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Method effects due to social desirability as a parsimonious explanation of the deviation from unidimensionality in LOT-R scores

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Abstract

Dispositional optimism measured by the Life Orientation Test (Revised; LOT-R, Scheier et al., 1994) was originally proposed as a unidimensional construct pertaining to individual differences in positive outcome expectancies. However, factor analytic research has suggested two separate “optimism” and “pessimism” factors associated with positively and negatively worded items respectively. Using confirmatory factor analysis with data from $N = 658$ students it is shown that a general optimism model with method effects of the positively worded items fits even better than the “optimism–pessimism” model in terms of the *AIC* statistic, which accounts for both model parsimony and model fit. Furthermore, an attempt is made to explain the method effects by social desirability: impression management, one of two components of socially desirable responding, correlates significantly with the method factor whereas the other component, self-deceptive enhancement, is related to the general optimism factor. Thus it is shown that the deviation from unidimensionality of observed scores does not imply deviation from unidimensionality of optimism when method effects are incorporated in the model.

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Keywords: Optimism; Pessimism; Socially desirable responding; Method effects

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1. Method effects due to social desirability as a parsimonious explanation of the deviation from unidimensionality in LOT-R scores

Dispositional optimism is defined as a construct pertaining to individual differences in the generalized expectation of positive outcomes. According to Scheier and Carver (1985), people high in dispositional optimism expect positive results when they try to achieve their goals, and they expect to cope successfully with problems they might encounter in doing so. As a consequence, optimists are more likely to persist in goal-directed behavior which leads to their better psychosocial adjustment and successful health-oriented behavior when compared to pessimists. Accordingly, a large number of studies has demonstrated the relation of dispositional optimism to psychological adjustment (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001) and physiological well-being (e.g. Kivimäki et al., 2005; Rääkkönen, Matthews, Flory, Owens, & Gump, 1999). Peterson (2000) has briefly summarized the relevant results: “research is uniform in showing that optimism . . . is linked to desirable characteristics: happiness, perseverance, achievement, and health” (p. 47).

1.1. *The dimensionality problem of optimism*

Even though there seems to be broad agreement concerning the psychological and physiological benefits of optimism its most widely used measurement instrument, the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985), has been the focus of an as yet unresolved debate: from the beginning, the unidimensionality of the LOT has been questioned (e.g., Marshall, Wortman, Kusulas, Hervig, & Vickers, 1992). It could be shown by means of confirmatory factor analyses that a model with two correlated factors for positively and negatively worded items respectively fits LOT data better than a one-factor model (e.g. Marshall et al., 1992; Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997) and this is also the case for the revised version, the LOT-R (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994; Vautier, Raufaste, & Cariou, 2003). These results have led some researchers to conclude that negatively worded LOT and LOT-R items measure a partially independent construct, namely pessimism; their argument is supported by different correlation patterns for positively worded “optimism” and negatively worded “pessimism” scales with other constructs. However, this correlational evidence for the partial independence of “optimism” and “pessimism” scales is ambiguous: whereas “pessimism” had a stronger relation to psychological and physiological health outcomes among caregivers in the often cited study by Robinson-Whelen et al. (1997), the converse result was found by Kivimäki et al. (2005) for people whose family members fell seriously ill or died. Kubzansky, Kubzansky, and Maselko (2004), even though concluding that “optimism and pessimism emerged as distinct constructs” (p. 943), did not find a strongly interpretable different correlation pattern of optimism and pessimism to health outcomes. In a most recent paper, Vautier and Raufaste (2006) have reported “surprising configural instability in LOT-R data” (p. 1517); they showed that in two of four French samples a satisfactory fit to the optimism–pessimism model could only be achieved by allowing a secondary loading of a positively worded item on the “pessimism” factor.

Scheier et al. (1994) and others have argued that a unidimensional structure can be maintained in confirmatory factor analyses when correlated errors or method factors are allowed in addition to a general optimism factor. In this line of reasoning the lack of fit to a unidimensional model is explained by method effects (Vautier et al., 2003). Method effects are defined as systematic vari-

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