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Why are Optimists Optimistic?

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Abstract

This study examined what is brought to mind when responding to the items comprising a measure of dispositional optimism. Participants (N = 113) completed the Life Orientation Test and the COPE, a measure of coping style, and described why they responded the way they did to the items assessing optimism. Participants' explanations comprised eight types of reasoning: (1) faith in a higher power; (2) belief in fate or a just world; (3) personal fortune; (4) belief in the role of one's own ability; (5) reliance on idioms; (6) beliefs about the usefulness of thinking optimistically; (7) matter-of-fact statements; and (8) a feeling, intuition, or hope. These types were also related to coping styles. Responses to positively-worded items were explained with respect to external forces and responses to negatively-worded items were explained with respect to internal forces. Understanding how people explain their optimism may be the first step in fostering this outlook.

Keywords

dispositional optimism; pessimism; coping; personality

Dispositional optimism is defined as a generalized high expectancy for positive outcomes and a low expectancy for negative outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Being able to foster optimism would be beneficial because of its various associated salutary effects (Carver, Lehman, & Antoni, 2003; Lobel, DeVincent, Kamiern, & Meyer; Scheier & Carver, 1992; Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998). Thus, better understanding the foundations of an optimistic outlook and to what extent these foundations differ across individuals is important.

Dispositional optimism is a global construct that differs from situational optimism, which applies to expectations in specific contexts (Armor & Taylor, 1998). A global versus a situational construct may be especially useful in predicting behavior, because many situations individuals encounter are new (Carver & Scheier, 2003). Dispositional optimism is commonly measured with the Life Orientation Test (LOT) and its revised version (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) and was designed not to imply any specific basis for the expectancies assessed. Although dispositional optimism is considered a trait and tends to be stable over time (Schou, Ekeberg, Sandvik, & Ruland, 2005), a developmental perspective allows for a continuum of the stability of traits and the possibility of altering this type of characteristic, especially prior to adulthood (Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004).

A related measure of optimism is the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), which assesses explanatory style (Peterson et al., 1982). The ASQ asks respondents to explain what would happen if they were faced with a hypothetical negative event and why. These

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explanations define a person's explanatory style, which then predicts expectations about the future. An optimistic explanatory style is based on attributions for previous events whereas dispositional optimism is based on expectations about future events (Garber, 2000). Explanatory style and dispositional optimism are both important predictors of similar salutary effects, but dispositional optimism may be more useful when predicting overarching outcomes, while explanatory style may predict concrete outcomes (Peterson, 2000). Seligman has successfully demonstrated that it is possible to foster an optimistic explanatory style (Seligman et al., 1988) and it may also be possible to do so for dispositional optimism (Peterson, 2000). If we can determine the explanations for optimistic expectations, then it may be possible to change these explanations in a similar way.

Potential sources of dispositional optimism can be inferred from conceptually similar constructs such as self-mastery or self-esteem (Aspinwall & Richter, 1999; Scheier & Carver, 1985; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). Scheier and Carver (1985) suggested that one reason self-esteem is related to optimism is that some people "derive their sense of optimism from a history of successes in which they have demonstrated their own personal mastery over difficult situations" (p. 231). They also proposed that people might attribute their optimism to a belief in a higher power or to other external causes (Scheier & Carver, 1985). However, there is little research investigating the sources of this construct (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Notable exceptions include a study that considered antecedents within the family in which one grew up (Boyd, 1996). Family adaptability, the perception that one's childhood female caretaker was an optimist, and closely following religious beliefs predicted dispositional optimism whereas satisfaction with the functioning of the family of origin, family cohesion, and being the child of an alcoholic parent did not. A study that considered the genetic determinants of scores on the LOT found that the heritability of optimism and pessimism was approximately 25% (Plomin et al., 1992). Gillham and Reivich (2004) posit that positive expectations may, in part, "result from the individual's belief that he or she can control good outcomes. But positive expectations may also result from a general belief that good things will befall us" (p.147). Other authors suggest that it would be useful to expand upon the conceptual ideas related to optimism and pessimism to further explain the dispositional construct (Kubzansky, Kubzansy, & Maselko, 2004).

Optimism traditionally has been interpreted as a unidimensional, bipolar factor (Carver & Scheier, 2003). Individuals low in optimism are considered pessimistic; pessimism is not considered a separate dimension. An alternative conception is that people can be optimistic and pessimistic simultaneously (Benyamini, 2005; Bryant & Cvengros, 2004), implying two separate factors. The original LOT had two factors that corresponded to the direction of the wording of the items (Scheier & Carver, 1985) and some evidence for a bidimensional structure remained after the scale was revised (Scheier et al., 1994). Although some authors argue that using the scale to assess a unidimensional construct of optimism is justified, this is still debated (Benyamini, 2005; Bryant & Cvengros, 2004; Chang, Maydeu-Olivares, & D'Zurilla, 1997; Cheng & Hamid, 1997; Kubzansky et al., 2004; Lai, 1994; Marshall, Wortman, Kusulas, Hervig, & Vickers, 1992; Mook, Kleijn, & Van Der Ploeg, 1992; Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997; Roysamb & Strype, 2002; Sohl & Moyer, 2009; Vautier, Raufaste, & Cariou, 2003). Thus, it is of interest to account for why two factors are observed (Roysamb & Strype, 2002).

This study investigated how individuals explain their ratings when they respond to items from the LOT and the LOT-R. This was determined by open-ended responses to queries regarding reasons for their ratings on items on these instruments. These explanations were also intended to shed light on the extent to which the positively-worded versus negatively-worded items are approached differently. Additionally, the study examined whether

individuals whose level of optimism is based on different sources score differently on a measure of coping.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The participants were 113 undergraduates. The sample was 65% female and ranged in age from 18-44 years of age (M = 20.4). It was diverse with respect to ethnicity (48% White; 26% Asian; 11% African American; 10% Hispanic) and religious background (62% Christian; 20% Agnostic/Atheist/none; 11% Jewish; 3% Muslim; 3% Buddhist; 2% Hindu). Measures were completed at a desktop computer with MediaLab 2004 Research Software (Jarvis, 2004).

Measures

Dispositional Optimism—The Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985) and the Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier et al., 1994) were used to measure dispositional optimism. The internal consistencies were α = .65 and α = .57, respectively.

Coping—Coping style was assessed with the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). The internal consistencies for the 15 coping strategies were: positive reinterpretation and growth (α = .73); mental disengagement (α = .41); focus on and venting of emotions (α = .79); use of instrumental social support (α = .78); active coping (α = .65); denial (α = .76); religious coping (α = .94); humor (α = .92); behavioral disengagement (α = .75); restraint (α = .66); use of emotional social support (α = .89); substance use (α = .97); acceptance (α = .70); suppression of competing activities (α = .53); and planning (α = .80).

Explanations for responses to optimism items—After the measures were completed, each of the items from the LOT and the LOT-R reappeared individually on the computer screen prefaced by, “Please explain why you agreed/disagreed with the statement…” Participants typed open-ended responses directly into the computer.

The coding scheme for the open-ended responses was based on both a priori categories and categories that arose from the data. The a priori domains were suggested by prior literature and our own theorizing and included: (1) faith in, or lack of faith in, a benevolent, higher power (*faith in a higher power)*; (2) belief in fate, a just world, or an unfair world (*belief in fate or a just world)*; (3) one’s own good or poor luck or past experience (*personal fortune)*; (4) belief in the role of one’s own ability or inability to cope with adversity, or to be in control of future events (*belief in the role of one’s own ability)*; (5) reliance on idioms; (6) beliefs about the usefulness of thinking optimistically; and (7) matter-of-fact statements (which were responses that did not offer much explanation). A category that emerged from participants’ responses was (8) a feeling, intuition, or hope. Each of the coding categories was based on the type of reasoning exhibited, regardless of whether a statement presented an optimistic or pessimistic view. The open-ended responses were coded independently by two researchers with 93% agreement; any discrepancies in their judgments were resolved by discussion.

Statistical Analysis

To investigate the dimensionality of the LOT and the LOT-R, a principal-axis factor analysis with a varimax rotation was performed. Pearson’s correlations were then used to determine the extent to which each of the explanations for optimism was associated with the emergent factors and coping strategies.

Results

Two factors were extracted based on both inspection of the scree plot and on the two factors having Eigenvalues greater than 1 (the first four Eigenvalues in the principal components analysis were 3.20, 2.24, .71 and .55). In the principal-factors analysis, the first two unrotated factors accounted for 58% of the total variance for the LOT and 70% for the LOT-R. The factor loadings after a varimax rotation are presented in Table 1. The first factor consisted of all of the negatively-worded (but reverse-scored) items. Thus, this factor is referred to as the *low pessimism* subscale, because higher values represent higher scores on the items assessing optimism. The second factor consisted of all of the positively-worded items, which is referred to as the *optimism* subscale. The internal consistency was $\alpha = .89$ for the low pessimism subscale, and $\alpha = .77$ for the optimism subscale for the items making up the LOT. Because five of the items making up the LOT and the LOT-R overlap, the scales were highly correlated ($r = .95$), and yielded similar outcomes. Hereafter the report focuses on results obtained from the items making up the longer, original LOT.

Table 2 provides examples of participants' open-ended responses to queries about their answers to items on the LOT and the proportion of these responses. Noteworthy associations were the positive correlation between responses attributed by participants to *faith in a higher power* and the optimism subscale ($r = 0.29$, $p < .01$), and the positive correlation between responses attributed by participants to *belief in the role of one's own ability* and the low pessimism subscale ($r = 0.30$, $p < .01$). Use of *matter-of-fact statements* in the open-ended responses correlated negatively with both the optimism and the low pessimism subscales ($r = -0.31$, $p < .01$; $r = -0.21$, $p < .05$). Table 3 displays the pattern of correlations that emerged with subscales of the COPE.

Discussion

This study examined the LOT to better understand its underlying factor structure and to better understand individuals' reasoning behind having an optimistic disposition. To address the question of whether to use a one- versus a two-factor model when interpreting dispositional optimism, this study examined if any differences in reasoning emerged between the two factors. The data supported the presence of two factors, which were included separately in the analyses.

When participants were asked to recall what was brought to mind when they answered the self-report items in the LOT, eight distinct types of reasoning were revealed. Many of these were consistent with speculations about sources of optimism made by other authors, including a higher power, a just world, luck, and one's own ability to succeed (Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Grant & Higgins, 2003; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Participants also relied on idioms, referred to the usefulness of thinking optimistically, used matter-of-fact statements, or mentioned a feeling, intuition, or hope. These categories of explanations for ratings regarding dispositional optimism make it possible to begin to understand what type of thought processes lie behind optimism's two factors and its correlations with other constructs.

The domain *faith in a higher power* was significantly positively correlated with the optimism subscale and the positive reinterpretation and growth and the religious coping subscales of the COPE. Although only 3% of the responses fell into this category, the concurrence with measures that are conceptually related to this type of reasoning is compelling. One would expect that a person who is spiritually inclined might explain situations they foresee encountering as being part of a divine plan, for example, and therefore, see them as something to learn from. Similarly, *belief in a just world* was positively correlated with the

COPE subscales of positive reinterpretation and growth, restraint, acceptance, and planning, and was marginally correlated with religious coping. It makes sense that a person who believes in a just world would be more willing to be accepting, show restraint, and have faith that making plans would be worthwhile. *Personal fortune* was also correlated with religious coping and marginally significantly correlated with positive reinterpretation and growth. However, it was also positively related to coping by focusing on and venting emotions and negatively correlated with active coping. Although it is not clear why a person with this outlook would be more likely to vent emotions, the negative association with active coping is especially logical if a person attributes good outcomes to luck. The emergent category of *a feeling, intuition, or hope* seems to fit conceptually with the above three categories. It was marginally correlated with the restraint subscale of the cope.

The four domains just discussed, *faith in a higher power, belief in a just world, personal fortune*, and *a feeling, intuition, or hope* were associated with some common coping strategies. These responses are all related to attributing the expectation of positive outcomes to a force outside of oneself. The positively-worded items on the LOT appear to ask about expectations regarding extremely favorable outcomes. In responding to these items, people may bring to mind external, potentially benevolent, influences to explain why things would go especially well.

The only domain that was significantly related to being low on the pessimism subscale was *belief in one's own ability*. It is possible that the avoidance of unfavorable outcomes, as opposed to the occurrence of favorable outcomes, is attributed to one's own actions, as opposed to powerful external forces. A similar divergence between the promotion of positive outcomes and the prevention of negative outcomes is described by Grant and Higgins (2003) as *promotion pride* and *prevention pride*. Promotion and prevention pride, however, would both fall under the category *belief in one's own ability*, since they involve changing outcomes with one's own actions. Reasoning based on *belief in one's own ability* was also marginally negatively related to spirituality/religiousness, significantly negatively correlated with religious coping and behavioral disengagement, positively associated with active coping, and marginally positively correlated with planning. This pattern of correlations fits together nicely. A person who believes they are in control of future events by virtue of his or her own actions might not rely on religion, would not want to disengage from actively coping with situations, and would want to plan ways to achieve positive outcomes. Similarly, promotion and prevention pride were also associated with active coping (Grant & Higgins, 2003).

The category, *usefulness of thinking optimistically*, was negatively correlated with religious coping, as well. A person who believes that the way one chooses to reason can influence outcomes, may be less likely to use external forces to explain expectations. The domains *reliance on idioms* and using *matter-of-fact statements* may represent low levels of introspection or insight into one's own thinking and, accordingly, did not exhibit an apparently coherent type of reasoning or pattern in the results.

The correlations between the categories of explanations for dispositional optimism and the optimism and low pessimism subscales support an interpretation whereby the low pessimism factor is derived from internal motivations such as *belief in one's own ability*, or the *usefulness of thinking optimistically*, whereas the optimism factor is related to external explanations for positive expectancies such as *faith in a higher power, belief in fate, personal fortune*, and *a feeling or intuition*. There may be a balance in people's optimistic beliefs between having some faith that forces outside themselves operate, while still taking some control over a situation to make sure it turns out favorably.

Since different explanations for dispositional optimism lead to different coping strategies, these different explanations clearly demonstrate various sources of dispositional optimism. Therefore, knowing how a person explains his or her expectations for the future may give psychologists something more specific to change. Even if one person used multiple explanations, this would allow a more directed multimodal approach. For example, for people who base their expectations on the *belief in one's own ability*, it may be possible to create numerous situations where they learn skills to successfully complete a task. A new pattern of successes with new tools to achieve success may change people's beliefs that the future will work out well for them. Another example may be that for people who base their expectations on a *faith in a higher power*. Churches or programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous may create a feeling of optimism by this means. It is possible that some roots of optimism may be more malleable than others and that it may be more feasible to convince a person of the *usefulness of thinking optimistically* than to convince them that it is a *just world*. Regardless, knowing how people explain their optimism may be the first step in fostering this construct.

This study is limited partially by the restricted number and age range of the participants. There would be more power to determine subtle differences with a larger sample, and expanding this study to participants with a broader range of ages would make it possible to investigate how more life experience and maturity may influence how people explain their optimistic thinking (but see Isaacowitz, 2005). Additionally, although ethnicity was not related to any of the dimensions in this population, it may be interesting to explore if differences arise cross-culturally. For example, Lee and Seligman (1997) found cross-cultural differences in the Attributional Style Questionnaire. Since the LOT has begun to be applied cross-culturally (Cheng & Hamid, 1997; Lai, 1994; Roysamb & Strype, 2002; Vautier et al., 2003) it would be pertinent to explore whether a similar pattern would arise in terms of individuals' reasons for optimism.

Conclusion

Developing a more comprehensive notion of what the different types of reasoning are for dispositional optimism could have various implications. Distinct categories would make it possible to establish a measure of how people explain their optimism, and possibly lead to research aimed at fostering more optimistic outlooks.

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Table 1

Life Orientation Test and Life Orientation Test-Revised varimax-rotated factor loadings

Item Content	Optimism	Low Pessimism
Negatively-worded		
If something can go wrong for me, it will.	-0.08 (0.03)	0.75 (0.85)
I hardly ever expect things to go my way.	0.08 (0.03)	0.85 (0.90)
Things never work out the way I want them to.	0.01	0.88
I rarely count on good things happening to me.	-0.13 (0.05)	0.79 (0.85)
Positively-worded		
In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.	0.62 (0.77)	-0.11 (-0.19)
I always look on the bleft side of things.	0.81	0.06
I'm always optimistic about my future	0.76 (0.79)	0.00 (-0.06)
I'm a believer that "every cloud has a silver lining"	0.51	-0.16
Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.	(0.80)	(0.13)

Note. Factor loadings in parentheses ( ) are from the items making up the LOT-R

Table 2

Percent of open-ended responses classified in each distinct domain of reasoning

Category	Example	Percent of Responses
Faith in a higher power	"In uncertain times, God knows what to do for me, he will take care of me and even if I do not like what is happening, soon after I can usually see the positives, the lesson or God's plan unfolding for me."	3
Belief in fate or a just world	"Things usually go right in the end."	15
Personal fortune	"In the past things never went my way."	16
Belief in the role of one's own ability	"I feel that I have control over most situations that I am confronted with."	18
Reliance on idioms	"Life is what you make of it."	2
The usefulness of thinking optimistically	"Because having a positive attitude usually brings about positive results. Nothing good ever comes from being negative."	16
Matter-of-fact statements	"I am usually an optimistic person."	25
A feeling, intuition, or hope	"I hope for the best, more than expect it."	2

Table 3

Correlations between the distinct domains of reasoning and the COPE subscales

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Faith in a higher power	0.24*	-0.16†	-0.01	-0.01	0.14	-0.07	0.42**	-0.03
Belief in fate or a just world	0.23*	0.08	0.01	-0.06	0.11	-0.11	0.17†	-0.03
Personal fortune	-0.17†	-0.02	0.20*	0.02	-0.19*	0.03	0.29**	-0.14
Belief in the role of one's own ability	0.13	-0.07	-0.09	0.06	0.23*	-0.11	-0.22*	-0.01
Reliance on idioms	-0.12	-0.11	-0.09	0.05	-0.02	-0.04	-0.10	0.03
Usefulness of thinking optimistically	0.02	-0.05	-0.10	-0.02	0.05	-0.07	-0.27**	0.09
A feeling, intuition, or hope	0.04	-0.01	0.16†	-0.09	-0.03	0.09	0.17†	-0.04
Matter-or-fact statements	0.21*	0.11	0.01	0.01	-0.15	0.11	-0.11	0.01

	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Faith in a higher power	-0.10	0.05	0.09	-0.11	0.06	0.00	0.04
Belief in fate or a just world	-0.05	0.24*	0.02	-0.10	0.20*	-0.04	0.21*
Personal fortune	0.05	-0.11	-0.02	0.05	-0.04	-0.06	-0.07
Belief in the role of one's own ability	-0.23*	-0.09	0.06	-0.03	-0.11	0.01	0.16t
Reliance on idioms	0.01	-0.10	-0.02	-0.08	-0.08	-0.09	-0.07
Usefulness of thinking optimistically	-0.01	0.08	0.02	-0.05	0.00	-0.05	0.08
A feeling, intuition, or hope	-0.02	0.19*	0.00	-0.12	0.02	0.09	-0.10
Matter-or-fact statements	0.12	-0.07	-0.01	0.17	-0.04	0.07	-0.15

Note. 1 = Positive reinterpretation and growth; 2 = Mental disengagement; 3 = Focus on and venting emotions; 4 = Use of instrumental social support; 5 = Active coping; 6 = Denial; 7 = Religious Coping; 8 = Humor; 9 = Behavioral Disengagement; 10 = Restraint 11 = Use of emotional support; 12 = Substance use; 13 = Acceptance; 14 = Suppression of competing activities; 15 = Planning.

† $p < .10$,

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$