



Optimism/pessimism and information-processing styles: can their influences be distinguished in predicting psychological adjustment?

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Abstract

This study examined the extent to which optimism and pessimism predicted variance in depressive symptoms and life satisfaction beyond what was accounted for by individual differences in perceived information-processing styles (Burns, L. R., & D’Zurilla, T. J. (1999). Individual differences in perceived information-processing styles in stress and coping situations: development and validation of the Perceived Modes of Processing Inventory. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 23, 345–371) in a sample of 402 college students. Consistent with expectations, results indicated that modes of information processing accounted for a significant amount of the variance in both adjustment measures. Moreover, optimism and pessimism accounted for a significant amount of additional unique variance in adjustment. Taken together, these findings indicate that optimism and pessimism reflect cognitive processes that are not redundant with information-processing styles. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the concepts of optimism and pessimism have generated a great deal of research interest in the areas of personality, social, and clinical psychology (Chang, 2001). According to Scheier and Carver (1985), optimism and pessimism, defined as generalized positive and negative outcome expectancies, represent relatively stable individual difference variables that promote or abate psychological well-being. Specifically, these investigators have argued that optimism is associated with and leads to securing positive outcomes, whereas pessimism is associated with and leads to incurring negative outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992; Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 2001). Consistent with this view, studies have shown that greater optimism is

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associated with greater psychological adjustment and with less maladjustment (Chang, 1998; Chang, D’Zurilla & Maydeu-Olivares, 1994; Chang, Maydeu-Olivares & D’Zurilla, 1997; Marshall, Wortman, Kusulas, Hervig & Vickers, 1992; Mroczek, Spiro, Aldwin, Ozer & Bossé, 1993). In contrast, for example, greater pessimism has been found to be associated with less life satisfaction and greater depressive symptoms (e.g. Chang, 1998; Chang et al., 1997). Yet, despite these findings, it remains important to distinguish the influences of optimism and pessimism on adjustment over the influences of other related variables.

Recently, Burns and D’Zurilla (1999) have developed the Perceived Modes of Processing Inventory (PMPI) to assess for individual differences in information-processing styles related to stressful encounters. The PMPI is composed of three relatively distinct dimensions which is based on Epstein’s (1990; Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj & Heier, 1996) cognitive-experiential self-theory (CEST). According to the CEST model, the self is composed of at least two distinguishable systems, a rational and an experiential system. Consistent with this model, Burns and D’Zurilla (1999) found support for different ways of processing information that corresponded to these systems. Specifically, these investigators identified a rational information-processing style and an experiential information-processing style. According to Burns and D’Zurilla (1999), rational information-processing style involves the use of logical reasoning, creative thinking, and the use of problem solving methods to cope with stressful situations, whereas experiential processing style involves the use of feelings and emotions to guide coping behavior. In addition to these two dimensions, Burns and D’Zurilla (1999) also found evidence for a third information-processing style that was automatic and related to, but not redundant with, both rational and experiential information-processing styles. In contrast to the other two styles, automatic processing style involves the use of past coping experiences which can result in fast and efficient coping responses. Consistent with the view that these cognitive styles are important determinants of adjustment, Burns and D’Zurilla (1999) found significant associations between the different PMPI scales and measures of psychological adjustment, including life satisfaction and depressive symptoms. Therefore, given that these modes of information-processing styles reflect cognitive processes which may overlap with those tapped by optimism and pessimism, and that both optimism/pessimism and modes of information-processing styles have been found to be significantly associated with similar indices of adjustment, it would be important to determine the extent to which the influences of optimism and pessimism on adjustment can be distinguished from the influences of information-processing styles on adjustment.

2. Purpose of this study

Given these considerations, the purpose of the present study was to (1) examine the relations between modes of information-processing styles, optimism/pessimism, and psychological adjustment (viz., depressive symptoms and life satisfaction); and (2) determine if optimism/pessimism adds significant incremental validity in the prediction of adjustment beyond what is accounted for by information-processing styles. Given that modes of information-processing styles are believed to reflect fundamental cognitive processes linked to adjustment, we predicted that they would be significantly related to optimism and pessimism. Second, insofar that optimism and pessimism represent variables that are theoretically distinct from modes of information-processing styles, we predicted that the former set of variables would account for a significant amount of the variance

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