

## Age Related Difference in Dispositional Optimism: Example of People with Individualistic and Collectivistic Orientations

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Based on the idea of social cognitive theory, a study was designed to explore the effect of age on optimism of people with individualistic and collectivistic orientations. A cross-section study was conducted with 426 participants of 15-70 years age. Life orientation test – Revised (Scheier et al. 1994) was used to assess the level of optimism of respondents. To assess the cultural orientation of respondents Individualism-collectivism Measure by Mishra was used. A personal demographic profile of the participants was also maintained. Analysis of data shows a significant age effect on the level of optimism of respondents. No significant difference was found in the level of optimism between people with individualistic and collectivistic orientations. It was revealed that respondents from 25-30 years age group with collectivistic orientations displayed highest level of optimism among all age groups. Results of study will be evaluated under the circumference of theoretical and empirical evidences.

**Keywords:** Age, Dispositional Optimism, Individualistic – collectivistic Orientations

It has been suggested that optimists are those who expect to have positive outcome, even when things are hard and it yields a mix of feeling that is relatively positive. On the other hand, pessimist expects negative outcomes and this doubt develop tendency towards negative feelings like anxiety, guilt, anger, sadness or despair (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Snyder, Sympton, Ybasco, Border, Babyak, & Higgings, 1996). It seems that the unfulfilled intrinsic desires and unaccomplished objective values of life lead ones to experience a variety of negative emotions. The balance between positive and negative feelings about life circumstances appears to relate to people's degree of optimism or pessimism.

### **Age and disposition optimism**

Optimism may be defined as a generalized positive expectation for the future (Scheier & Carver 1985; Scheier et al. 1994). Due to the positive relationships between (dispositional) optimism and many physical and psychological outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1993), there has been an increased interest in understanding how dispositional optimism develops with age. Researches on the effect of age on

dispositional optimism have yielded mixed findings. Some studies reported age related increase in dispositional optimism, but others did not (Chapin, 2001; Herzberg et al. 2006; Isaacowitz, 2005; Lennings, 2000; Robinson-Whelen et al. 1997). For example, a longitudinal study found that future attitude at age 13 had a positive but weak association with dispositional optimism at age 43 (Daukantaite & Bergman, 2005). Lennings (2000) further revealed an age-related increase in dispositional optimism in a sample aged from 55 to 99 years. In addition, Chapin (2001) found that age was negatively associated with self-protective pessimism toward health risks in a community sample with age ranging from 14 to 78 years. These findings indicate a positive relationship between age and dispositional optimism.

Other studies reveal a more complicated pattern of age-related dispositional optimism. Isaacowitz (2005) did not find any significant age difference in dispositional optimism after controlling for covariates despite the fact that older Americans displayed a higher level of optimistic explanatory style in affiliation domain, but a lower level of optimistic explanatory style

in health domain. Another study (Robinson-Whelen, MacCallum, & Keicolt-Glaser, 1997) found that older Americans with caregiving stress were more optimistic and less pessimistic than those without life stress.

Some possible explanations for these findings have been proposed, in terms of the moderating or mediating roles of religion (Mattis et al. 2004), stress (Robinson-Whelen et al. 1997), coping (Mayers & Derakshan 2004; Nicholls et al. 2008), and self-regulation (Umstatted et al. 2007). Recently, You, Helene and Issacowitz (2009) proposed another factor socio-cultural contexts which may play a significant moderating role in the relationships of age with optimism. They argue that these inconsistencies in findings on dispositional optimism might at least in part be the results of socio-cultural contexts. Given the fact that individuals develop their personal characteristics throughout the lifespan, at least in part, according to what their socio-cultural contexts emphasize (Baltes et al. 2006; Fung & Ng 2006), age differences in dispositional optimism might occur in different directions when the socio-cultural contexts differ. Many of these determinants include age-graded social influences that are provided by custom within familial, educational, and other institutional systems.

#### ***Age, culture, and dispositional optimism***

Socio emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen et al. 1999) argues that people prioritize emotionally meaningful goals with age. Even though such prioritization may be universal (Fung et al. 2001), the specific age-related patterns of personal characteristics can differ across cultures when cultural groups emphasize different goals. Extending this theoretical framework to dispositional optimism, You, Helene and Issacowitz (2009) argue that cultures may differ in the relative emphasis that they place on dispositional optimism. These cultural differences may in turn determine the direction for age differences in dispositional optimism.

In Western cultures, being a good person means being unique, independent, and self-sufficient (Hamamura & Heine 2007; Markus & Kitayama 1991). To maintain a good self-

image, individuals are motivated to attend to positive information regarding the self and the environment. As a result, individuals may tend to have a positive expectation for the future. On the contrary, in Eastern cultures, being a good person means being successful at maintaining good relationships with others (Hamamura & Heine 2007; Markus, 2004). To this end, individuals are expected to adjust to others' demands and not to stand out from the group (Lai, & Yue, 2000). Moreover, dispositional optimism was found to be associated with many measures of cultural values, including independent-interdependent self-construal, uncertainty avoidance, self-enhancement and self-criticism, collectivism and individualism (Chang, 1996; Fischer & Chalmers 2008; Lai & Yue 2000), suggesting that the developmental trajectories of dispositional optimism can potentially be shaped by what cultures emphasize.

Though cultural values endorsed by people seem to be related with several factors in different societies, but, ironically, lesser studies discussed the change in cultural orientation with progressive age or their relationship. Oppenheimer (2004) used a developmental approach to explore the relative change in cultural values along with progressive age. He found that with developing age (adolescence to adulthood) people gradually changes their preference to use individualistic orientation more with collectivistic orientations in Dutch society. Mishra (1994) reported similar finding that respondent from young age, highly educated, and urban people tended to be more individualist than collectivistic compare to old people, less educated and urban people. Although above said findings tried to explain the relationships of cultural orientations with age, still there is a need to retest this relationships.

#### **Method**

In this study, we extended the idea of You, Fung and Isaacowitz (2009) to explore the effect of cultural orientation on dispositional optimism with progressive age in within culture context. The conceptual idea for the present study came from the seminal work of Keller (2007). She conducted a study on samples from six different countries (China, Costa Rica,

Germany, India, the United States, and West Africa) which revealed a link between socio-demographic factors, cultural values, and learning environment and infant socialization processes and practices. It was found that parental ethno-theories and infant socialization practices emphasizing interdependence (more extensive bodily contact and social stimulation, less extensive face-to-face contact, and less object stimulation) were adapted to small agricultural villages. On the other hand, parental ethno-theories and socialization practices that emphasize independence (less extensive bodily contact and social stimulation, more extensive face-to-face contact, and more object stimulation). Obviously, cultural values of individualism and collectivism differ in their relative emphasis on independence versus interdependence with one's group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Keeping this idea in mind, it was planned to explore the relationship of age with optimism in people living in different settings (urban and rural).

On the basis of available literature and findings of studies following objective were formulated:

1. To test the differences in level of optimism with progressive age.
2. To explore the difference in optimism between people with individualistic and collectivistic orientations.
3. To examine the effect of cultural orientations on optimism with progressive age.

Following hypotheses were postulated to test the objectives:

1. Older people would display higher level of optimism than younger people.
2. People with collectivistic values significantly differs from people with individualistic values on optimism measure.
3. There would be no effect of cultural orientations on optimism with progressive age.

### **Participants:**

The study was carried out with 426 participants drawn from the urban and rural settings of Varanasi. Male and female participants belonging to four age groups (i. e., 15-20, 25-30, 45-50, and 60-70 years) were included in the study. The sample comprised 110 participants from 15-20 year age group, 106 participants from 25-30 year age group, 105 participants from 45-50 year age group, and 105 participants from 60-70 year age group. Thus the sample included rural and urban, male and female participants drawn from four age levels. This distribution was achieved according to 2 (urban, rural) x 2 (male, female) x 4 (15-20, 25-30, 45-50, 60-70 years) factorial design.

Respondents from four age groups (i.e., 15-20, 25-30, 45-50, and 60-70 years) were selected randomly. The urban sample was selected from different areas of Varanasi city. Each participant was approached individually. Participants belonging to 15-20 and 25-30 years age group were selected from different schools and colleges of Varanasi city and adjacent villages. We approached the concerning authority of the schools and colleges and obtained their permission to conduct the study. After the permission was granted, male and female participants were contacted in the classrooms. Participants belonging to other three age groups were approached personally at their respective home with the help of liaison persons. Data were collected looking at the convenience of the respondents.

### **Measures:**

In the present study Life Orientation Test – Revised (Scheier et al., 1994) and Individualism-collectivism Measure (Mishra, 1994) were used for the data collection. Mishra (1994) developed this measure with urban and rural population of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. He included people from across the age group to define the indicators of individualism and collectivism orientations. Before data collection Life Orientation Test – Revised was translated in Hindi language using back translation method.

*Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R):* This test was developed by Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994). The test measures a

respondent's degree of optimism or pessimism. The LOT-R is a short instrument consisting of 10 items. Only 6 of the 10 items are used to derive an optimism score. The remaining 4 items, (numbers 2, 5, 6 and 8) are filler items. Of the 6 items, 3 are keyed in the positive direction, and 3 in the negative direction. Item-scale correlations range from .43 to .63. Cronbach's alpha for all six items was .78.

**Individualism-Collectivism Orientation Measure:** Drawing upon the ideas of Triandis (1988), Mishra (1994) had developed a new measure to assess individualistic and collectivistic orientations of people in India. The measure consists of five decision areas (marriage, occupation, treatment, selling of property, and buying household goods) and six individuals/groups (spouse, family, friends, relatives, neighbors, and self). Every participant was asked about the importance of each group in each decision area. The overall scores on this measure range from 30 to 150. The assessment of individualism or collectivism orientation is based on median split of the total score. Scores above the median indicate collectivistic orientation, and scores below the median indicate individualistic orientation. Factorial validity and reliability of this measure was calculated for the present study. Outcomes of the Principal Component Analysis for this measure showed higher levels on the indices of factorial validity. Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure of sample adequacy .840. Bartlett test of sphericity value ( $X^2 = 5.73E3$ ) is significant at .000 level. Communalities are ranging from .54 to .79. A 5 factor structure emerges with 65.44% of total variance. Cronbach's alpha was found to be .883 based on standardized items and it ranges from .87 to .88.

Besides collecting data with above mentioned scale, information regarding the participant's age, residence, family background, mobility and participation in various activities were also obtained.

**Procedure :**

Each participant was informed about the study, and consent for participation in the study was taken. Besides a few dropouts, there was genuine support from the participants. The researcher was individually present throughout the session to make necessary clarification in case there were confusions and queries from the participants. Participants were also told that there was no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, and hence, no evaluative judgments regarding their personality, intelligence, or morality would be made on the basis of their answers. So, they should feel free to give their honest responses.

**Results**

The results reported here are based on the data pooled for various age groups. ANOVA statistics was used to analyze the data collected from the respondents. Table 1 shows the mean scores and SD of respondents from different groups on optimism in relation with their preference on individualistic and collectivistic values.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of overall sample for optimism measure for cultural orientations**

Age groups	N	Cultural Orientations			
		Individualism (N = 186)		Collectivism (N = 240)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
15-20	110	21.29	3.71	21.08	3.00
25-30	106	22.00	3.50	22.10	3.21
45-50	105	19.50	3.75	21.00	2.45
60-70	105	20.18	4.36	21.29	3.73

Table shows that people with collectivistic orientation scored higher on dispositional optimism than that of with individualistic orientations. It was also found that respondents from 25-30 years age group with collectivistic orientation displayed highest level of optimism.

A 4x2 ANOVA statistics was used to examine the effects of age and individualistic and collectivistic orientations on the level of optimism. Table 2 summarizes these results.

**Table 2. ANOVA outcomes for the effect of age and individualism and collectivism on optimism**

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F-ratio
Age	177.88	3	59.29	4.84**
Individualism-collectivism	33.06	1	33.06	2.70†
Age x IC	55.88	3	18.62	1.52
Total	193647.00	426		

\*p <.05, \*\*p < .01, †<.1

**Table 3. LSD Post Hoc Comparison for Optimism Scores**

(I) Age groups	(J) Age group	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
15-20	25-30	.89	.48	-2.12	.34
	45-50	.94*	.48	-.29	2.18
	60-70	.46	.48	-.77	1.69
25-30	15-20	-.89	.48	-.34	2.12
	45-50	1.84*	.48	.60	3.08
	60-70	1.35*	.48	.11	2.59
45-50	15-20	-.94*	.48	-2.18	.29
	25-30	-1.84*	.48	-3.08	-.60
	60-70	-.49	.48	-1.73	.76
60-70	15-20	-.46	.48	-1.69	.77
	25-30	-1.35*	.48	-2.59	-.11
	45-50	.49	.48	-.76	1.73

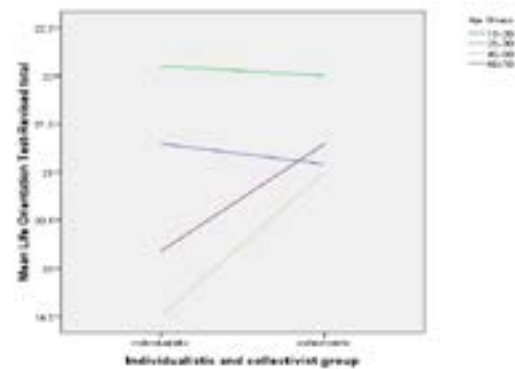
\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01

Table 2 indicates significant effect of age on the level of optimism. There was no significant difference found in dispositional optimism between people with individualistic and collectivistic orientations. Interaction effect was also found insignificant.

LSD Post Hoc test (Table 3) revealed that respondents from 15-20 year age group significantly differed from 45-50 year age group. Respondents of 25-30 year age group

significantly differed from those of 45-50 and 60-70 year age groups. Other mean comparisons were non-significant.

Results obtained from ANOVA statistics can be explained with the help of graphical representation. Following figure depicts the mean scores of respondents from different groups on optimism in relation with their preference on individualistic and collectivistic values



**Figure. Mean scores of respondents from different groups on optimism**

Mean scores depicted in figure suggest interesting results. It appears that respondents belonging to 45-50 and 60-70 year age with collectivistic orientations displayed higher level of optimism than people with individualistic orientations. On the contrary, respondents belonging to 25-30 and 45-50 year age with individualistic orientations displayed slightly higher level of optimism than people with collectivistic orientations. Figure also indicates a cross over, probably an interaction, between two age groups (15-20 year and 60-70 year) for optimism.

**Discussion**

The present study aimed to replicate the idea of You, Fung and Isaacowitz (2009) to explore the effect of cultural orientation on dispositional optimism with progressive age in Indian context. A cross sectional study was conducted with more than 400 participants from urban and rural areas of Varanasi district. Results obtained from the analysis indicate that age has significant effect on dispositional optimism, but the significant difference between people with individualistic and collectivistic orientations for optimism was

found significant at .1 level. Interaction effect was also found insignificant. Findings of the present study may be explained with the help of outcomes of other researches and establish notions.

Finding of the present study indicates inconsistency in the relationship of age with optimism. There was no linear relationship was found between age and optimism. In the present study respondents from younger age groups displayed higher level of optimism than other two aged groups. Respondents from 25-30 year age group displayed highest and respondents of 45-50 year age group displayed lowest level of optimism among all age groups. Thus our hypothesis for relationships of age with optimism is rejected. Research conducted on the relationship between age and emotion regulation suggested that people of young adult age have the richest armory of emotion regulation strategies and it promotes belief to tackle any adverse situation effectively (John & Gross, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011). This might be the reason for displaying highest level of optimism. Similar finding was obtained for young adults in a study conducted in India (Mishra, 2013).

On the other hand, findings of the present study endorse earlier researches. Daukantaite and Bergman (2005) found that future attitude at age 13 had a positive but weak association with dispositional optimism at age 43. Lennings (2000) further revealed an age-related increase in dispositional optimism in a sample aged from 55 to 99 years. In addition, Chapin (2001) found that age was negatively associated with self-protective pessimism toward health risks in a community sample with age ranging from 14 to 78 years. In a study, it was found that only older adults who had a positive relationship with God had a higher level of optimism and a lower level of pessimism compared to younger counterparts (Mattis et al. 2004). Other than these findings from Western cultures, two studies on Chinese found a comparable level of dispositional optimism among high-school students, undergraduate students and middle-aged adults (30–45 years), and within all these groups, age was unrelated to dispositional optimism (Lai & Cheng, 2004; Lai & Yue, 2000). It suggests that the relationship

underlying age and dispositional optimism may be shaped by various other factors such as life stress and religious beliefs. Other studies indicate that optimism is not an independent entity. Gender could be one of the factors to explain variations in optimism in general and also from developmental perspective (Pradhan et al, 2004; Shukla, 2010).

Another finding of the present study indicates a statistical significant difference between people with individualistic and collectivistic orientations for dispositional optimism at .01 level. Which suggest that living in different environment (Urban and rural), considering them as different culture (Individualistic and collectivistic), within a culture may affect the level of optimism partly but not totally. So hypothesis regarding cultural orientation and optimism partially accepted. Finding of the present study does not align with the findings of other researchers conducted elsewhere.

The cultural difference in dispositional optimism has been confirmed in empirical studies using different paradigms (Chang et al. 2001; Heine & Lehman, 1995; Lee & Seligman, 1997). Chang et al. (2001) also found that while European-Americans were more optimistic in predicting negative events, Japanese were more pessimistic in predicting positive events. Moreover, dispositional optimism was found to be associated with many measures of cultural values, including independent-interdependent self-construal, uncertainty avoidance, self-enhancement and self-criticism, collectivism and individualism (Chang, 1996; Fischer & Chalmers, 2008; Lai & Yue, 2000), suggesting that the developmental trajectories of dispositional optimism can potentially be shaped by what cultures emphasize. Studies conducted in Indian context suggest that people use both individualistic and collectivistic values, depend upon the demand of the situation and suitability with ones circumstances (Mishra, 1994; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). Interaction effect of age and cultural orientation was found insignificant. Thus our hypothesis for the effect of cultural values on optimism with progressive age is accepted. One possible reason behind such finding is the modernization of society. In past three decades, due to excess migration of people from rural

to urban areas and introduction of different living style substantive changes took place in the structure and socialization process of rural society.

### Conclusions

It may be concluded from the findings of the present study that optimism does changes with progressive age. Adult people are more optimistic than adolescents and old people. There is a possibility that cultural values contribute to level of optimism at different stages of life. Overall people with collectivistic orientation displayed higher level of optimism than those with individualistic values.

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