



Optimism and the Big Five factors of personality: Beyond Neuroticism and Extraversion

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the Big Five factors of personality and dispositional optimism. Data from five samples were collected (Total $N = 4332$) using three different measures of optimism and five different measures of the Big Five. Results indicated strong positive relationships between optimism and four of the Big Five factors: Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Agreeableness and Conscientiousness explained additional variance in dispositional optimism over and above Neuroticism and Extraversion, providing evidence for the complexity of optimism. The position of optimism in the larger web of human personality constructs is discussed.

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1. Introduction

As interest in positive psychology has grown in recent years (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), the construct of optimism has received an increased amount of research attention (Peterson, 2000). Optimism is typically defined in terms of positive expectations about future events. For research purposes, optimism is often viewed as a bipolar individual difference variable ranging from pessimistic at the low end to optimistic at the high end, although some have argued that optimism and pessimism are relatively independent (Herzberg, Glaesmer, & Hoyer, 2006; Marshall, Wortman, Kusulas, Hervig, & Vickers, 1992; Zuckerman, 2003). Various approaches to operationalizing optimism have been put forth, including dispositional optimism (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Scheier & Carver, 1985; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994), explanatory style (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Seligman, 1991), and hope (Snyder, 1994). Research has demonstrated that optimists are psychologically well-adjusted and satisfied with life, engage in adaptive behaviors, and tend to have better physical health (Rasmussen, Scheier, & Greenhouse, 2009; Scheier & Carver, 1992; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001).

While the outcomes of optimism have been studied quite extensively, the position of optimism in the larger web of human personality constructs is less well understood (Peterson, 2000). Along these lines, investigators have called for more research aimed at understanding the relationship between optimism and other well-established personality constructs (Boland & Cappeliez, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 2003; Marshall, Wortman, Vickers, Kusulas, & Hervig, 1994; Milligan, 2003). The Big Five model of personality has steadily emerged over the past twenty-five years as a comprehensive taxonomy of individual differences in human personality (John & Srivastava, 1999; Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997), and thus provides a standard framework within which many other specific personality constructs can be better understood. The Big Five model is an empirically-derived, "lexical" model of personality consisting of the following five major factors identified through analysis of adjectives from the English language: (1) Extraversion/Positive Emotionality, (2) Agreeableness, (3) Conscientiousness, (4) Emotional Stability versus Neuroticism, and (5) Openness/Intellect. The optimism construct has most often been linked to low Neuroticism and high Extraversion/Positive Emotionality (Boland & Cappeliez, 1997; Marshall et al., 1992; Williams, 1992). Much of the research in this area has focused on whether or not optimism-pessimism adds anything over and above Neuroticism to the prediction of relevant mental and physical health outcomes (Scheier et al., 1994, 1999; Smith, Pope, Rhodewalt, & Poulton, 1989).

Although the majority of research concerning relationships between optimism and the Big Five factors has centered on Neuroticism and Extraversion, some investigators have found sig-

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nificant correlations between optimism and other major factors. In a study with undergraduate students conducted by Milligan (2003), four different measures of optimism had modest positive correlations with Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness as measured by the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992), and strong negative relationships with Neuroticism. Marshall et al. (1994) and Ebert, Tucker, and Roth (2002) obtained similar results using the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985) and the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al., 1994). In a study with undergraduates who took the Adolescent Personal Style Inventory, Lounsbury, Saudargas, and Gibson (2004) found modest positive correlations with Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, and a strong positive correlation with Emotional Stability. Segerstrom, Castañeda, and Spencer (2003) assessed optimism using the LOT-R and a measure of academic optimism and, in addition to the typical significant relationships with Neuroticism and Extraversion, obtained strong positive correlations with Conscientiousness as measured by the NEO-PI-R.

Of the studies mentioned above, only Milligan (2003) set out explicitly to examine the relationship between optimism and the Big Five model of personality. Because research has demonstrated that optimism results in a number of positive physical, psychological, and behavioral outcomes, it is critical to gain a deeper understanding of its relationship with basic factors of personality, and perhaps gain insight into potential antecedents of optimism. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to conduct a more thorough investigation of the relationship between the Big Five factors of personality and the construct of optimism by examining a number of various Big Five and optimism measures across multiple samples. Given the well-established relationship between optimism and both Neuroticism and Extraversion, emphasis was placed on examining the added effects of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness in the prediction of optimism. Optimism was operationalized in the present study as a bipolar, dispositional construct. Data from five different samples were examined involving multiple measures of dispositional optimism and the Big Five.

Based on previous research findings already discussed, optimism was hypothesized to be positively related to Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, and negatively related to Neuroticism. No clear hypothesis concerning the relationship between optimism and Openness emerged based on past research and current theoretical understanding of these constructs. However, based on the modest positive correlations found by Lounsbury et al. (2004), optimism was expected to be positively related to Openness.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Sample 1

Sample 1 participants were 280 undergraduate students (52.0% female) from a mid-sized Mid-western university. The mean age of the sample was 19.07 years ($SD = 4.04$) and the vast majority of the participants were single (96.1%). In terms of ethnic background, 73.7% of the sample was Caucasian, 19.5% was African-American, 2.0% was of Hispanic origin, and 4.8% represented other ethnic backgrounds.

2.1.2. Sample 2

Sample 2 participants were 212 undergraduate students (60.8% female) from a mid-sized Western university. The mean age of the sample was 21.50 years ($SD = 4.35$) and the majority of the participants were single (77.8%). In terms of ethnic background,

87.9% of the sample was Caucasian, 1.0% was African-American, 5.8% was of Hispanic origin, and 5.3% represented other ethnic backgrounds.

2.1.3. Sample 3

Sample 3 participants were 203 undergraduate students (69.5% female) from a mid-sized Mid-western university. The mean age of the sample was 19.39 years ($SD = 3.44$) and the majority of the participants were single (89.7%). In terms of ethnic background, 92.6% of the sample was Caucasian, 3.5% was African-American, 1.5% was of Hispanic origin, and 2.4% represented other ethnic backgrounds.

2.1.4. Sample 4

Sample 4 participants were 822 applicants (57.0% female) to an advanced internship program designed to attract graduate students from a wide range of fields to civil service positions in the United States Government. Restrictions of the employment context prevented collection of additional demographic information. Although age data were not collected, the mean age of this sample is highly likely to be higher than that of the undergraduate student samples. By regulation, all applicants had to be nearing completion (within months) of a graduate degree at various levels (i.e., Master's, Ph.D., J.D., etc) and in nearly any area of study.

2.1.5. Sample 5

Sample 5 participants were 2815 applicants (57.9% female) to the same internship program described for Sample 4. Data for Sample 5 were collected two years later as part of a revised assessment process. None of the Sample 5 participants were applicants in the process described for Sample 4. As with Sample 4, no additional demographic information was collected due to restrictions of the employment context and the same note concerning the likelihood of a higher mean age applies.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Life Orientation Test (LOT)

The LOT is a 12-item instrument designed by Scheier and Carver (1985) to assess dispositional optimism. Four items were positively keyed, four were negatively keyed, and the remaining four were used as filler items. A five-point rating scale was used ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

2.2.2. Worldview Personality Inventory Optimism–Pessimism Scale (WVPI-OP)

The WVPI is an 84-item inventory measuring six dimensions covering individual differences in general beliefs about the world (Sharpe, Davies, & Belt, 2001). The WVPI-OP scale contains 13 items, including six positively-keyed and seven negatively-keyed items. A six-point rating scale was used ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Sharpe et al. (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .89 for the OP scale and a test-retest reliability of .88 (5-week interval, $N = 87$).

2.2.3. International Personality Item Pool Optimism Scale (IPIP-OP)

The IPIP-OP is an eight-item measure from the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg et al., 2006). The published scale contains 10 items, but two items ("Often feel blue" and "Seldom feel blue") were removed from the scale because they were included in the IPIP Emotional Stability scale also used in the present study. The resulting eight-item scale had three positively-keyed items and five negatively-keyed items. A five-point scale was used ranging from "Very Inaccurate" to "Very Accurate." The original 10-item scale had a published Cronbach's alpha of .86.

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