

Impact of Education on Optimism/Pessimism

Mina Daraei and Ali Reza Ghaderi

University of Mysore, Mysore Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

This study was conducted to explore the impact of educational level of parents on degree of optimism and pessimism of their children. Using an explanatory survey of undergraduate students, male and female, randomly 240 students, 19-22 years old, from both public and private colleges in Mysore city were selected. A self-report Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) and a structured questionnaire were administered. To test the hypothesis, analysis of variance (ANOVA), one way and one-way ANOVA post hoc tests was used to measure the difference between level of parents' education, and its relationship with level of students' optimism and pessimism. The result revealed that education of parents had an influence on degree of their children's optimism and pessimism. In the other words, students with high degree of optimism had parents with high level of education. Implications of current study were also discussed.

Keywords: *Optimism/Pessimism, Education, Undergraduate Students.*

In recent years, research on optimism has received more attention due to its impact on physical, psychological, and social well-being. Optimism is one of the components of positive psychology; it is related to positive mood and attitude for creating healthy, stress free life, and successful social relationships and social functioning. Optimists use positive reinterpretation with an effort to accept the reality of situation. By contrast, pessimists try to deny and distance from the problem. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) examined the relationship between optimism and dispositional coping tactics, they found that optimists reported dispositional tendency to rely on active, problem-focusing coping, and they have more plan when face stressful events, while pessimists have tendency to withdraw from the goals, they use denial tactic and substance abuse to lessen their awareness of the problems. Moreover, optimists accept the reality and do the best to construct the situation more positively and learn from the experience.

There are a many great studies on relationship between optimism and coping with diseases including bypass surgery, transplantation, HIV, cancer and so on. It was found that optimism related to better health, more positive moods, and better immune functioning. According to Scheier, Carver and Weintraub (1989) optimists have better health because during and after treatment, they likely make plan for their future and setting goals for their recovery. But the clinical efforts of optimism are not the main concern of this study; hence, we do not address the details of such studies.

Carver et al. (1993) reviewed studies on optimism and pessimism; their results revealed that optimists are more confident and persistent; whereas pessimists are more doubtful and hesitant, this can lead to differences in risky situation which need coping capacity. Difficulties cause many feelings and responses to these feelings differ between optimists and pessimists. Pessimists should experience more negative

feelings such as: anxiety, sadness, and despair.

Harju and Bolen (1998) found that optimism had an effect on quality of life; they studied how quality of life of college students were influenced by optimism, the result manifested that students with high optimism had highest quality of life. It is also worth adding optimist's response effectively to cope with problems because psychologically they are healthier, this idea is reinforced by a study conducted by Aspinwall and Taylor (1990), they examined level of adjustment of first semester of college and optimism, the results showed that higher levels of optimism had an effect on psychological distress.

Scheier and Carver (1991) conducted a study similar to Aspinwall and Taylor, with a notable exception. They measured the outcomes twice, at the start of study and at the end. Their findings were akin to Aspinwall and Taylor (1990), optimism was predictors of changes in perceived depression, stress, loneliness, and social support. Optimists were less stressed, less lonely, more socially supported compared to pessimistic counterparts. As mentioned earlier, the impact of optimism/pessimism on physical, psychological, and social well-being are well-documented, this impact seems to stem from the characteristic approach of optimism, because this outlook makes optimists able to manage both stressful problems and emotions due to coping style capacity (Solberg, Nes & Segerstrom, 2006).

Optimists enjoy higher well-being than pessimists, one important feature of dispositional optimists is that they effectively pursue goals; hence, they are more likely to accumulate resources like: money, friendship, skill. Evidence supports this statement that socio-economic status (SES) and social network size predict mental and physical health; therefore, resource accumulation as a mechanism helps optimists to benefit

physical and mental health (cited in Segerstrom, 2007, p.773).

Coll and Draves (2008) examined the relationship between worldview, demographic features, and optimism among 163 university students in US, using LOT_R scale (Scheier, Carver, and Bridges, 1994) for measuring level of optimism. In their study optimism defined as outcome expectancies about future and expects that good things will happen; the results showed that age was not correlated with worldview, but there were significant differences in LOT_R score in terms of ethnicity and marital status. African-American were more optimist than Caucasians and married participants were significantly more optimist than single who in turn, were more optimist than divorced.

Segerstrom (2007) examined optimism and resources: effects on each other and on health over 10 years among 61 law students in US with different racial backgrounds. She explored that optimists may accumulate resources such as: money, friendship, skill, and status that may be contributed to better health. Dispositional optimism may be related to enhance the social and status resources. When optimists expect good things will happen in the future, this outlook may be associated with positive consequences such as: better performance, better physical and mental health, and higher likelihood of goal achievement.

But which factors do have an influence on optimism/pessimism? In answering this question, we have reviewed some of studies; for instance, Schulman, Keith, and Seligman (1993) suggested that there may be a substantial genetic effect on optimism. On the other hand, many investigators have studied the influence of culture on optimism. Although we do not discount other factors such as, genetic make-up, personality, and culture, we only focus on education as one of the social factors.

Regarding human capital theory, educated population is a productive population (Sakomota & Powers, 1995) and (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1997), and they argued that human capital theory based on this assumption that formal education is highly instrumental to enhance the capacity of a population. It helps individuals to improve their quality of lives and it is the key to increasing economic efficiency. Education contributes to interpersonal tolerance and helps people build up self-actualization. Higher education and increase in earnings are associated with improvement in quality of life. Educational attainment is one of the determinants of occupational success that indirectly affect the economic status of an individual, well-paid, full-time job, high status, social prestige, and likely to experience less socio-economic problems, and unemployment (Reynolds & Ross, 1998). Study conducted by Clark (2003) revealed that unemployment seems to be negatively affected optimism and well being. As has been found in the literature, individuals who are unemployed show significantly lower level of optimistic view. Indeed education is an instrumental factor which related to good job opportunity and income.

Outcomes of optimism/pessimism

Scheier and Carver (1985) have applied a model of behavioral-self regulation to define how optimism/pessimism can affect behavior. The behavior leads to the feedback system when individuals concentrate on self. Their concentrations on self result in behavioral changes in order to reduce the inconsistency between present behavior and the goal. In another words, when persons encounter challenges, they concentrate on changing their behavior to manage the challenges and gain the goal.

According to this perspective, if persons face up obstacles, they will stop and figure out whether they can handle the challenge or not. If they find out that they are able to

handle the challenge, the result encourages them to repeat their efforts. On the other hand, if the individuals feel that they are incapable in handling the challenges, they will become disappointed and give up renewing their efforts. Therefore this situation may lead to the pessimism that contribute to their inability to the process associated with disappointment, anxiety, unemployment, getting married, finding good job, and continuing the study. Because in this period, they face challenges of shifting the social role, take new responsibilities. Individuals become more capable of handling challenges, they become optimist because they are able to cope with problems (Scheier & Carver, 1985). In addition when people encounter obstacles, optimists likely repeat their efforts due to favorable experiences in the past. Eventually optimists will gain confidence in their abilities to deal with difficulties. Thus, they believe the future challenges lead to positive consequences. Conversely, pessimism develops with in individuals when they have unsuccessful experiences in dealing with problems, and they will build self-doubt in themselves on the basis of past failures; hence, they believe the future will lead to negative consequences.

With this in mind, let's look at impact of education. Education as one of the aspects of socioeconomic status can build self-confidence or self-doubt in individuals to handle challenges and repeat their efforts and based on this experience develops optimism. For instance, individuals with high income, education, and occupation have access to social and economic resources which help them deal with difficulties successfully.

Method

Sample:

The sample of this study consisted of 240 undergraduate, Indian students who randomly selected from eight colleges, both private and public colleges, in Mysore City,

the components of sample were 125 males (Mean=19.08 years old, S.D= 4.08) and 115 females (Mean= 18.87years old, S.D= 4.23).

Instruments:

The LOT-R test (Scheier & Carver, 1994) was administered to assess the optimism and pessimism status of the students. It consists of ten items measure with four filler items, three positively worded items and three reverse coded items. The scores are based on responses to these item, total scores can range from a low of 6 to a high of 30. Internal validity using Cronbach's alpha has been found to be $r = .78$ and test, retest reliability after 28 months was reported to be $r = .79$.

Results and Discussion

The obtained F value of 10.316 was found to be significant at 0.000 levels for father's education and obtained F value of 9.344 was found to be significant at 0.000 levels for educational level of mother. Or we can say educational level of parents had influence on level of students' optimism.

The educational level of parents impacts level of optimism/pessimism of students. In other words, students with high degree of optimism, their parents had high educational level. Our finding revealed that parents with high education, also they hold good job, high income and they have sent their children to private colleges with better educational facilities. Hence, these students may expect good future for themselves and this attitude impacts their degree of optimism. Kozol (1991) stated that students from advantaged family attend schools in better facility and suitable learning environment, highly paid teachers, good library, and computer labs which would influence their job opportunity in the future. Therefore, favorable socio-economic status is passed on from one generation to the next.

Our results also indicated the difference between students going to public or private colleges in terms of their educational level of

their father. The students in private colleges had parents with high education and their children were more optimists. According to Reynolds and Ross (1998, p: 224) "education often functions to pass on high status jobs and good incomes to adult children of high status parents."The importance of education lies in the fact that apart from educational requirement, the most rewarding jobs are given to those from advantaged background. In sum, education is meaningful not only because of its relationship with advantaged family background, but due to this reason that education provides individuals with abilities, skills, and resources that eventually impact optimism and positive attitude towards future. In India, education has a determinant role for finding a good job, so having parents with high educational level could give hope to students that they may have desirable job opportunity; while it may not be true for students who had parents with low level of educations.

In prior literature only a few studies explored the relationship between education and optimism and their focus was on impact of optimism on educational achievement and cope with educational challenges, like study of Harju and Bolen (1998) , Aspinwall and Taylor (1990), and Scheier and Carver(1991) , also most of the prior studies have examined effects of optimism on health, psychological well-being, satisfaction with life , and quality of life, but our study looked at influence of education on optimism and found the relationship between these factors. However, our results are significant for our sample and we do not generalize our findings to other larger groups.

Implications

Learning optimism and information on this area can help students to be a successful citizen and perform their social roles perfectly due to their abilities to deal with problems and capacities of seeking social support in right

time and right place. This study targeted the early adulthood which is considered as productive period in an individual life; hence, this type of study may have Psychological, attitudinal, social and economic benefits.

References

- Aspinwall, L.G. & Taylor, S. E. (1990). Stress, coping and well-being: Modeling a casual hypothesis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 32, 327-338.
- Carver, C.S., Scheier, M.F. & Weintraub, J.K. (1989). Assessing coping strategy: A theoretical based approach, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 267-283.
- Carver, C.S., *et al.* (1993). How coping mediates the effect of optimism on distress: A study of women with early stage breast cancer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 375-390.
- Clark, *et al.* (2003). Lags and leads in life satisfaction: A test of the baseline hypothesis, See [http:// www.delta.ens.fr/clark/BLINEaug03.pdf](http://www.delta.ens.fr/clark/BLINEaug03.pdf).
- Coll, J.E. Patrick, R.D. (2008). An examination of the relationship between optimism and world view among university students. See: [www.http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mimofcr/is242/ai-n2545147](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mimofcr/is242/ai-n2545147)
- Harju, & Bolen. (1998). The effects of optimism on coping and perceived quality of life of college students. *Journal of Behavior and Personality*, 13, 185-201.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in American's schools*. America: Crown
- Psacharopoulos, G & Woodhall, M. (1997) *Education for Development: An Analysis of Investment Choice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds & Catherine E.R. (1998). *Social stratification and health: Education's benefit beyond economic status and social origins*, *Social problems*, 45, 221-247.
- Sakamoto, A. & Powers, P.A. (1995) Education and the dual labor market for Japanese men. *American Sociological Review*. 60, 222-246.
- Scheier, M. F. & Carver, C.S. (1985). Optimism, coping and health: Assessment and implication of generalized outcome expectancies. *Journal of health Psychology*, 4, 219-247.
- Scheier, M.F., Carver, C.S. & Bridge. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self –mastery and self-esteem) : A re-evaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 1063-1078.
- Scheier, M. F & Carver, C.S. (1991). Dispositional optimism and adjustment to college. Unpublished raw data.
- Schulman, P., Keith, D. & Seligman. (1993). Is optimism heritable? A study of twins. *Journal of Behavior Research and Therapy*, 31, 569-574.
- Segerstrom, S.C. (2007). Optimism and resources: Effects on each other and on health over 10 years. *Journal of Research and Personality*, 41, 772-786.
- Solberg, N.L., & Segerstrom, S.C.(2006). Dispositional optimism and coping: A meta-analytical review. *Journal of Personality and Social psychology Review*, 10, 235-251.

Received: March 03, 2011

Revised: October 12, 2011

Accepted: November 03, 2011

Mina Draei, Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, University of Mysore, Manasagangotri, Mysore-570 006, Email: Mina_d2003@yahoo.com

Ali Reza Ghaderi, PhD, Clinical Psychologist, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran, Email: arghaderi44@yahoo.com