Declinism: is the world actually getting worse?

A recent survey suggests that 71% of people think that the world is going to the dogs. Are things actually that bad, or is it a psychological trick of the mind?

Are things really getting worse? Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

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Let’s face it, 2015 hasn’t been the most positive of years so far. But is the world really going down the pan? Radio 4’s The Human Zoo kicked off a new series this week, taking a look at “declinism” – the idea that we’re predisposed to view the past favourably, and worry that the future is going to be dire. In a survey run by YouGov for the programme, 71% of respondents said they thought the world was getting worse, and only 5% said that is was getting better. But what’s the reality of the situation?

Declinism is a trick of the mind ...

Two lines of psychological research might provide insight into why people might think things are getting worse. The first is called the “reminiscence” bump. Across a number of studies from the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers showed that when they asked 70-year-olds to recall autobiographical memories, they tended to best remember events that happened to them at around the ages of 10-30. Recall dropped for events that happened when the participants were aged between 30-60, and then increased again for ages nearer to 70. So you’re more likely to remember things that happened to you in late childhood or early adulthood.

The second is known as the positivity effect, explained in a 2005 paper by Mara Mather and Laura Carstensen. Essentially, this is the idea that as people get older, they tend to
experience fewer negative emotions, and they’re more likely to remember positive things over negative things. So putting these two concepts together - the reminiscence bump and the positivity effect - people are more likely to remember events from late childhood or early adulthood, and critically more likely to remember positive events from the past. In other words, you remember your younger years more favourably, which might go some way to explaining why some people experience declinism.

... and things aren’t as bad as they seem
Of course, people might think that the world is worse now than it was in the past, because it actually is worse now. But again the evidence doesn’t seem to stack up for that. For example, in a 2013 study published in Psychological Science, Angelina Sutin and colleagues looked at self-reported wellbeing data from three different groups of people - young, middle-aged, and older - across 30 years. In general, they found that older people reported lower levels of wellbeing when compared to younger or middle-aged adults. However, collapsing across these groups, wellbeing broadly increased across the lifespan. Why the lower levels specifically in the older group then? The authors argued it was because this group (which included people born in the early 1900s, a period of war and economic uncertainty) started off with lower levels of wellbeing. Taking this into account then, each of the three age groups showed the same trend of increasing wellbeing, it’s just that they started off (and ended) at different levels.

To be fair, self-reported wellbeing is only one indicator you could take of whether things are better or not. But if you look at other measures, it still seems like things are pretty good nowadays. Tom Chivers argued this recently, pointing to evidence that life expectancy is on the increase, violence is declining, and we’re getting healthier and smarter. So maybe declinism is just a quirk of human psychology.

Negativity bias and depression
Just as there’s evidence for a positivity effect though, so too is there research suggesting the existence of a negativity bias. This is the idea that emotionally negative events are likely to have more impact on your thoughts and behaviours than a similar, but positive, event. For example, we tend to hold on to criticisms for much longer than we do praise, and bad information tends to be more thoroughly processed than good information.

Moreover, negative biases or interpretations of events tend to be more pronounced in people with depression. Researchers showed this in a 2011 study in the journal Cognitive Therapy and Research. In the study, participants either with or without depression were shown a series of ambiguous sentences on a computer screen (for example, “you get a new job”). Following each sentence, they then either saw a negative word (“unqualified”) or a neutral word (“qualified”), and asked whether or not they thought the word and sentence were connected in some way.

Participants with depression tended to respond faster when the sentences were paired with negative words, suggesting that they have a predisposition to interpret ambiguous events negatively. So for individuals with depression at least, findings like these might go some way to explaining why some people have a bleaker outlook on the future, compared to the
This point becomes more salient when you consider that rates of depression seem to be generally on the increase. For example, a 2006 study in the American Journal of Psychiatry showed that in the US, there was a 4% increase in the prevalence of major depressive disorder between 1991/92 and 2001/02. So in a sense, you might argue that the prevalence of declinism isn’t because the world’s getting worse - it’s because more people are becoming depressed. Or at least, more people are being diagnosed with depression.

On the other hand, you could equally argue that the increased prevalence in rates of depression is a good thing - it means our understanding of mental health, and our ability to successfully diagnose depression, are getting better. And in turn, that hopefully opens up the possibility of better treatments.

But aside from all that, individual differences obviously come into play. Not everyone has a bleak outlook on the future, and not everyone remembers their younger years fondly. So in the end, I guess it’s up to you, and your own outlook on life, as to whether you think the world really is going to the dogs.