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Self-esteem in early and late adolescence predicts dispositional optimism–pessimism in adulthood: A 21-year longitudinal study

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Abstract

A 21-year longitudinal study investigated whether self-esteem in early and late adolescence, at ages 12 and 18, and any changes in it is related to dispositional optimism–pessimism in adulthood, at the age of 33. The subjects comprised a population-based sample of young Finns. The results showed that the self-esteem measured during adolescent years is significantly associated with dispositional optimism–pessimism in adulthood accounting for 5–19% of variance (p 's < .001). Further, results revealed that adolescents scoring in the top thirds of self-esteem at the age of 12 and 18 showed significantly lower levels of pessimism than those whose self-esteem had changed or stayed low during the adolescent years.

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1. Introduction

Generalized expectancies of future outcomes, i.e., dispositional optimism and pessimism, constitute an important dimension of personality. Individuals with an optimistic life orientation tend to have positive expectations for the future, to see desired outcomes as attainable and to persist in

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their goal-directed efforts. Those with a pessimistic life orientation have negative outcome expectations, withdraw effort and become passive, and potentially give up on achieving their goals (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Dispositional optimism–pessimism has been shown to be a relatively stable disposition across time (e.g., Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) and in different contexts (e.g., Park & Folkman, 1997). Empirical evidence showing that dispositional optimism and pessimism have contrasting effects on psychological and physical well-being is mounting (for reviews, see Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001).

Relative to information on the psychological and physical consequences of optimism–pessimism, surprisingly little is known about the developmental correlates of individual differences in this disposition. A study of Swedish twins showed that up to 25% of the variance in dispositional optimism–pessimism may be due to hereditary factors (Plomin et al., 1992). Also difficult temperament of the child has been shown to be related to later adulthood pessimism (Heinonen, Rääkkönen, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2005). Regarding the childhood family of origin, negatively turned parenting (e.g., inconsistency in love, low care and emotional closeness) and family atmosphere (e.g., low levels of cohesion) has been shown to be, both retrospectively as well as longitudinally, related to higher pessimism scores in adulthood (Heinonen et al., 2005; Heinonen, Rääkkönen, Keltikangas-Järvinen, & Strandberg, 2004; Hjelle, Busch, & Warren, 1996). In contrast to these findings, during adolescence, fathers', mothers' or adolescents' own current reports of parenting were not related to their concurrent reports of optimism–pessimism (Brewin, Andrews, & Furnham, 1996).

The current study focuses on self-esteem in adolescence as the potential predictor of adulthood optimism–pessimism. Adolescence has been shown to be a critical period for development of self-esteem, i.e., one's evaluative judgement about oneself (Coopersmith, 1967; DuBois, Felner, Brand, Phillips, & Lease, 1996), or one's overall feelings of worth or value as a person (Harter, 1993; Rosenberg, 1979). During adolescence, self-evaluations have been suggested to be challenged (cf. Caspi & Roberts, 1999; Twenge & Campbell, 2001) and still changeable (e.g. Block & Robins, 1993; Deihl, Vicary, & Deike, 1997; Trzedniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Further, there has been shown to be considerable variation in developmental trajectories of self-esteem during adolescence (e.g., Block & Robins, 1993; Deihl et al., 1997), and its stability has been shown to increase throughout adolescence (Trzedniewski et al., 2003).

Studying self-esteem in relation to later optimism–pessimism has both conceptual as well as empirical bases. Self-esteem represents a sense of self-worth carrying the implication that one will be accepted rather than rejected by others, and that one is not a failure in one's life. According to Scheier et al. (1994) these consequences of cause involve positive versus negative outcomes, thus linking self-esteem conceptually to optimism. Self-esteem and optimism–pessimism have also been suggested to be related via the variance they share in concept core self-evaluations (Bono & Judge, 2003). Scheier and Carver (1992) have also suggested that one source, even though certainly not the only, of the outcome expectations are found in evaluations of the self. Still in another article, Scheier and Carver (1993) propose that it is reasonable to argue that optimism–pessimism is partly learned from prior experiences of success and failure. Experiences of success and failure are also among the main predictors of individual differences in self-esteem (e.g., Harter, 1999). Moreover, empirical cross-sectional studies have shown that optimism–pessimism and self-esteem are substantially related, the correlations ranging from .67 in 11-to-14-year-old adolescents (Carvajal, Clair, Nash, & Evans, 1998), .48 to .67 in university undergraduates/college freshmen

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