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## Age differences in optimism bias are mediated by reliance on intuition and religiosity



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### ABSTRACT

The relationships among age, optimism bias, religiosity, creationist beliefs, and reliance on intuition were examined in a sample of 211 high school students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 16.54$  years). Optimism bias was defined as the difference between predictions for positive and negative life events (e.g., divorce) for the self and age peers. Results indicated that older adolescents displayed less optimism bias, were less religious, believed less in creationism, and relied on intuition less than younger adolescents. Furthermore, the association between age and optimism bias was mediated by religiosity and reliance on intuition but not by creationist beliefs. These findings are considered from a dual-process theoretic perspective that emphasizes age increases in metacognitive abilities and epistemological beliefs and age declines in impulsive judgments. Research directed toward examining alternative explanations of the association among religiosity, age, and optimism bias is recommended.

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### Introduction

Late adolescence is a period during which considering the future becomes increasingly important, in part because the transition from high school to the adult world is fraught with ambiguity and in part because navigating the life course involves setting long-term goals and considering the means by which those goals can be attained (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Although adolescents' goal-setting beliefs include temporality (i.e., how far plans are projected into the future), planning,

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and self-efficacy (Galotti & Clare, 2014; Nurmi, 1989), optimism is also a pivotal aspect of expectations because it not only guides difficult long-term and everyday decisions but also has implications for well-being (Carroll, Sweeny, & Shepperd, 2006; Weinstein, 1980; Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007).

Whereas optimism refers to beliefs about the likelihood of attaining one's goals, optimism bias occurs when people predict that they are more likely to attain important goals—and less likely to experience adverse life events—than others (Weinstein, 1980). Optimism bias is not only ubiquitous—found during adolescence and adulthood—but also correlates negatively with personal problems (e.g., depressive symptomatology, low self-esteem) and social problems (e.g., interpersonal, delinquency) (Lapsley & Hill, 2010; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and positively with adaptive decision-making styles (Magnano, Paolillo, & Giacomini, 2015). Despite findings that optimism bias is not particularly pervasive in specific areas (e.g., long-term health risks from smoking) and that such domain-specific optimistic biases may reinforce risk taking (Arnett, 2000; Chapin, de las Alas, & Coleman, 2005; Popova & Halpern-Felsher, 2016), optimism bias—at least when self–other comparisons include a wide range of future events—seems have to some protective and some negative functions (Hill, Duggan, & Lapsley, 2011; Klaczynski & Fauth, 1996; Lapsley & Hill, 2010).

Despite its importance, developmental research on optimism bias is sparse. For instance, in a study of the perceived self–other probabilities of becoming addicted to smoking, optimism bias declined from early to late adolescence (Popova & Halpern-Felsher, 2016). However, because most developmental research on optimism bias has concerned specific life arenas and has rarely involved developmental comparisons, an unanswered question is whether optimism bias, assessed across a number of general events, differs for younger and older adolescents. Consequently, one focus of the current research was to clarify the relationship between age and optimism bias.<sup>1</sup>

The primary focuses on this research, however, were on predictors of optimism bias that (a) have not been examined developmentally and (b) may mediate the association between age and optimism bias. First, we examined whether religiosity (specifically, faith and creationist beliefs) predicted optimism bias. Although these associations had not been researched previously, we expected adolescents with stronger faith in a divine being to be more optimistically biased than other adolescents. Second, we examined whether optimism bias was related to critical thinking dispositions (e.g., to engage in careful deliberation or rely on immediate intuitions). In addition, Klaczynski and Fauth (1996) found that optimism bias associated positively with intellectual ability. Because that work was conducted with young adults, we explored whether intellectual ability was related to optimism bias during adolescence. In the following paragraphs, it is argued that reliance on intuitive decision making, religious faith, and (possibly) creationist beliefs mediates the age–optimism bias association.

### *Religiosity and creationism*

Despite indications that it declines from early to late adolescence (Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1989; Regnerus, Christian Smith, & Smith, 2004; Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, & Campbell, 2015), numerous reports indicate that religiosity is linked to subjective well-being and fosters positive youth development. For instance, those with stronger religious beliefs have higher self-esteem (e.g., Kabiru, Elung'ata, Mojola, & Beguy, 2014; Smith, Weigert, & Thomas, 1979), have better self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), and engage in more positive health-relevant behaviors (e.g., exercise; see Wallace & Forman, 1998) are more hopeful (Marques, Lopez, & Mitchell, 2013), experience less death anxiety (Landau, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2007; see also Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009), and are more optimistic (Schutte & Hosch, 1996) than those with weaker beliefs. Other findings show that religiosity relates negatively to a variety of risky behaviors (e.g., drinking and

<sup>1</sup> Lapsley and Hill (2010) argued that some studies (e.g., Arnett, 2000) showed that optimism bias is stronger in adolescents than in adults and that other studies showed the reverse (e.g., Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002). In general, there have been too few developmental studies of optimism bias to draw definite conclusions regarding its relationship to age. Specifically, we are aware of no study that examined adolescent age differences in optimism bias. Millstein and Halpern-Felsher (2002), for instance, examined adolescents' probability estimates that they would experience negative outcomes in risk situations involving natural hazards (e.g., tornados), "neutral" personal behaviors (e.g., jogging), and risky behaviors (e.g., drinking) but did not ask participants to make the same estimates for others. Consequently, this study is the first to examine age differences in optimism bias during adolescence.

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