



Hope versus optimism in Singaporean adolescents: Contributions to depression and life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the discriminant validity of optimism and hope in accounting for unique variance in depression and life satisfaction for 334 secondary school students from Singapore. Correlational analysis showed that optimism and hope were significantly correlated with each other. Hierarchical multiple regression findings indicated that both optimism and hope significantly predicted depression and life satisfaction even after controlling for hope and optimism, respectively. However, the incremental unique variance accounted for in depression by optimism is 6% more than that accounted for by hope in terms of R^2 Change values. Simultaneous multiple regression analyses using the subscale scores found that only agency, optimism, and pessimism contributed uniquely to the variance in depression and life satisfaction. Implications and limitations of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Dispositional hope and optimism

Snyder (2002) defined hope “as the perceived capacity to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways” (p. 249). However, the construct of hope overlaps with other similar constructs. The need to distinguish similar constructs from each other could not be understated. Hogan (1994), Mayer (1998), and Tennen and Affleck (1998) have noted the tendency of researchers to rediscover and relabel phenomena. Hence, it is important to test a relatively new but similar construct against a more established construct. One construct that should be distinguished from hope is optimism (Aspinwall & Leaf, 2002; Tennen, Affleck, & Tennen, 2002). Scheier and Carver (1985) defined dispositional optimism as the “stable tendency to believe that good rather than bad things will happen” (p. 219) – generalized positive outcome expectancies about the future. Conversely, dispositional pessimism refers to generalized negative outcome expectancies about the future. Scheier and Carver (1985) believed that compared to efficacy expectancies, outcome expectancies are better predictors of behavior. In contrast, Snyder et al. (1991) emphasized the importance of the reciprocal action of efficacy expectancies and outcome expectancies, in which both types of expectancies are important and influence each other. Thus, the optimist may believe that things will turn out as he or she wants,

but not possess the pathways necessary to pursue and acquire the goals (Snyder, 1995). A second difference between hope and optimism is that optimism focuses more broadly on the expected quality of future outcome in general or dispositional cognitive appraisals of personal outcomes, whereas hope focuses more directly on the personal attainment of specific goals or dispositional beliefs about personal capabilities (Bryant & Cvengros, 2004).

1.2. Optimism, hope, depression, and life satisfaction

Dispositional optimism has been found to be negatively associated with depression (Chang, 1998a, 1998b; Dunn, 1996; Given et al., 1993; Hooker, Monahan, Shifen, & Hutchinson, 1992; Lightsey & Christopher, 1997; Marshall & Lang, 1990; Ridder, Schreurs, & Bensing, 2000; Scheier & Carver, 1992) and positively associated with life satisfaction (Chang, 1998a, 1998b, 2002; Curbrow, Sommerfield, Baker, Wingard, & Legro, 1993). Similarly, researchers have reported that trait hope was negatively associated with depression (Chang, 2003; Chang & DeSimone, 2001; Kwon, 2000) and positively associated with life satisfaction (Bailey & Snyder, 2007; Chang, 1998c, 2003; Gilman, Dooley, & Florell, 2006).

Due to the conceptual and empirical similarities between optimism and hope, it would be important to test the two similar constructs within the same study in terms of how well they predict outcomes of importance. Besides conceptual overlap with optimism and other related constructs, independent reviewers have noted that the findings attributed to hope may not be unique to hope, as they have been attributed for other constructs as well, such as optimism (Aspinwall & Leaf, 2002; Tennen et al., 2002).

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Of the few studies that compare hope with optimism, Anderson (1988) found that the Hope Scale contributed unique variance to mental health variables (e.g., depression and anxiety) in relation to Schedule of Life Events, Life Orientation Test, and Locus of Control Scale. He found that hope accounted for unique variance above and beyond that contributed by negative life stress, locus of control, positive life stress, and optimism. In contrast, optimism failed to account for unique variance after controlling for hope scores. Holleran and Snyder (1990) in a series of hierarchical regression analyses showed that the Hope Scale was able to predict uniquely the problem-focused coping beyond the positive expectancies measured by the Life Orientation Test and the Generalized Expectancy for Success Scale, but not vice versa. Using structural equation modeling, Bryant and Cvengeos (2004) found that optimism had a stronger influence on the use of positive reappraisal as a coping strategy than did hope, whereas hope had a stronger influence on level of general self-efficacy than did optimism. More recently, agency was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction in samples of university students and adults compared to optimism, pessimism, and pathways in backwards multiple regression analyses (Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007). In sum, these studies showed that hope was generally a better predictor of psychological well being than optimism.

1.3. The present study

To date, all of the studies that have compared hope with optimism have been conducted in the United States – a Western individualistic and egalitarian society (Hofstede, 1994). In contrast, the present study focuses on Singapore – an Asian collectivistic and elitist society (Hofstede, 1994). Previous studies have shown that tertiary students from Singapore tended to report less optimism and less life satisfaction than counterparts from Australia (Wong et al., 2007). They also reported less frequent thoughts about life satisfaction and happiness than Australian or American tertiary students (Diener, 2000). Finally, Singaporean tertiary students expressed less importance about life satisfaction, but more importance about money than Australian or American tertiary students (Diener, 2000). Given the cross-cultural differences between Americans and Singaporeans, it would be informative to explore whether the results obtained from the American studies generalize to Singaporeans. This would also allow us to determine if collectivistic culture influences hope's and optimism's relationships with depression and life satisfaction.

The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the discriminant validity of optimism and hope in accounting for unique variance in depression and life satisfaction in an Asian sample. Specifically, it explores three interrelated research questions concerning the relationships of optimism and hope, with each other, as well as their relationships with depression and life satisfaction.

1.3.1. What is the correlation between optimism and hope?

Given the conceptual similarities, a certain degree of relationship between the two constructs is expected. Gibb (1990) and Holleran and Snyder (1990) found a correlation of .60 and .50 ($p < .005$) between the Hope Scale and the Life Orientation Test. Hence, Hypothesis 1 states that there is a positive correlation between the two scales in this study.

1.3.2. Which of the two constructs is a stronger predictor of depression and life satisfaction?

According to Snyder, Sympton, Michael, and Cheavens (2001), hope may add predictive power beyond optimism because hope explicitly taps both the agency and pathways components. As mentioned previously, some past research has found that hope is a better predictor than optimism of mental health variables. Hence,

Hypotheses 2A and 2B state that hope accounts for more unique variance in depression and life satisfaction relative to optimism, above and beyond those accounted for by optimism.

1.3.3. Which of the four construct components account for unique variance in depression and in life satisfaction?

According to Snyder et al. (1991), the agency component taps aspects of personal efficacy expectancies, whereas the pathway component taps aspects of outcome expectancies. They proposed that unlike Bandura's (1977) construct of self-efficacy, which emphasizes efficacy expectancies, or Scheier and Carver's construct of dispositional optimism, which emphasizes outcome expectancies, hope construct emphasizes both types of expectancies. If the constructs of optimism and hope are conceptually different, then we would expect that each theoretical component would account for unique variance in depression and life satisfaction. Hence, we posit that Hypotheses 3A to 3H state that optimism (LOT-R subscale), pessimism (LOT-R subscale), agency (CHS subscale), and pathway (CHS subscale) components of each construct account for unique variance in depression (Hypotheses 3A to 3D) and life satisfaction (Hypotheses 3E to 3H), respectively.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three hundred and thirty-four secondary students from one school volunteered in the study after being recruited through the school authorities. The distribution of male ($n = 145$; 43.4%) to female ($n = 189$; 56.6%) students was about equal. Majority of the participants was between the ages of 15 years (46.1%) and 16 years (50.6%) and the average age was 15.6 years ($SD = .59$). Three hundred and thirty-three of the participants were Chinese (99.7%), and there was one unidentified ethnic minority student (0.3%). The survey was administered in English, a language which the respondents are proficient in.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R)

The LOT-R (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) is a shorter version of the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985), with just 10 items (including four filler items), with responses that range from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Three items are positively worded (e.g., "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.") and three are negatively worded (e.g., "I rarely count on good things happening to me."). The three negatively worded items can be scored as the pessimism subscale, while the three positively worded items can be scored as the optimism subscale. The LOT-R possesses an acceptable level of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. LOT-R was positively correlated with several other related scales including self-mastery, self-esteem, trait anxiety and the original LOT. It appears to possess adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

2.2.2. Children's Hope Scale (CHS)

The CHS (Snyder et al., 1997) is a 6-item measure that assesses global level of hope, with three items reflecting the agency thinking (e.g., "I think the things I have done in the past will help me in the future.") and three items representing the pathway thinking (e.g., "I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.") (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 1999). In response to each item, subjects are asked to select the most descriptive phrase from a 6-option continuum from 1 (none of the time) to 6 (all of the time). The correlation between the agency

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