

Optimism Is Universal: Exploring the Presence and Benefits of Optimism in a Representative Sample of the World

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Abstract

Current theories of optimism suggest that the tendency to maintain positive expectations for the future is an adaptive psychological resource associated with improved well-being and physical health, but the majority of previous optimism research has been conducted in industrialized nations. The present study examined (a) whether optimism is universal, (b) what demographic factors predict optimism, and (c) whether optimism is consistently associated with improved subjective well-being and perceived health worldwide. The present study used representative samples of 142 countries that together represent 95% of the world's population. The total sample of 150,048 individuals had a mean age of 38.28 ($SD = 16.85$) and approximately equal sex distribution (51.2% female). The relationships between optimism, subjective well-being, and perceived health were examined using hierarchical linear modeling. Results indicated that most individuals and most countries worldwide are optimistic and that higher levels of optimism are associated with improved subjective well-being and perceived health worldwide. The present study provides compelling evidence that optimism is a universal phenomenon and that the associations between optimism and improved psychological functioning are not limited to industrialized nations.

The capacity to maintain an optimistic orientation toward the future has been proposed to be one of the defining features of the human species (Tiger, 1979). The potential benefits of optimism have been a popular research topic in psychology, and there is now extensive research examining whether an optimistic orientation toward the future is adaptive (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). However, the majority of previous optimism research has been conducted in industrialized nations. The present study extends this previous work by examining the origins and benefits of optimism using representative samples from 142 countries that together represent 95% of the world's population. In addition to examining worldwide variations in individual levels of optimism, we examine whether the associations between optimism and improved psychological functioning are consistent worldwide.

Is Optimism Adaptive?

Whether positive thoughts about the future are adaptive is an issue that has been debated for centuries (Peterson, 2000). From classic characters of fiction such as Voltaire's (1759) Pangloss, to psychiatrists and psychologists such as Freud (1928), who argued that optimism is widespread but illusory,

many have proposed that positive expectations for the future are damaging delusions. On the contrary, historical figures such as Martin Luther, who said that "everything that is done in the world is done by hope," or 20th-century self-help author Norman Vincent Peale (1952), who advocated for "the power of positive thinking," have argued positive expectations and thoughts about the future are, in fact, adaptive.

Recent theories of optimism within psychology have generally sided with the latter perspective, that positive thoughts about the future provide benefits (Taylor & Brown, 1988). One of the most widely studied models within psychology for describing how and why positive expectancies for the future may confer benefits is Scheier and Carver's (1985) theory of optimism. This theory defines optimism as a stable individual difference that reflects the general perception that future positive outcomes will be common and future negative outcomes will be rare. This theory differs from related theories such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and hope (Snyder, 2002) in that optimism, as conceptualized by Scheier and Carver (1985), emphasizes globalized positive and negative expectations and

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