



Optimistic Behavior Related to Depression, Age, and Gender

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INTRODUCTION

Research has indicated that optimists see the world as a positive place. According to Isaacowitz (2005), optimistic individuals tended to be happier, were less likely to become depressed, and appeared to cope well in stressful situations. Granted that optimism and pessimism are two extreme degrees and are independent dimensions, some people tend to fall in the middle and have a little bit of both (Caprara & Steca, 2005). Optimism leads to more success because it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Caprara and Steca (2005) found that increased optimism led to good health, job success, and good interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, there are advantages and disadvantages of both pessimism and optimism. Pessimists have one advantage; they are able to see reality accurately. According to Chang and Sanna (2001), pessimism would be used as a way to harness negative effects in order to help oneself foster motivation. Another advantage of pessimism, according to Kivimaki et al. (2005), is that pessimists have the opportunity to be optimists. They can learn to change and to see certain situations as temporary and not take blame for them. The disadvantage of pessimism is that it is one of the leading causes of depression as well as health concern. Higher optimism was related to smaller increases of stress and depressive symptoms after major life events. Furthermore, studies have found that as people have higher levels of optimism, they have lower levels of depression. Within this study we will also see a relationship between optimism and age. Optimism has been found to have a positive relationship with age. Moreover, another relationship optimistic studies have found reliable scores in gender. In essence, optimism has been found to be more in women than in men.

Hypotheses

- Participants reporting higher levels of optimism will report lower levels of depression.
- Female participants will report higher levels of optimism than male participants.
- There is a positive relationship between age and level of optimism.

METHOD

Participants

A nonrandom sample of 130 participants was used for this study. The participants were made up of 28% men and 72% women with a mean age of 23.1 years of age. The ethnic makeup of the participants was 38% Latino/Hispanic, 40% Euro-American/White, 9% African-American/Black, 7% Biracial/multiracial, 2% Asian, 6% other, and 1% who declined to state their ethnicity.

Materials and Measures

This is a cross-sectional survey design, used to examine how demographic variables influence levels of optimism and how optimism influences depression. The 3-page survey asked participants to respond to a) demographic questions, b) statements that measured their level of optimism, and c) statements that estimate the degree of depression.

Independent variables. The independent variables for this study are gender and age. The respondents were asked to indicate their gender (male or female), and their age in years.

Dependent variables. The Life Orientation Test (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) is designed to measure optimism level. The participants were asked to respond to 10 statements assessing the participants propensity to explain life events (past, present, and future) either optimistically or pessimistically using a 5-point, Likert scale (1 = *I agree a lot* to 5 = *I disagree a lot*). Sample statements include "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best" and "I'm always optimistic about my future." This is a cumulative score where high scores reflect higher reported levels of optimism. Items 1, 4, and 10 are reversed

The Self-Rating Depression Scale (Zung, 1965) is designed to assess symptoms of depression. Participants were asked to respond to 20 statements reflecting their personal feelings using a 4 – point, continuous scale (1 = *some or little of the time* to 4 = *most or all of the time*). Sample statements include "I feel down-hearted, blue, and sad" and "I get tired for no reason." This is a cumulative matrix score where higher scores reflect higher levels of depression. Items 2, 5, 6, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, and 20 are reversed.

Procedure

The surveys were administered to a number of students during the beginning of class. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that all responses would remain confidential. Also, they were provided with short debriefing explaining the research project. To indicate agreement to participate, the attached consent form was signed and detached from the survey. Once completed, the surveys were returned to the researcher.

RESULTS

It was hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between levels of optimism with levels of depression (Table 1). A Pearson *r* correlation was performed and as expected, there is a negative correlation between optimism ($M = 21.18, SD = 4.42$) and levels of depression ($M = 36.98, SD = 8.05$), $r(130) = -.60, p < .01$. These results indicate that individual's with higher levels of optimism will have lower levels of depression.

A *t*-test for independent samples was performed to examine the differences in levels of optimism between men and women (Table 2). Contrary to prediction, women did not report higher levels of optimism ($M = 21.09, SD = 4.33$) when compared to men ($M = 21.41, SD = 4.68, t(128) = .38, p = .71$).

It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between age with levels of optimism (Table 3). A Pearson *r* correlation was performed and as expected, there is a positive, moderate correlation between age ($M = 23.09, SD = 6.98$) and levels of optimism ($M = 21.18, SD = 4.42$), $r(130) = 0.25, p < 0.01$. These results indicate that as you get older, your level of optimism increases.

DISCUSSION

Results did support the hypothesis that people who exhibit higher levels of optimism will also report lower levels of depression. The results of the study showed that higher levels of optimistic style resulted in lower levels of depression. The hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between age and level of optimism was also supported. It was found that as people age, positive thinking seemingly prevails and individuals become more stable and grow increasingly interested in maintaining their well-being. Conversely, results did not support the hypothesis that women report higher levels of optimism than do men. Women did not report significantly more positive emotions than did their male counterparts. The reason for this hypothesis was because there was not an equal distribution between males and females. The nonsignificance of this hypothesis may possibly be explained by the uneven gender representation. The current study may have also been considered a limitation. The SDS (Zung, 1965) was primarily intended to measure clinically significant levels of depression as opposed to general and/or short term depressive symptomology.

Table 1
Correlations for levels of optimism with Depression and Age

Depression	-0.60*
Age	0.25*

n = 130; * p ≤ .01

Table 2
Means and standard deviations on levels of optimism for men and women

	Male (n = 37)		Female (n = 93)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Level of Optimism	21.41	4.68	21.09	4.33