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I want to quit education: A longitudinal study of stress and optimism as predictors of school dropout intention



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ABSTRACT

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Prior research on school dropout has often focused on stable person- and institution-level variables. In this research, we investigate longitudinally perceived stress and optimism as predictors of dropout intentions over a period of four years, and distinguish between stable and temporary predictors of dropout intentions. Findings based on a nationally representative sample of 16–20 year-olds in Switzerland ($N = 4312$) show that both average levels of stress and optimism as well as annually varying levels of stress and optimism affect dropout intentions. Additionally, results show that optimism buffers the negative impact of annually varying stress (i.e., years with more stress than usual), but not of stable levels of stress (i.e., stress over four years). The implications of the results are discussed according to a dynamic and preventive approach of school dropout.

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Introduction

Students who drop out of school often face negative consequences such as unemployment and lower standards of living (Belfield & Levin, 2007). It is therefore important to detect the social and psychological factors that first give rise to dropout intentions and eventually lead to actual dropout. In this study, we investigate dropout *intentions* longitudinally over a period of four years by focusing on both person-level predictors and predictors that may vary over time. In doing so, we want to better understand how temporary psychological factors influence dropout intentions over and above previously documented stable person characteristics and performance indicators.

Predicting who drops out

At the individual level, findings consistently show that *poor academic and cognitive performance* (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007) as well as *deviant behavior* (e.g., school absenteeism, substance abuse; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997) predict school dropout. Moreover, men and minority members (e.g., immigrants) are more likely to drop out (Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005; Laird, Kienzi, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007; Rumberger, 1987), although this effect often disappears when controlling for academic performance, attitudes, and behaviors (Rumberger, 1995). The impact of relevant *attitudes* seems more inconsistent: While low educational expectations are associated with dropout (Driscoll, 1999), the association between self-perceptions

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(e.g., self-esteem, locus of control) and dropout is inconsistent and weak (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Rumberger, 1995). Recent studies in Finland and the U.S. have, however, shown that cynicism as well as lack of perceived control and identification with school predict dropout, even when controlling for educational performance (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012).

On the family level, low *socio-economic status* (SES) has been one of the most powerful predictors of dropout (Dunham & Wilson, 2007; Entwisle, Alexander, & Steffel Olson, 2004), along with *family structure* (e.g., parents living in different households, Ferreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006) and being a *first-generation student* (Ishitani, 2006). Additionally, student composition, resources, and classroom climate in schools have been shown to influence school engagement and dropout prevalence within a given educational context (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Loeb & Page, 2000; Rumberger, 1995). Research on the type of schooling (e.g., college-track vs. vocational training) is more ambiguous: Some studies show fewer dropouts in career-technical courses while others show no effect (Bishop & Mane, 2004; Pittman, 1991).

Several models of dropout have integrated these different risk factors to explain student dropout (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975), for example, focused on academic and social integration as factors leading to institutional commitment, persistence and goal engagement. Bean and Metzner (1985) revised this model for nontraditional students (i.e., older, non-residential, and part-time), stressing the role of environmental (e.g., financial situation, family responsibilities) and psychological variables (e.g., stress, satisfaction) in predicting dropout.

Bean and Metzner (1985) also explicitly considered *intention* to drop out of education as “the strongest single predictor of dropout” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 527). This link between dropout intentions and actual dropout was subsequently confirmed by various studies (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Sandler, 2000; Thomas, 2000; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Research specifically investigating dropout intentions has furthermore confirmed the predictive impact of psychological variables such as goal engagement and intrinsic motivation (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Otis, Grouzet, & Pelletier, 2005), institutional commitment (Braxton et al., 1995; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997), as well as social support (Hausmann et al., 2007; Thomas, 2000) that are all negatively associated with dropout intentions. Starting from the basic model of Bean and Metzner (1985), the present study examines the role of two neglected psychological variables—educational stress and optimism—as predictors of dropout intentions.

Stress, optimism, and coping

Neither stress nor optimism have received much attention in research on dropout intentions, although both may intervene in coping with the difficulties that push young people to leave school. In general, stress is defined as an imbalance between demands and resources (Lazarus, 1999). More specifically, we consider *educational stress* as the feeling of being overwhelmed by school demands. Investigating the role of educational stress for dropout is especially relevant as dropout intentions may be seen as a coping mechanism in response to stress (i.e., escape-avoidance coping, see Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). While the role of stress has already been investigated in relation with dropout intentions and actual dropout, the findings seem rather inconsistent. Chartrand (1992), for example found a significant impact of stress on dropout intentions, Sandler (2000) evidenced an indirect effect through institutional commitment, while others found no or only marginal effects (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). However, stress fluctuates over time and therefore stress measured at one point in time may not be a good indicator for analyzing the association between general stress and dropout intentions, thus leading to inconsistent results. We therefore measure educational stress at different points in time and expect that individuals who are more stressed *in general* think more about dropping out of education.

Positive psychological resources such as optimism may help individuals to deal with environmental demands (e.g., Katz, 1960). Optimism has rarely been included in studies on dropout intentions and dropout. This is surprising, as optimism has been shown to be associated with higher persistence in experimental tasks (Solberg Nes, Segerstrom, & Sefhton, 2005) and higher goal engagement in longitudinal studies (Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2006). The association between optimism and persistence may be explained by the fact that optimism—defined as expecting “positive outcomes, even when things are difficult” (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001, p. 191)—is associated with approach-based and problem-focused coping (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986; Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006) as well as with perceived controllability of stressful events (Chang, 1998a; Scheier & Carver, 1985): Because optimists expect positive outcomes, they are more persistent in their efforts to achieve their goals than less optimistic individuals. Some studies indeed showed that optimism reduces both dropout intentions (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001) and actual dropout (Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009) and has a positive impact on college adjustment in general (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992). Following this research, we expect that individuals who are more optimistic in general think less about dropping out than others, because they are better at coping with the demands of their school environment.

Importantly, however, stress and optimism may also interact in predicting dropout intentions. Indeed, prior research has shown that optimism buffers the negative impact of stress on well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Chang, 1998b). Optimism further appears to be associated with secondary appraisal (evaluation of own coping resources), but not with primary appraisal (evaluation of relevance of the situation) (Chang, 1998a; Lazarus, 1999). As a result, optimists do not necessarily experience less stress, but they believe to possess the necessary resources to cope with it, thus buffering the negative consequences of stress. Therefore, optimism should also buffer the negative impact of educational stress on dropout intentions.

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