

Emerging Positive Psychology: A Study on Optimism, Life Satisfaction and Counselling Process

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ABSTRACT

Positive Psychology is one of the newer fields to emerge in the realm of psychology. Two of its major components: Optimism and Life Satisfaction are redefining perspectives on psychological science and counselling today. Optimism can be understood as a stable tendency to believe that good rather than bad things will happen in the future. Optimistic individuals tend to have positive presumptions about people and situations in life which influences individual's actions and thus with growing life experiences, such individuals lead a more happy, fulfilling and satisfying life. Life satisfaction can be defined as an individually-oriented way of reporting their well-being or welfare through a series of life episodes. The current study aimed to study a relationship between optimism and life satisfaction and to see if any gender differences exist. For this study, a sample of 168 young adults aged between 18-25 years were selected via purposive sampling method. The questionnaires administered to these participants were the Life Orientation Test (R) and Satisfaction with Life Scale. A Pearson Correlational design was used to compute the results. The results of the study revealed a significant correlation between Optimism and Life Satisfaction indicating that the ability to have a positive outlook towards the future can induce positive thoughts leading to actions and finally a positive, happy and satisfied life. In addition, the gender difference revealed a significant difference between males and females with males being more satisfied as compared to females. The study may aid in counselling processes by helping counsellors predict client behaviours, plan assignments based on optimistic predispositions and help clients develop these competencies to lead a happier life.

Keywords: Optimism, Life Satisfaction, Counselling, Counselling Process

Optimism

The field of positive psychology has two major objectives - to give rise to optimism and resilience in humans in order to have better functioning lives. Optimism has been a topic of wide research in the past few years. Two dominant views of optimism are presented by Seligman (1978) and by Scheier and Carver (1985). Seligman's view on optimism is known as 'Learned optimism' which explains that an optimist uses causal attributions to explain and evaluate negative life episodes. Thus, this view holds that the optimist makes external, variable and specific attributes for negative life episodes such as death of a loved one as contrary to internal, global

and stable attributions made by a pessimist thinker. The optimist explanations involve blaming role of others around oneself in producing bad outcomes, perceiving more positive outcomes happening in future and restricting the unfavourable outcome to only a particular domain. So, theory places a significant attention on attributing underlying cause to negative life events and thus, this theory uses excuse-like processes of distancing from the negative things.

Research indicates that learned optimism helps in predicting higher academic records (Peterson & Barret, 1987), superior sport abilities (Nolen-Hoeksema, *et al.* 1990), productive working ability

(Seligman & Schulman, 1986), higher satisfaction in romantic relationships and friendships (Fincham, 2000), more effective coping ability with life problems, predisposition to depression and better physical health and well-being (Peterson, 2000).

Michael Scheier and Charles Carver (1985) defined optimism as “tendency to believe that good rather than bad things will happen in the future”. The dominant assumption was that when a goal is of value to an individual, then an individual will produce an expectancy about attaining it. An emphasis was placed on the role of self efficacy beliefs in which a person holds favourable expectations of success for reasons such ability, luck or situation.

Therefore, these expectancies involve thoughts about being able to move toward desirable goals or to move away from not so desirable ones.

Childhood Antecedents of Optimism

Carver and Scheier implied in their version of optimism that it grows due to varied initial childhood events that fosters trust and secure attachments to caregivers (Bowlby, 1988).

1. Optimists have a more a problem-focused approach while coping with stressful situations as compared to pessimists.
2. Optimists are more organised than pessimists (Manstead and Wagner, 1993).
3. Optimists appraise everyday hassles in terms of potential for self growth and development.
4. In circumstances where no solution is obtainable, optimists accept situations while pessimists fully deny their issues making them even more problematic.

Optimists perform better than pessimists in the mentioned domains:

1. Going to college or University (Aspinwal, 1992).
2. Job Performance (Long, 1993).
3. Caring for patients suffering from life threatening diseases (Given *et al.* 1993)
4. Undergoing coronary bypass surgeries and bone marrow transplants among many other surgeries (Fitzgerald, 1993).
5. Coping in general (Solberg, 2006).

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is an individually-oriented way of reporting their well-being or welfare. Life satisfaction therefore, is subjective in nature. In questionnaires or surveys pertaining to the life satisfaction, individuals are asked to report their degree of satisfaction with their life in totality rather than taking into account the components that take into account the standard of living. In other words life satisfaction is a measure as to how positively an individual evaluates his or her life in overall.

Pettegrew and Wolf (2007) defined life satisfaction as a “global measure to one’s own well being surrounding his or her life in general”. Common definition of life satisfaction is “a cognitive process by which an individual assesses his/her progress towards desired goal” (c.f George & Bearnon 1980; Zautra & Hempel 1984). As stated above life satisfaction basically constitutes a feeling of overall sense of well being in response to various domains such as interpersonal relationships, mood, self concept etc. Life satisfaction is also regarded as a positive attitude and is an important aspect for study among young, adults and older generations. Certain variables affecting life satisfaction are age, health, socio-economic status, job opportunities, marital status etc. These variables are related to one another. Less or no satisfaction in one area can affect the other.

Importance of Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction might aid in the success of achieving other important goals. People who are satisfied tend to be happier and therefore are more positive and open minded in their thinking. Such individuals also use divergent thinking patterns with enhanced creativity. On the contrary individuals who are less satisfied or dissatisfied tend to exhibit narrow thinking and tend to think more negatively. Being satisfied tends to improve our ability to survive and adapt to the environmental stimuli. Dissatisfied individuals have rigid thinking patterns and are more prone to stress and anxiety.

Causal determinants of Life Satisfaction

A number of common causal themes can be identified across the life satisfaction evidence. These include:

- (a) **Social relationships:** It is believed by most of the researchers that interpersonal relationships which are social in nature. Hence, friendships and marriage courtship are important in this way. These variables also help to mediate the effects of other variables such as personality differences, unemployment and here, life satisfaction.
- (b) **Stress:** Stressful situations particularly distress as compared to eustress, impact our mental health negatively. Certain kinds of positive situations such as marriage or arranging a party might be stressful but they may not have a long lasting negative impact on our mental health.
- (c) **A sense of personal control:** having a sense of control provides us with a stability reference point in life and hence, one is able to function in a better way thereby, leading to life satisfaction.
- (c) **Aspirations and values:** It has been recognized that humans have certain need and their fulfillment leads to satisfaction. For example, it has been argued that people brought up in conditions of poverty place a higher value on material acquisition, while those brought up in conditions of plenty place grater emphasis on non-material factors such as freedom of speech. This implies that the factors that determine satisfaction will vary between people and this may help to explain their uneven impact across groups and countries.
- (d) **Adaptation:** Psychologists have highlighted the importance of 'hedonic adaptation'- that people get used to a given level of comfort. Therefore when comfort is experienced satisfaction results.

However, most of these are just certain factors affecting life satisfaction. Therefore one cannot claim as to whether these are the only one affecting it. There are and can be vast multitude of factors which can impact the life satisfaction

METHOD

Rationale

Optimism and Life Satisfaction are some of the widely researched topics under the field of Positive

Psychology. This study aims to understand the optimism and life satisfaction in young adults and if any gender differences exist. Previous studies depict a positive relationship between the two variables with mixed results about gender differences. The current study might provide insights as to how in a period of rapid technology with increased stress and more demands is affecting the optimism and life satisfaction of young adults. The study also aims to understand the gender differences between males and females. Finally, the studies are quite less within the Indian context.

Objectives

1. To study if there is a significant relationship between Optimism in relation to Life Satisfaction.
2. To study if there is a significant difference in Males and Females in relation to Scores on Optimism.
3. To study if there is a significant difference in Males and Females in relation to Life Satisfaction.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant relationship between scores on Optimism in relation to scores on Life Satisfaction.
2. There will be a significant difference in Males and Females in relation to scores on Optimism.
3. There will be a significant difference in Males and Females in relation to Life Satisfaction.

Sample

In data collection, the sample size was 84 educated English proficient males and females aged from 18 to 25 years were obtained. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling.

Design

The design of the study was a Correlationall Design where the relationship between Optimism and Life Satisfaction was determined.

Variables

For hypothesis 1: The Independent Variable is the scores on Optimism whose effect was studied on the

effect of Dependent Variable i.e. Life Satisfaction. The Control Variables were Age (18-25), Language Proficiency and individuals situated in Delhi NCR Region.

For Hypothesis 2: The Independent Variable is the Gender whose effect was studied on the effect of Dependent Variable i.e. Optimism. The Control Variables were Age (18-25), Language Proficiency and individuals situated in Delhi NCR Region.

For Hypothesis 3: The Independent Variable is the Gender whose effect was studied on the effect of Dependent Variable i.e. Life Satisfaction. The Control Variables were Age (18-25), Language Proficiency and individuals situated in Delhi NCR Region.

Tools Used

Life Orientation Test: Developed by Scheier and colleagues (1994), the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) is a 10-item scale that measures how optimistic or pessimistic people feel about the future. Test retest reliability of the test is good at ICC=.72. Criterion validity is strong as the test is negatively correlated with depression at $r = .60$ and Hopelessness at $r = .65$. For every item there was a 5 point Likert scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Satisfaction with Life Scale: The SWLS (developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985) is a short 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one’s life. The reliability of the Scale using Cronbach’s Alpha Index is .84. SWLS shows good concurrent validity with LSI with $r = .77$. Internal consistency was adequate at baseline ($\alpha = .69$) and follow-up ($\alpha = .72$). Subjects used 7 point likert scale to show their views (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Procedure

For the purpose of the study, an online questionnaire (google form) was created. The questionnaire included demographic details to be filled by each of the participants in the beginning, followed by LOT(R) and SWLS. It was then send to the participants to be filled.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Table indicating Correlation between Optimism and Life Satisfaction of Young Adults

		Optimism	SWLS
Optimism	Pearson Correlation	1	.696**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	84	84
SWLS	Pearson Correlation	.696**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	84	84

***.p < 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Table 2.1: Table indicating Group Statistics of Males and Females for Optimism

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Optimism	Male	32	20.16	4.081	.721
	Female	52	14.33	2.655	.368

Table 2.2: Table indicating Independent Samples Test for Males and Females for Optimism

t-test for Equality of means					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Optimism	7.94	82	.000***	5.82	.734

Note: **p < 0.001.*

Table 3.1: Table indicating Group Statistics of Males and Females for Life Satisfaction

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SWLS	Male	32	26.88	4.723	.835
	Female	52	19.52	5.308	.736

Table 3.2: Table indicating Independent Samples Test for Males and Females for Life Satisfaction

t-test for Equality of means					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference
SWLS	6.42	82	.000***	7.35	1.14

Note: **p < 0.001*

The aim of this study was to understand the relationship between optimism and life satisfaction

and determine gender differences (if any) among young adults. For this purpose data was collected from 168 individuals aged 18-25 with 84 males and 84 females. The questionnaires employed in this study were LOT-R by Scheier and Carver (1992) and Satisfaction with Life Scale by Diener (1991). After the collection of data and its scoring, it was analysed into SPSS. The findings are discussed below.

Optimism can be understood as the common tendency to believe that one would experience more good versus bad outcomes in one's lifetime. Life satisfaction can be explained as the extent to which an individual positively evaluates the overall quality of his/her life as a whole entity. In other words, how much the person likes the life he/she is leading.

The first hypothesis of this study stated that "There will be a significant relationship between scores on Optimism in relation to scores on Life Satisfaction. To find results for the first hypothesis, a Correlational analysis was used. The results indicated that the ($r(82) = .696, p = .000$). As can be seen in Table 1, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in scores for Optimism and Life Satisfaction at 0.001 level of significance. For positive living, optimism about the future is an important sign of life. It is positively linked to different features of life for example pleasure, physical health, satisfaction in education and life and negatively connected to sadness and worry which is consistent to the previous research. The ability to have a positive outlook towards the future can induce positive though leading to actions and finally a positive, happy and satisfied life.

The results of this research are consistent to a study conducted by Baily and Synder (2008) as in this research life satisfaction was found to be completely connected to hope and optimism. So, the variables hope and optimism affect on person's life that these variables forced the to think about his/her better future. When a person is hopeful, optimistic and prefers to think about good things; then obviously he/she direct to good words in front of others about his/her life.

This can be supported by a research conducted by Leung *et al.* (2005) who developed a dispositional path model of life satisfaction for community dwelling Chinese elderly living in Hong Kong and found that life satisfaction was predicted by self-

esteem and relationship harmony which, in turn, were predicted by independent and interdependent optimistic nature. So, optimism predicted life satisfaction directly and indirectly through self-esteem and relationship harmony.

The second hypothesis of this study stated that "There will be a significant difference between males and females with respect to optimism." As can be seen in Table 2.1 the results indicate that a total of 52 females and 32 males fell in our test sample and their gender difference on Optimism has been compared. The Mean Score of the female group on the scale = 14.33 and the Mean Score of the male group on the scale = 20.16. The results indicated were ($t(82) = 7.94, p = .000$) which was statistically significant at 0.001 level of significance.

The results showing females are less optimistic which can be attributed to the social situations of females in the Indian context. Since our sample consisted predominantly of individuals who are either holding a job or will so, soon in the future, lower optimism in females can be related to pessimism about the future of work. Higher levels of authority correlate with higher levels of optimism. Men are significantly more likely to hold leadership positions as compared to women. Many previous researches indicate that women have lower self esteem compared to men and make more internal evaluations for failures. These lead to a decreased perception of one's ability and optimistic beliefs about future successes. At the home front, a number of females face additional challenges of taking care of food for the family, cleaning and looking after other house duties. This can bring additional frustration as from the early ages most male members aren't introduced to the same challenges.

This can be supported by a research conducted by Unuvar (2012) who did a study on evaluation of optimism and life satisfaction in undergraduate students of tourism and hotel management in Turkey. The findings indicated that the students were moderate on life satisfaction and high on optimism. Males were more satisfied and optimistic as compared to females. The results also indicated that there is a positive correlation between optimism and life satisfaction.

The third hypothesis of this study stated that "There will be a significant difference between males and

females with respect to life satisfaction." As can be seen in table 3 indicating the group statistics the mean difference between males and females is 7.36 points.

However, to determine whether these differences are statistically significant or not, an Independent Samples t-test was conducted in SPSS. As can be seen from the table, the difference is significant at the 0.001 level of significance with males have higher life satisfaction as compared to females. The results indicated ($t(82) = 6.42, p = .000$).

There are various reasons that can be attributed to the above finding. One factor that significantly contributes to this finding is the social conditioning process. In other words, the conditioning of males and females is different within the social world. Emphasizing upon the collectivistic culture of India and stressing upon the dimension of 'Masculinity vs Femininity', Indian society is predominantly male dominated which signifies that the gender roles are clearly distinct. While males are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, females are supposed to be more modest, tender, etc. In such a culture, men are supposed to be the bread earner of the family while women are supposed to take care of the households. However, with changing times wherein men and women are being placed on the same pedestal, women might suffer from extra stress due to increased responsibilities.

Though nowadays, gender equality is emphasized but the situation is still in a state of emergence rather than existent. Therefore, moreover, females are operating with dual roles that is both taking care of the house and working or studying in their respective organisations.

Both the domains are demanding in their own ways which puts on an extra baggage on females. In addition daily functioning of females is marked with a lot of difficulties such as leaving and coming home on time, wearing socially appropriate clothes etc. Also looking at the freedom and high opportunities and preference of the other gender may inculcate a sense of inferiority within females. All these factors might integrate and lead to the overall less satisfaction of females. This is contrary to the various researches done earlier.

Implications in Counselling

1. Studying Optimistic expectations about the future, and its relation to Life Satisfaction can help us predict behaviour in a counselling set up. By understanding the relationship and nature of optimism with satisfaction with life the counsellor can gain a more comprehensive understanding of clients and their behaviours in the course of counselling. As the study supports, individuals who are more optimistic are more satisfied with life. The same understanding can dictate future events as the optimistic client takes more initiatives/risks in the future and be more competent to deal with stressful events during the counselling than the pessimistic client.
2. Individuals who are more Optimistic about the future tend to be individuals who are more satisfied with life, as the research supports. This can be helpful to have insights and plan assignments for patients by counsellors. The understanding gained by this study can help plan well suited approaches for clients all over the optimism-pessimism spectrum. An optimistic client may easily undergo therapy and do it at a better pace, which the pessimistic client may need more follow ups for motivation. The satisfaction with therapy may also vary.
3. Individuals can also be taught to develop optimistic competencies during counselling sessions, in order to live more happy, satisfied and fulfilling lives. Clients optimistic beliefs can be boosted by introducing step by step ladder to get over the past, being thankful for what one has, positive change in environment, positive affirmations, watching one's language, etc. By introducing these techniques in counselling, a more optimistic outlook can be achieved which will be beneficial for therapy.

Limitations

1. The findings cannot be generalized due to the small size of the sample.
2. The effect of social desirability cannot be ruled out.

3. Since, this was an online questionnaire, the chance of fake responses or response style cannot be ruled out.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to understand the relationship between optimism and life satisfaction. For this purpose a sample of 168 individuals (84 males and 84 females) was selected through purposive sampling. The Life Orientation test and Satisfaction With Life Scale were the tools used for the above study. Finally the results indicated that there is a significant relationship between optimism and Life Satisfaction. In addition there was a significant difference between males and females with regard to optimism and life satisfaction.

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