us to evolve. Without this rather self-aggrandizing and reckless aspect of our socio-biological make-up we would not have taken the risk to climb down from the trees, settle in agrarian communities, or mess around with dangerous things such as steam, electricity or computer chips. Of course, taking these chances still involves an

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<sup>6</sup> See Seligman, M. (1998) *Learned Optimism: How to Change your Mind and your Life*. Free Press.

<sup>7</sup> Tiger, L. (1985) *Optimism: the Biology of Hope*. Kodansha International.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.psych.nyu.edu/phelpslab/>

assessment of risk of some kind and overcoming fears about failure, defeat and individual or social disadvantage.

Tiger suggests that optimism became an important part of human life at the point when we began to develop a perception of future time and, as a result, of our own mortality as well. In order to counteract the rather depressing inevitability of our own deaths we began to favour positive, optimistic thinking as a way of visualising future events. This also becomes an important aspect of social organisation as individual members must share, or be coerced into sharing, in a common goal for the future in order for society to function. The division of labour and the organisation of resources are in this sense tied up in important ways with the ability to think positively about the outcomes of a communal activity that, in the short-run at least, might not seem the most beneficial option for a particular individual.

There is not sufficient space here to enter into a debate about the complex socio-biological history of our species and it is certainly not the aim of this research to pinpoint the moment in primordial time when optimism became an important human attribute – our focus group and poll data do not stretch quite that far. These ideas, however, are useful because they provide an interesting framework for thinking about the *social* importance of optimism – its role in defining how we act with other people in particular social and historical contexts.

### 4.6 The anthropology of optimism

Arguments from sociology and social anthropology stress these social rather than biological or psychological aspects of hope and optimism, highlighting the fact that optimism is socially constructed and contextual. Optimism about the future can, in this sense, be considered to be a fundamental aspect of social life, but one that is manifested in very different ways in different social and cultural settings. It also takes on different meanings at various points in the life course. Optimism is essential to ideas about religion (notions of rebirth or the afterlife), rituals (lucky charms, toasts, etc.), love (our optimism about the success of relationships), family (especially children as a symbol of an intrinsically optimistic future) and some of the over-arching ideologies that characterise the Western world – capitalism, freedom, individualism, liberty, democracy, the American Dream and so on. How we experience these aspects of social

life, however, depends on our social environment and what we are optimistic about is likely to change accordingly. As Tiger emphasises, there is no one objective definition of optimism.

### 4.7 Socially contagious optimism

Thinking about optimism as a social phenomenon also allows us to consider how people experience optimism in relation to the people around them. This can be seen at a national level in terms of different aspects of social life, from collective or contagious optimism about the political future (see the recent example of the presidential elections in the United States) to the national economy (e.g. our current lack of optimism about the impact of the so-called 'credit crunch'), to sports, weather, the impact of the media, etc. On a smaller scale, optimism plays an integral role in our social interactions with others, from motivating or being motivated by colleagues at work to nurturing positive social exchanges with friends or family.

### 4.8 Balancing social and psychological theories of optimism

While some might argue that optimism exists primarily in our minds, it is also possible to suggest that it is a product of social interaction and experience. Combining these two perspectives – both the psychological and the social – allows us to approach optimism in a balanced and critical way. With these broad debates in mind, we now examine the research findings.

## 5 Methodology

The SIRC study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. A series of four focus groups with a wide variety of participants were held to explore what optimism and pessimism mean in real terms to real people; how they see themselves in these terms; what, if anything, they feel most optimistic about; what influences their levels of optimism; etc. Detailed transcripts of the sessions were used to develop questions for the second phase of the research – a national poll of 2,184 adults conducted by YouGov plc. Fieldwork was undertaken between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> February 2009. The survey was carried out online and the figures have been weighted in order to be representative of all GB adults aged 18 and over.

Following the national poll a final focus group was arranged to gain commentary on the results and to add detail to material contained in the previous four sessions.

## 6 Optimism: definitions and dispositions

A number of key ideas about *dispositional* and *situational* optimism were raised over the course of the project. One focus group participant, for example said that he was “optimistic about just about everything” and this reflected a dominant view in most of the groups. There was also a consensus that optimism is channelled into “a bit of everything” – it permeated all aspects of peoples lives from their hopes for a local football team to key aspects of personal relationships.

### 6.1 Situational optimism

For many participants, however, optimism was often tempered by a degree of pessimism – “[There are] particular things that [I can] feel pessimistic about” was a commonly expressed sentiment. A sense of optimism often depended on particular situations or contexts, irrespective of how optimistic one’s general disposition.

### 6.2 Benefits of looking on the bright side of life

A benefit of optimism noted by one focus group participant was that it made him “... feel very good about [himself] generally day to day”, which kept him motivated to continue with difficult tasks. The groups generally agreed that being optimistic gave meaning to their behaviour. One participant noted “If I thought there was no point to the things that I do because they’re going to turn out badly, I wouldn’t do any of them”.

Another participant felt strongly that optimism was necessary in order to succeed in life. The consensus was that a positive response to failure was important. As one female participant said, “Failures are integral to feeling optimistic in itself”. Entrepreneurs and inventors were, as a result, thought likely to have high levels of optimism. Other members of the groups, however, emphasised that optimism was by no means an essential prerequisite for success, giving examples of successful musicians and literary figures notorious for their melancholy outlooks. As with some sportsmen, the potential to be motivated by fear of failure was also raised.

### 6.3 A replacement for knowledge or skill?

One focus group participant suggested that optimism might act as a ‘replacement’ for knowledge or skill. If a person has limited

knowledge of an outcome they might choose to be optimistic instead.

### 6.4 Optimism as a coping strategy

Many focus group participants agreed that optimism can be used as a sort of coping mechanism during difficult times, such as bereavement. After losing five members of her family in the war, one elderly focus group participant said she used her optimism as a “lifeline”. She said that remaining optimistic was “a way of getting through”. Another focus group participant also used optimism to help him get through divorce.

*“I’ve learned from it and I’ve grown from it and it was because I was optimistic that I would be alright. It gets you back on the way and is very valuable.”*

In a similar vein a participant summarised the role of optimism in difficult situations as “a way of keeping your mental health”.

### 6.5 The dangers of delusional optimism

During the discussion of the benefits to optimism, potential drawbacks were also noted. One young male participant felt that those who see only the good in situations can render themselves misinformed or misguided. In this way ‘blind’ optimism can have potential negative consequences.

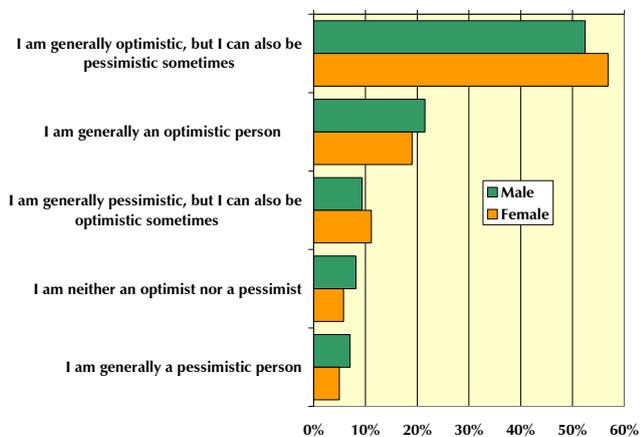
Another participant also suggested that people who are overly optimistic are “continually disappointed by life because they expect good things to happen” while pessimists were more likely to be happy because they did not have such high expectations. The groups were divided in opinion on this subject but concluded that a person “needs a balance between the two extremes”. In reference to this, one well-read participant aligned herself with Gramsci’s philosophy:

*“What you want is pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. So the pessimism of the intellect is where you see all the bad things that you want to change so it spurs you into action. But when you are optimistic in your will it will encourage you to believe that what you do will bring results.”*

## 7 Britain – an optimistic nation?

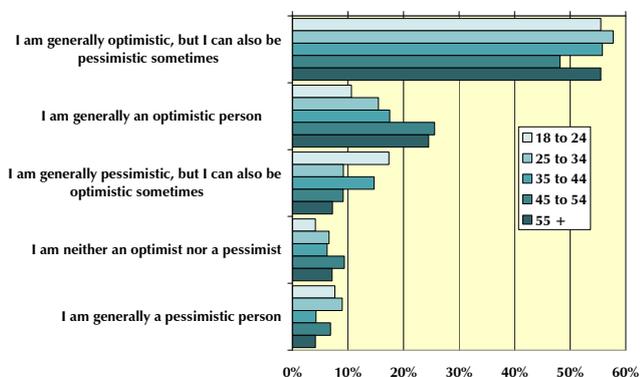
Results from the national poll were generally consistent with the upbeat sentiments expressed in the focus groups. We can see from Figure 1 that 21% of people see themselves as being generally optimistic with a further 54% being optimistic but also feeling pessimistic about some things. This contrast markedly with the 6% who felt generally pessimistic and the 10% who were pessimistic but also optimistic about some things. Women were slightly more likely than men to define themselves as optimists, but the difference between the sexes was small and statistically insignificant.

Figure 1. Self-descriptions of optimist/pessimist, by gender



There were, however, some interesting age differences in this context, as we can see from Figure 2. Young people aged between 18 and 24 are much less likely to define themselves as being ‘generally optimistic’ than those over the age of 45 – 11% compared with 26%.

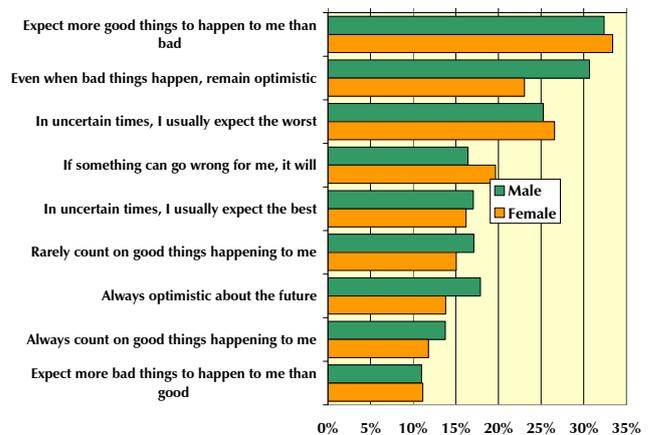
Figure 2. Self-descriptions of optimist/pessimist, by age



This finding is consistent with other work conducted by SIRC that has focused on the mood and aspirations of today’s young adults – those whose formative experiences have been marked by 9/11, the London bombings, etc.

The generally optimistic attitude of the population was reinforced by responses to a further poll question, as shown in Figure 3. Three times as many people feel that more good things happen to them than bad as those who take the opposite view.

Figure 3. Optimistic/pessimistic sentiments, by gender



We can also see from Figure 3 that well over a quarter of British people, and men in particular, are able to remain optimistic even when bad things happen. We should note, however, that a similar proportion say that they expect the worst in ‘uncertain times’. Perhaps with the so-called ‘credit crunch’ and current economic recession this is understandable.

## 8 What makes us optimistic?

Focus group participants were divided as to whether optimism was a learned or innate human quality, although some highlighted the overlap between ‘natural’ and ‘nurtured’ optimism. One participant, who had previously described himself as a “natural born optimist”, suggested that optimism is “an inherited reflex” that is “passed down” through generations. Others agreed with this hereditary view of optimism, suggesting that optimism is “intrinsic in you” rather than a learned characteristic.

Some focus group participants chose to sit on the fence on this question, arguing that optimism is “something inside you” but

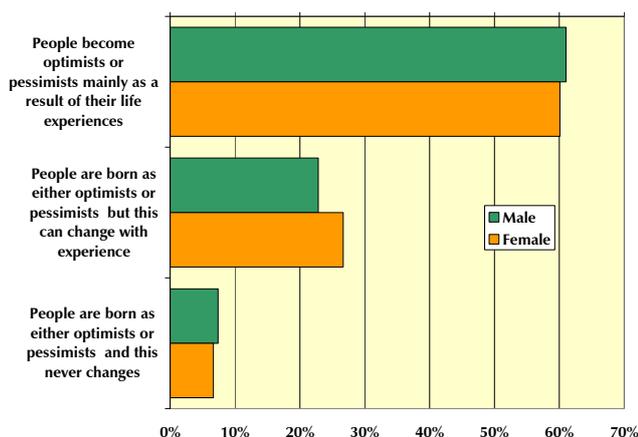
also acknowledging the importance of external influences such as friends and family in determining how optimistic a person becomes. One participant offered his mother as an example of a social influence, believing that she helped him to build upon his natural optimism. Another participant put it this way:

*‘I personally think there’s an innate part. There’s a little bit of your personality that every individual has that is about them, you know. We get a lot from our parents and our upbringing and our surroundings. You have the typical parents who say ‘I don’t know where he gets it from’ because they really know that they’re not like that and their child just has some part of their personality which is just so different to them. So I think there is an innate part of it but, you know, a lot of it is down to your environment and your upbringing.’*

Others, however, argued more strongly for the learned, socially-derived nature of optimism, suggesting that if optimism is ‘passed down’ through the generations it is a social or psychological quality that parents “instil in you” rather than a genetic trait.

This view was consistent with the responses from the majority of poll participants, with 61% agreeing with the statement ‘people become optimists or pessimists mainly as a result of their life experiences’, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Learned or innate optimism**



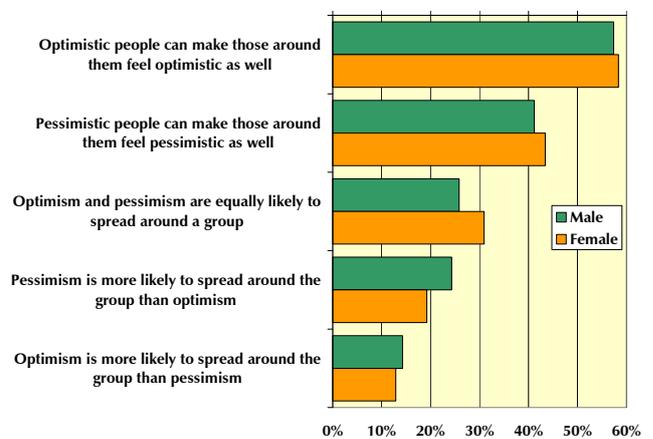
One participant stated that her grandparents had been optimistic and this attitude had been recognised and learned by subsequent generations. In a more explicit example, another participant talked about encouraging optimism in her role as a teacher:

*“... you do see children who have a negative side and are ‘Can’t do it, can’t do it’; then you sort of encourage them and give them a lot of positive feed back and break it down for them and actually say to them, ‘Actually, if you get one wrong it’s not a problem. You’re still doing brilliantly’. You know, when you start letting them know that it’s okay you do actually see that they become a lot more positive and optimistic and more hopeful in themselves. And they want to challenge themselves if they get one wrong, ‘Yeah, I’ll get them all right next time’ and so forth.”*

## 9 Socially contagious optimism: radiators and drains

The learned aspect of optimism was linked in focus group discussions to the notion of optimism being socially ‘contagious’ – that optimistic people are able to ‘infect’ others with their positive outlook of the future. The national poll data confirmed this view with nearly 60% of respondents taking the view that optimistic people can make those around them optimistic as well, as shown in Figure 5. A further 40%, however, noted that pessimism could also be ‘contagious’ in this sense.

**Figure 5. Contagious optimism**



In line with these poll data, most focus group participants agreed that both optimism and pessimism could be contagious, but optimism rather more so. One participant commented,

*“...from a work point of view you can go into work and it can be all doom and gloom and no one says ‘morning’, no one says hello, no one smiles ... if you walk into a room and you smile and you say ‘Hello, good morning’ and you do*

*that every morning, after a while you notice that there is a change so I think, yes, you can influence it [optimism]."*

A participant who was a restaurant manager saw this kind of contagious optimism as a vital part of his job:

*"Yeah you have to be [optimistic]. I'm an optimistic person and you have to [have] a positive attitude, being optimistic in front of guests ... I've worked in a lot of restaurants so ... even if something is going wrong at back of house, which makes you feel pessimistic, i.e. you've run out of something and they don't tell you, you've got to show in front of the guests that everything is fine ... It's almost like a performance – a performance of optimism. You've got to filter that down to the rest of your team because you're the one they are looking at."*

On a larger national scale, sporting events were used as an example of when optimism could be particularly contagious:

*"Sporting events [are] the perfect example. I think it is not very often that British sport is that successful but if you think about the Olympics, there were crowds in the street; when they won the Ashes for the first time in ages; I mean even people who love cricket are normally very, very cynical about these things, but everyone's out there, everyone was very positive ... people will eventually come out and [raise the level of optimism] every now and then. Yeah, I think sport is a perfect example."*

Some even went as far as to suggest that contagious optimism of this sort could improve performance in a range of contexts, at least for a short while:

*"... you could argue that optimism is socially cohesive and the fact that it brings people together and is infectious means that they are more likely to perform better and so in the continued optimism for the next time, it might actually have a direct influence on the performance the second time. Like directly with sport; if you have got a really amazing crowd who ... support the team, it actually influences their performance and they play better ..."*

There were, of course, examples of infectious pessimism as well. Again, this was discussed particularly in relation to the

influence that people can have on one another in the workplace:

*"I'm hanging around with or working in a place where everyone's a group of miserable [people] who seem to hate everyone and everything that could possibly have any impact ... you know, they read the [newspaper] everyday and 'Oh, such and such has taken our money' and you're just like, 'Oh, God. Please...'. And you just have to remove yourself from that situation otherwise eventually you just become [like] them."*

In relation to the positive and negative effects that others can have on one's outlook, one participant offered the following neat distinction between what he described as 'radiators' and 'drains':

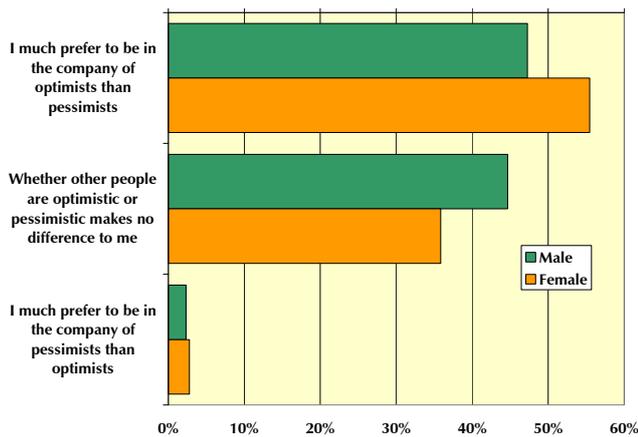
*"I had a friend who had really bad depression whose psychiatrist just said to him 'right there are two types of people out there, you have radiators and you have drains, stay away from the drains and go and talk to radiators'."*

### 10 Some say optimists attract ...

The idea of 'radiators' being more positive, and better for one's mental health, than 'drains', suggests that optimism and pessimism might be factors in how attractive we find other people. Are optimists more attractive, in the broad sense, than pessimists?

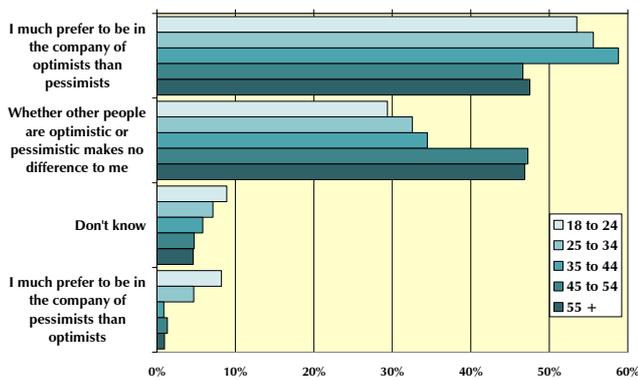
The poll data provided a clear answer, as shown in Figure 6. While around 40% of respondents thought it made little difference in this context, over 50% preferred the company of optimists compared with a mere 3% who were more attracted to pessimists. Women were rather more positive about the attractive qualities of optimists than were men – 55% compared with 47%.

Figure 6. Optimism and attraction – by gender



There were a few interesting age differences in this context, as shown in Figure 7. Older respondents tended more towards the view that whether others were optimists or pessimists made little difference in this context. Young people, however, especially those aged under 25, were significantly more likely than the oldest group to say that they preferred the company of pessimists – 8% versus 1%. This, perhaps, reflects that younger people, as we have seen earlier, are more likely than other age groups to be pessimists themselves.

Figure 7. Optimism and attraction – by age



In the focus groups there was an equally strong overall consensus in favour of optimists. The most attractive quality associated with optimists was their ability to make others feel ‘good’ – to inspire and motivate people to share a positive view of the world. A few, however, accepted that pessimists could be attractive too – but only if they were funny. In line with the poll data, this was expressed by younger participants in the focus groups. One participant described a particularly morose friend

of his, whose otherwise unattractive pessimistic character was saved by what he described as a particularly ‘British’ kind of black humour:

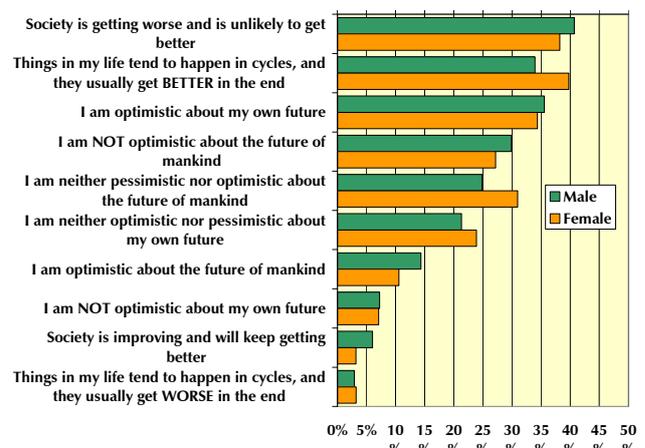
*“Why he is my friend is because he’s got a good sense of humour which is tied up with this slightly dark view of the world. He’s an intelligent guy and that’s tied up with it too and has interesting and perceptive things to say about life. So it’s not just like he’s bleak and boring, otherwise, you know, he wouldn’t be my friend, obviously.”*

There were also occasions where focus group participants talked about an ‘over-bearing’ optimism as being potentially a negative and irritating personality trait. These shades of grey between the attractive qualities of optimists and pessimists perhaps point to the fact that individuals may embody both pessimistic and optimistic qualities, each making them more or less attractive in particular different social contexts.

## 11 What are we optimistic about?

In the focus groups, having established the different levels of optimism expressed by participants and the reasoning behind people’s perceptions of optimism, we went on to explore what they felt most optimistic about. Many suggested that they were optimistic about their own lives – their own ‘little bubbles’ as one person put it – but far less optimistic about the world at large. This matched closely the poll results shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Optimism and life experiences



We can see that while the most dominant response in this section was the familiar ‘society is getting worse’ sentiment – something that has been expressed throughout all history – the

second highest ranking response was the upbeat belief that in one’s personal life things tended to get better in the end. Compare this with the mere 3% of people who thought that things in one’s personal life usually got worse in the end. Also significant in these results is the sense that while people are generally optimistic about their own futures, they are much less optimistic about the future of the world in general.

Here we have a clear example of the difference between ‘big’ and ‘little’ optimism, with people applying an optimistic outlook to their own circumstances, but casting a rather more negative view over society more generally. This would seem to be connected in important ways to people’s perception of control in their lives:

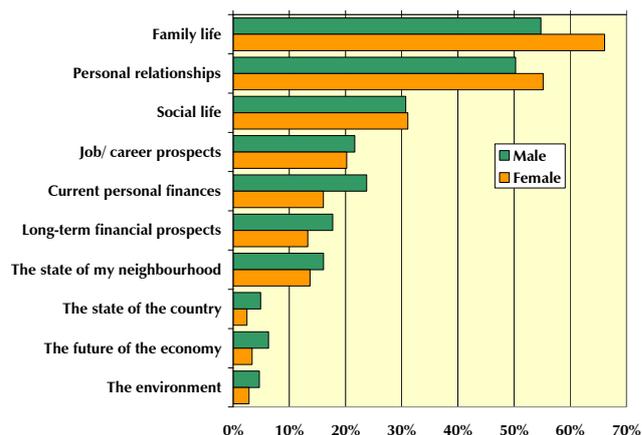
*“Things I don’t have control over I’m more fatalistic about or perhaps a little pessimistic about at times. The recession – I can’t do very much about that at all except for what I can do for myself. Shop in a different supermarket; tighten the belt for a while; that kind of thing. But I can’t do anything on a global scale to prevent what’s happening or make it better. But you’re just sort of optimistic that eventually things will be okay. Don’t sweat the small stuff because you can deal with that. The big stuff is the stuff that you can’t address, and you have to sometimes let things be.”*

Another participant framed the distinction between different social contexts in this:

*“If you worry about all the every atrocity and every person that dies – I haven’t got that much emotional energy to be that sad for people that I don’t know. I think that I almost detach myself from it just for my own sanity. It’s not necessarily a good thing, but that’s the way I deal with it. So I don’t really get sad about things on the news because I don’t know the people. That’s a terrible thing to say.”*

This distinction between the personal/impersonal and controllable/uncontrollable aspects of one’s life, and their relevance to what we feel optimistic or pessimistic about was demonstrated even more clearly in the national poll, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9. What we feel optimistic about



People, and women in particular, are most optimistic about their family lives and their social relationships – rather less so about their job prospects and their current and future financial situations. Given the present gloomy economic conditions, some worries about jobs and money are not too surprising. It is, however, the aspects of our lives and circumstances over which we have little control that we feel the least optimistic about – the environment, economy, state of the country in general and even our neighbourhoods.

The pervading sense of optimism, albeit confined mostly to the personal, social and familial aspects of lives, survives despite the ups and downs that we all experience in our lives. Most of the focus group participants recognised that they would have to deal with some kind of hardship but believed that these moments of difficulty were part of a longer cycle of events that would, in the end, turn out for the best. Even in times of ‘downturn’, over which individuals have little control, a sense of optimism about one’s personal and social life remained.

*“In the current climate when everyone’s talking about the way things are going and how things are hard, I still feel quite optimistic about it because, to me, I just think this is part of life’s cycle and it’s something that always happens. It’s happened before and people just have to go through it, work through the cycle, pull tight and it will be okay in the end. In the current climate I’m still quite optimistic about life whereas around you find quite a lot of people are like, ‘Oh, it’s hard’ and, you know, gloom and doom.”*

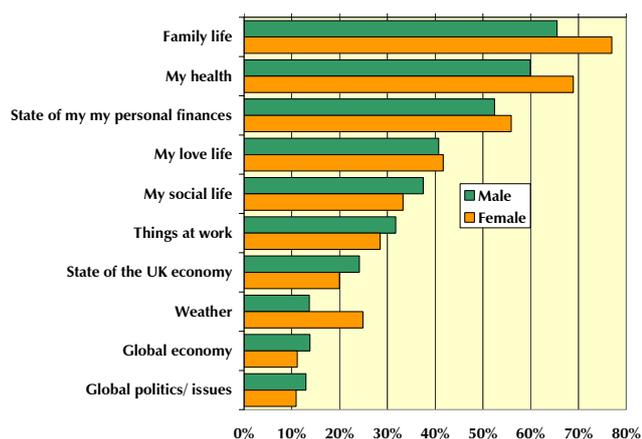
A belief in the cyclical nature of events and the need to retain a sense of optimism even in the ‘troughs’ dominated not only discussion of global issues but also in the arena of sport. As is often the case in focus groups, football emerged as the provider of a suitable analogy for human existence.

*“I suppose [football] is a real microcosm with that. For those who know football, the beginning of the season wasn’t very good for Tottenham Hotspur. We were right at the bottom and, you know, there was all this falling apart. And then Harry Redknapp came in ... and so with those things you can be optimistic if you can see there’s a path ... I think ... that’s how things are in life, generally. If you can see a path – and if you can’t see one you need to strive to do so. That’s where your optimism comes in – otherwise you’re just going to go round in circles, aren’t you?”*

## 12 What influences our sense of optimism?

While family life was something that about which we feel the most optimistic, it also naturally featured as the strongest influence on our levels of optimism in general. When things went wrong within the family, this was most likely to dent our sense of optimism. Another strong influence on our sense of optimism, however, was personal health, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Influences on sense of optimism



We can also see from Figure 10 that the state of ones’ personal finances can have a strong impact on levels of optimism, while the state of the global economy, which might have a direct effect on personal finances, is generally seen as less important. The distinction between those things over which we feel we

have control, or at least *should* have control, and those that are beyond our sphere of influence, is again highlighted.

Our love, social and work lives are also aspects that determine how brightly we view the current and future outlook. For some, and women in particular, the weather also seems play a significant role. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or ‘winter depression’ – was mentioned by some in this context as having an effect on levels of optimism.

Although there is some scepticism within the academic community as to whether SAD actually exists as a discrete psychological condition, comments by focus group participants indicated substantial belief in the phenomenon. Blaming the weather in this way, of course, fits quite neatly with the ideas of control explored earlier. Ironically, it is an indication of an optimistic point of view to blame the weather for one’s mood because there is little that one can personally do to influence the sun and the rain. Pessimists, on the other hand, would be more likely to blame themselves for feeling down rather than seeking external causes.

## 13 The role of experience

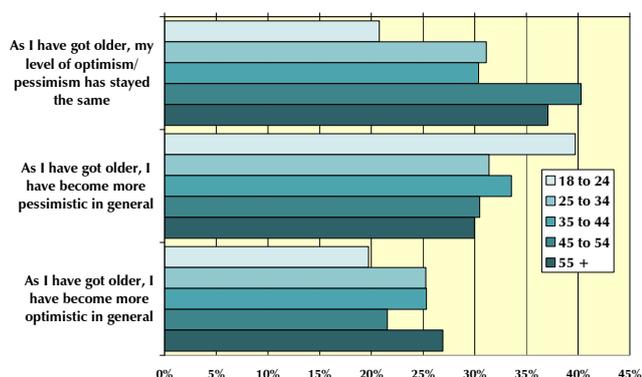
In the focus groups, experience and perspective were both highlighted as important factors in determining how optimistic participants were about particular aspects of their lives. For many, experience of adversity were just as important as positive outcomes in terms of gaining perspective and remaining optimistic. Different experiences of optimism or pessimism at different points in life were part of this experiential process.

*“As you get older you start to realise that actually, you don’t need to be like that [pessimistic], it doesn’t do you any favours and the more you know yourself ... the more optimistic you can be because you know more what you want.”*

At the same time, however, there were other focus group participants who felt that as they had got older they had become less optimistic – due mainly to particular events or to the fact that life had simply ‘become harder’. Interestingly, such sentiments tended to expressed most by the younger

participants. This was consistent with the poll data summarised in Figure 11.

**Figure 11. The effect of ageing on optimism**



Here we can see that the dominant view was that levels of optimism or pessimism had stayed roughly the same as people had got older. Younger people, however, were significantly more likely to feel that their sense of pessimism had increased over time than those over the age of 55 – 40% versus 30%. The over 50s were more likely to feel that their sense of optimism had grown over time compared with the under 25s – 27% versus 20%.

These age differences undoubtedly reflect the extent to which social and economic conditions have changed over the past half century. The outlook of the ‘Baby Boomer’ generation is clearly different in many respects from that of the current ‘Generation Y’, and this is reflected in levels of optimism and perceptions of the impact of life experience to date. This may, however, also reflect the nature of the particular life experiences that are commonly associated with the age range of 18 to 24 years. Experiences such as leaving school, entering paid work, moving to different geographical areas for work or study, dealing with potentially more complex social and emotional relationships – all of these are part of the complex transitions towards adulthood. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that this period of relative upheaval sometimes allows younger people to look back nostalgically to a less complicated childhood where they were able to be more unabashedly optimistic.

## 14 British optimism?

The issue of whether or not there is particularly ‘British’ form of optimism was discussed with focus groups that included participants from other countries as well as British nationals.

Many British focus group participants were quite ambivalent about the nature of British optimism. Some, however, thought that British identity was more related pessimism than optimism, particularly in relation to the weather. Of course, grumbling about the weather is as quintessentially British as the ‘Blitz spirit’ of the Second World War. As SIRC co-director Kate Fox points out in her book *Watching the English*, however, when English people talk about the weather they are seldom *actually* talking about the weather. Instead, the weather becomes a vehicle for other topics of social interaction. ‘Weather-speak’ provides not only a common topic of conversation but also a common ground for positive social bonding more generally. It is easy and socially acceptable to curse the weather, or to talk about its imminent improvement. As Kate suggests<sup>8</sup>,

*“English ‘moaning rituals’ about the weather have an important social purpose, in that they provide further opportunities for friendly agreement, in this case with the added benefit of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ factor – ‘them’ being the weather ... an equally acceptable, more positive approach to weather ... is to predict imminent improvement ... shared moaning is just as effective in promoting sociable interaction and social bonding as shared optimism ...”*

In the focus groups, sports provided another vehicle for these kinds of interactions, either in terms of sharing in an optimistic view of rather rare examples of British sporting success, or in favouring the (often British) underdog in sporting competitions.

When the conversation focused around the Olympics, the group agreed that there was a sense of unity in the country and “the happiness came up” because Brits were not focusing on “doom and gloom”. The point was made, however, that this was only temporary and as soon as it was over, optimism began to decline.

<sup>8</sup> Fox, K. (2004) *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. Hodder & Stoughton, p.31

One New Zealand participant suggested a number of distinctive character traits within the British population that he identified with pessimism. These included, “Austere, dour, more cynical”. Pessimism was related to British humour but a degree of optimism was related, according to an American participant, to “the long tradition of British people supporting the underdog.”

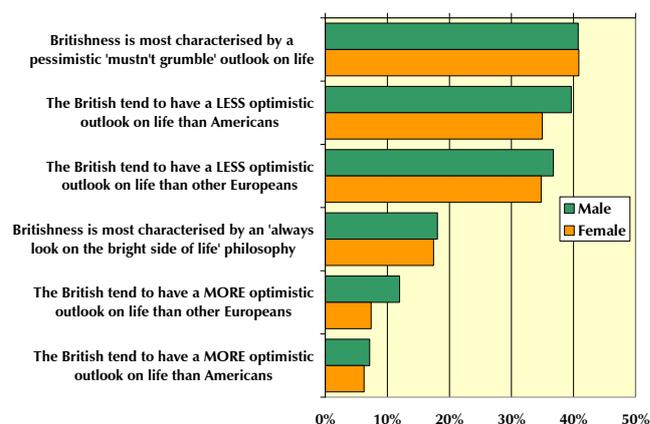
The issue of social class inevitably cropped up in these discussions, and the general consensus was that class had some impact in this context. Upper class people, as opposed to the middle or working classes, were seen as being a position where “... they are secure in themselves, and I think that makes a massive difference”. The sentiment expressed here, however, is not merely that wealth makes one more optimistic. Instead, focus group participants talked about the relative sense of freedom that social mobility brings. One focus group participant from a working class background, now studying for a D.Phil. at the University of Oxford, put it this way:

*“That is a big thing about optimism. Feeling you’ve got control over your life and you can better your life in the sense of whatever the definition of better is. If you’re materialistic minded that would be it [consumer culture] but that’s not for me. I appreciate other things in life that can give you enjoyment and satisfaction, whether that’s intellectually or materially.”*

A German focus participant did not perceive any difference between the optimism displayed in England and in his home country. Nonetheless there was strong support among the groups for the idea that optimism was culturally specific. One participant, for example, argued that winning is not part of Britain’s sporting experience and this, perhaps, accounts for the fatalistic attitude of its fans. This fits with the suggestion that support of the underdog is a quintessentially British trait. A lack of experience of winning may account for the reliance on foreign coaches and managers in many different sports to inject an otherwise lacking sense of optimism. Another focus group participant suggested that this might be increasingly necessary because of the policy in schools that she felt “promoted a no winners – no losers” approach to sport.

The general feelings of the focus participants in this context were echoed in the national poll, as shown in Figure 12. Here we can see that the dominant views were that Britishness was characterised by a pessimistic ‘mustn’t grumble’ attitude and that we as a nation are less optimistic than Americans or other Europeans. Less than 20% of the poll respondents felt that Britishness was best characterised by an optimistic attitude and even fewer thought we were more optimistic than our American or mainland European counterparts.

Figure 12. Britishness and optimism/pessimism



This image of the British as a dour and rather miserable race contrast very much with the findings we have noted above showing that the majority of Brits have a distinctively upbeat and optimistic outlook on life. A very British trait, however, is also to play down achievements and to engage in rather self-deprecating behaviours. We may, in fact, be as optimistic as any other national group, but we don’t want to admit or shout about it – that wouldn’t be British at all!

## 15 The influence of the media

The influence of the media on levels of optimism was discussed in all of the focus groups, with most participants agreeing that the media can have a profound effect on how optimistic or pessimistic people are in relation to particular events or situations.

The groups were in agreement that the media is dominated by negative and pessimistic news because “pessimism sells”. Another participant suggested that people perhaps enjoy hearing bad news because “it makes their own lives ... seem comparatively better”. This theory was also offered as an

explanation for the popularity of television soap operas which use predominately negative story lines. A consensus, however, was not reached on this subject. One female participant in her 60s, for example, said that when she watched news reports she felt “down”. Another was of the opinion that this could be construed as a good thing – negative press can have a positive influence on people because it forces people to accept the reality of the world, which might “Spur [you] to do something”.

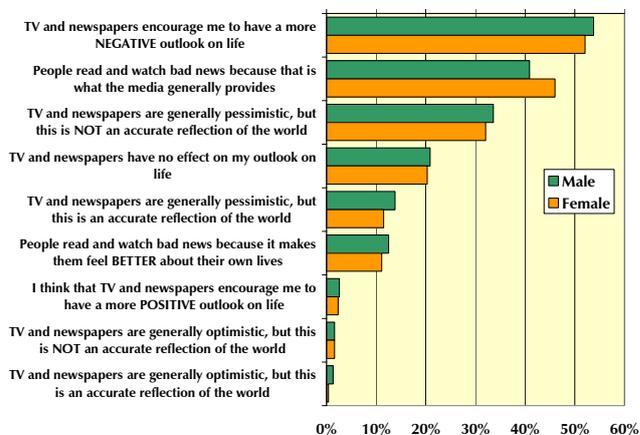
Participants were asked why, if optimism is broadly perceived to be such a favourable trait, bad news sells so well. Some participants said that they found endless negative press depressing. One suggested that this was the result of the way bad news develops over time, as opposed to any inherent appeal of bad news itself. Other members of the groups, however, felt that bad news was more interesting than good news. They were unsure why this was the case but it was suggested that some of its appeal may lie in its ability to place their own lives in perspective.

*“I think the whole thing about Baby P – I watched that documentary about it and I felt really down after that because it just shows you the depths that people will sink to. I mean, it was just a reminder ... and there were graphic images. And I did feel very down after that because just thinking about that child all on its own and suffering. And I ... feel down when I see things about Kosovo or in the Congo or endless images about people starving in refugee camps ... but then I think that it’s right that I feel down because it will spur me to do something, and it’s no good hiding from it. It’s important that people are aware of all the bad things that happen.”*

The various views on the role of the popular media in relation to optimism/pessimism were reflected in responses to question in the national poll, as shown in Figure 13. Here we can see that the most dominant feelings were that the media encourage people to have a more negative outlook because they generally provided ‘bad news’ stories. There was also recognition that the apparent pessimism contained in media articles and programmes was not an accurate reflection of the world in which we live – less than 1% felt that newspapers presented an optimistic perspective that accurately reflected reality. Around a

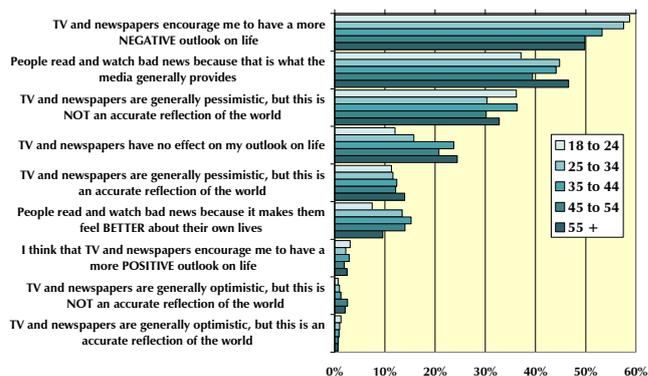
fifth of respondents felt that the media had no influence at all on their levels of optimism.

Figure 13. Influence of the media on optimism, by gender



In this particular context, however, there were some interesting age differences, as shown in Figure 14. Older people (55+) were the least likely to be affected by the media and young people (<25) the most. Members of the youngest age group were also the most likely to see the media as being a driver of pessimism. This may, again, reflect the relatively higher levels of pessimism among the under 25s, even though a sense of optimism still dominates within this age group.

Figure 14. Influence of the media on optimism, by age



## 16 The SIRC optimism spectrum

From detailed analysis of the focus group transcripts and video recordings it seemed that the participants could be divided into various ‘types’ depending on their levels of optimism or pessimism and the precise characteristics of these personality traits. We set out, therefore, to capture these types in order to include them in our national poll.

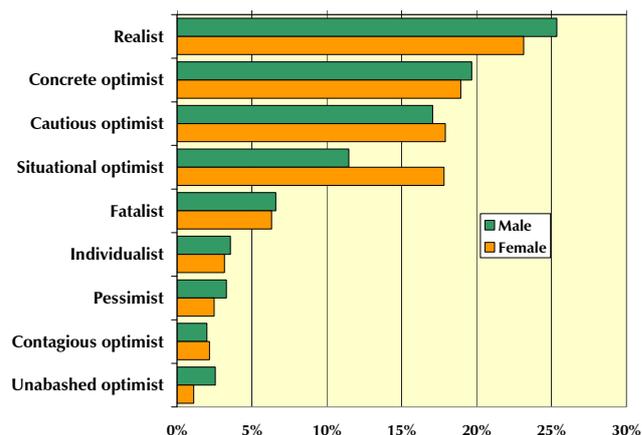
The process was not without its attendant dangers. Typically in such polls, if you provide respondents with a list of categories that are not quite appropriate or do not accurately reflect a real-life spectrum, and then ask them to choose which summarises them best, they will tick the 'None of these' box. Most people do not like being 'pigeon-holed' in any case and if the descriptions do not 'fit', the exercise is a little pointless.

With this danger in mind we developed the list of potential categories, or spectrum, very carefully – as summarised below:

- **Unabashed optimist:** I am always very optimistic, whatever the circumstances
- **Contagious optimist:** I am always optimistic, and my optimism spreads to those around me
- **Concrete optimist:** I am optimistic, but I am realistic about the possible outcomes of events
- **Cautious optimist:** I am optimistic, but I am careful not to be complacent about my good fortune
- **Situational optimist:** My levels of optimism/pessimism change from situation to situation
- **Realist:** I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but simply realistic about the good and bad things in my life
- **Fatalist:** I accept that essentially I can't change what's going to happen to me, whether it's good or bad
- **Individualist:** I believe that essentially I have control over what's going to happen to me, whether it's good or bad
- **Pessimist:** I am generally pessimistic, whatever the circumstances

Some of these categories, of course, are not necessarily mutually exclusive – one can be, for example, a Concrete Optimist as well as a Realist. Nonetheless, we were pleasantly surprised that only 2% of poll sample of over 2,150 representative British citizens felt that they did not fit into any of these categories. The results are summarised in Figure 15.

**Figure 15. The optimism/pessimism spectrum**



What is clear from Figure 15 is that while the largest group of people preferred to describe themselves as Realists, the number of Optimists (of various sub-types) far exceeded that of the Pessimists. This very much reflects the other findings that we have summarised earlier. There are, it is true, very few Unabashed Optimists – those who, perhaps naively, 'look on the bright side of life even when circumstances do not warrant such joviality. Optimism, it seems, is restrained in most people by a degree of realism and an avoidance of complacency – very British characteristics that may come in very useful over the next year or so of belt-tightening in the face of economic recession.