



16 Apr 1992

A Pessimistic Look at Optimism

Maureen Sidio

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsmine.mst.edu/oure>

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sidio, Maureen, "A Pessimistic Look at Optimism" (1992). *Opportunities for Undergraduate Research Experience Program (OURE)*. 72.
<https://scholarsmine.mst.edu/oure/72>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars' Mine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Opportunities for Undergraduate Research Experience Program (OURE) by an authorized administrator of Scholars' Mine. This work is protected by U. S. Copyright Law. Unauthorized use including reproduction for redistribution requires the permission of the copyright holder. For more information, please contact scholarsmine@mst.edu.

A PESSIMISTIC LOOK AT OPTIMISM

Maureen Sidio

Catherine A. Riordan

Department of Psychology

University of Missouri - Rolla

ABSTRACT

The personality construct of optimism has been shown to be related to important outcome measures like depression, physical health and achievement. Several recent studies have questioned the psychometric uniqueness of the concept of optimism and its relationship to neuroticism. This study examined this relationship and found that the measures of optimism were as highly correlated with neuroticism as they were with each other. Results are discussed in the context of optimism being a subordinate construct in the multifaceted construct of neuroticism.

INTRODUCTION

Optimism is defined as a personality construct wherewith individuals have generally positive expectations about the future and are more likely to persist in their effort to achieve their goals (Smith, Pope, Rhodewalt & Poulton, 1989). When faced with stressful situations optimists' perceive them as a challenge and are motivated to investigate every avenue they can in an attempt to solve or actively cope with the problem. Research has established that individuals with a more positive outlook on life are more likely to succeed and are better adjusted than those with a negative outlook (Seligman, 1991). Additionally, it has been suggested that the more effective coping of optimists, the feeling of being in control of ones own destiny is responsible for alleviating the negative effects of stress on an individual's physical and emotional health (Scheier & Carver, 1987).

The personality construct of optimism also has been shown to be related to important outcome measures like depression, physical health and achievement (Seligman, 1991). Recently however, it has been suggested that it is neuroticism rather than optimism that is the predictive personality construct (Smith et. al., 1989), and that findings with respect to optimism merely reflect the more pervasive personality dimension of neuroticism.

Neuroticism is defined as a broad stable dimension of personality consisting of chronic negative emotions including sadness, anxiety, guilt and anger, as well as associated cognitive and behavioral characteristics such as low self-esteem, preoccupation and insecurity (Smith et. al., 1989). Neuroticism often results in depression, decline in physical health and low levels of achievement despite intellectual capability.

Another important construct that correlates with optimism and neuroticism is attributional style or the way we explain events in our lives. The helplessness theory of depression (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) holds that the way in which people explain events in their lives has an important impact on the extent and duration of depression. Specifically, people who attribute bad events to internal, stable and global causes are believed to be more susceptible to depression. These individuals would also be expected to be less optimistic about the future as a result of having an attributional style where they attribute bad events to internal and enduring causes.

In sum, this study reexamined the possibility suggested by Smith et al. that optimism is merely a special case of neuroticism. Secondly, it examined the relationship of optimism to attributions which should serve as basis for optimism and neuroticism according to the predominant personality theories.

METHOD

One hundred eighty-one students participated in partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology research requirement. In group sessions of 8 to 10, subjects completed the questionnaires.

Optimism was measured using the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985) and the Personal Ladder (PL; Cantril, 1963). Neuroticism was measured using the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (TMAS; Taylor, Carver, 1985) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, 1967). Attributional Style was measured using the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel & VonBaeyer, 1979).

RESULTS

In Table I, the correlations of the two measures of optimism and two measures of neuroticism can be seen. The LOT and PL were as highly correlated with neuroticism as they were with each other providing some support for Smith et al.'s argument that optimism, as measured by the LOT, is not empirically distinct from neuroticism.

TABLE I
CORRELATIONS OF MEASURES OF OPTIMISM AND NEUROTICISM

OPTIMISM	LOT	PL	BDI
Life Orientation Test (LOT)			
Personal Ladder (PL)	.39**		
NEUROTICISM			
Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)	-.38**	-.36**	
Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (TMAS)	-.46**	-.35**	.62**

Table II shows the correlations of the optimism measures with attributions which serve as the basis for optimism. Only the LOT was significantly related to a hopeful attributional pattern, and that was only weakly correlated.

TABLE II
CORRELATIONS OF OPTIMISM AND NEUROTICISM WITH
HOPEFUL AND HOPELESS ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLES

OPTIMISM	Attributional Style	
	Hopeful	Hopeless
Life Orientation Test	.16*	.04
Personal Ladder	.08	.12
NEUROTICISM		
Beck Depression Inventory	-.09	.05
Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale	-.06	.12

DISCUSSION

The correlational pattern observed in this study was similar to that obtained by Smith et al. (1989) even though the personality measures used were not the same and correlations not as high: The two optimism measures were more highly correlated with each other than they were with the measures of neuroticism. Thus, these results too call into question the uniqueness of the concept of optimism as measured by the LOT and PL. There was little evidence to refute the argument that measures of optimism are confounded with measures of neuroticism.

Carver (1989) pointed out that in personality research, what looks like confounding could be two concepts, are facets of a larger, multi-faceted construct. Optimism being a subordinate construct in the multi-faceted concept of neuroticism would be consistent with the results of this study and those obtained by Smith et al.

The fact that attributional style was associated with optimism as measured by the LOT, but not with either measure of neuroticism, suggests that optimism may be an important concept, apart from its role in neuroticism, in understanding the attributional style which may precipitate neuroticism and chronic negative affective states. On a theoretical level, the hopeful and hopeless attributional style should lead to both optimism and neuroticism. However, optimism, because of its similarity to those specific attributions may be a more sensitive measure of the cognitions that foster neuroticism.

It is quite possible that optimism, measured independently, might be a better predictor of outcome measures more directly based on expectancies (e.g. motivation) than neuroticism as a global concept. In fact, only looking at neuroticism and ignoring the optimism component could result in a loss of important information. Thus, it would seem justifiable--both empirically and theoretically--to choose to focus on optimism in some instances and neuroticism in others (see Carver, 1989 for a discussion of these issues).

A cautionary note should be offered concerning the convergent validity of the two optimism measures. The Personal Ladder may not provide the strongest test of convergent validity for the Life Orientation Test because the scales are very different. The LOT has a standard Likert-type format. The PL asks subjects to pick a place on the ladder that best reflects how positively they feel about their lives in the past, now, and in the future.¹ Thus, a much more global judgement is made by subjects than the very specific items (e.g., "If something can go wrong, it will") on the

¹All these judgements are significantly correlated with each other (p 's < .25-.66) and with neuroticism (p 's < .19-.41).

LOT. Moreover, it is possible the PL may be less reliable due to greater influence of recent events on these broad judgements. Thus, in future examinations of the convergent validity of the LOT, it would be advisable to use other measures of optimism that should move method variance.

Future research might extend the methodological approach used in this study by looking at the relationship of optimism and neuroticism to the many outcome measures that have been shown to be related to optimism. If treatment interventions are to be effective, knowing the underlying dimension one is trying to affect would be important. Focusing on optimism rather than the broader concept of neuroticism may lead to treatments that are not as effective as they could be. Similarly, using only neuroticism may lead to loss of important information that could be useful in understanding the attributions which lead to neuroticism.

REFERENCES

- Abramson, L.Y., Seligman, M.E.P., & Teasdale, J.D. (1978). Learned helplessness in humans: Critique and reformulation. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 87, 49-74.
- Beck, A.T. (1967). *Depression: Clinical, experimental and theoretical aspects*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cantril, H. (1963). A study of aspirations. *Scientific American*, 208, 41-45.
- Scheier, M.F. & Carver, C.S. (1987). Dispositional optimism and physical well-being: The influence of generalized outcome expectancies on health. *Journal of Personality*, 55, 169-210.
- Seligman M.E.P. (1991). *Learned Optimism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Seligman M.E.P., Abramson L.Y., Semmel A., & VonBaeyer C. (1979). Depressional attributional style. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 88(3), 242-247.
- Smith T.W., Pope M.K., Rhodewalt F., & Poulton J.L. (1989). Optimism, neuroticism, coping and symptoms report: An alternative interpretation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*. 56, 640-648.
- Taylor J.A., (1953). A personality scale of manifest anxiety. *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology*, 48, 285-290.