

An Exploratory Investigation of Learned Optimism

Swati Kendurkar^{1*}, Vivek Sharma²

^{1,2}IMS, DAVV, Indore, India

Available online at: www.isroset.org

Received: 30/May/2018, Revised: 15/Jun/2018, Accepted: 25/Jun/2018, Online: 31/Jul/2018

Abstract- In the early 1960's, psychologist thought that they had answers to most of the important questions about human behavior. Why do human beings act the way they do? Why they become depressed, anxious or hostile? Why do they do poorly at work or in other endeavors? Present study tries to find the answer of these questions. For the study Automobile and Pharmaceutical Industries took into the consideration

Keywords-- Optimism, positive attitude, pessimism

I. INTRODUCTION

Optimism 'involves positive, relatively stable, favorable expectations and outcomes for the future; it is associated with making positive cognitive appraisals of situations, then with making active, engaged coping efforts to deal with stress, making the best of whatever is encountered' (Stewart, 2007). Professor Martin Seligman (1996), the leader of the positive psychology movement, uses the concept of explanatory styles to define the term optimism 'The basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way you think about causes.'

Explanatory Style

Seligman's theory of explanatory style, a cognitive personality variable, has been used extensively in psychological research to predict traits such as depression. (Hjelle, Bush & Warren, 1996; Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Seligman, 1990) However, it also offers a framework for exploring optimism and pessimism, (Seligman, 1990) a theory that materialized from the concept of learned helplessness. Explanatory style is a descriptive term that is used to explain individual differences in how people explicate the cause of bad events. In other words each of us has our own habitual way of thinking that we use to justify setbacks and failures (Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale 1978; Seligman et al 1979). This theory is based on individual differences along three dimensions: permanence, pervasiveness and personalization. The three p's attempt to address the following questions:

Dr. Seligman introduces the concept of "explanatory style." How we talk to ourselves about negative occurrences is the predominant determinant of optimism versus pessimism. Interestingly, he does this by recounting a severe critique of his work delivered publicly in a lecture at Oxford University in April, 1975, by John Teasdale. Rather than becoming defensive and rejecting Dr. Teasdale's analysis, Dr. Seligman solicited his partnership in developing an explanation for his results. Out of this work came the concept of explanatory style. Dr. Seligman writes:

"Throughout my career, I've never had much use for the tendency among psychologists to shun criticism. It's a long-standing tradition acquired from the field of psychiatry, with its medical authoritarianism and its reluctance to admit error. Going back at least to Freud, the world of the research psychiatrists has been dominated by a handful of despots who treat dissenters like invading barbarians usurping their domain. One critical word from a young disciple and he was banished. p.42.

Observation: Many educational researchers should read, re-read, memorize, paraphrase, re-word in iambic pentameter, and otherwise study Dr. Seligman's views until they have replaced their own defensiveness and dogmatism with his embrace of criticism.

Launching from a base of attribution theory prepared by Bernard Weiner, doctors Seligman and Teasdale, along with two graduate students working with Dr. Seligman, began developing a new approach. Looking at habitual explanatory styles, they

added the concept of pervasiveness to the dimensions of permanence and personalization which Weiner had identified. This chapter presents an Attribution Style Questionnaire (ASQ) and scoring instructions.

Optimism is commonly thought of as being a rather trivial attribute. An optimist is widely thought of as someone who sees the silver lining in every cloud and views the world through rose-tinted spectacles (or a glass that? Always half full).

Pollyanna is their role model and if they just think positively, everything will turn out for the best in this best of all possible worlds. Some of these attitudes can be witnessed in optimists, but with more than 20 years of solid scientific research into the subject, it's clear that optimism goes much deeper than was previously thought.

There are two main ways to define optimism. Scheier and Carver, for example, define optimism as 'the global generalized tendency to believe that one will generally experience good versus bad outcomes in life.' In everyday language this means 'looking on the bright side of life.' In such a definition, pessimism is the tendency to believe 'if something will go wrong for me, it will'. The other main way to define optimism is to use the concept of 'explanatory style'. This is the approach taken by Professor Martin Seligman, the leader of the Positive Psychology movement and so is the one which is most appropriate for us to outline. Scheier and Carver's optimism questionnaire (LOT-R) is included in the tools, tips and techniques section.

Learned optimism was defined by Martin Seligman and published in his 1990 book, *Learned Optimism*. The benefits of an optimistic outlook are many: Optimists are higher achievers and have better overall health. Pessimism, on the other hand, is much more common; pessimists are more likely to give up in the face of adversity or to suffer from depression. Seligman invites pessimists to learn to be optimists by thinking about their reactions to adversity in a new way. The resulting optimism—one that grew from pessimism—is a learned optimism. The optimist's outlook on failure can thus be summarized as "What happened was an unlucky situation (not personal), and really just a setback (not permanent) for this one, of many, goals (not pervasive)". Other differences exist between pessimists and optimists in terms of explanatory style.

- **Permanence:** Optimistic people believe bad events to be more temporary than permanent and bounce back quickly from failure, whereas others may take longer periods to recover or may never recover. They also believe good things happen for reasons that are permanent, rather than seeing the transient nature of positive events. Optimists point to specific temporary causes for negative events; pessimists point to permanent causes.
- **Pervasiveness:** Optimistic people compartmentalize helplessness, whereas pessimistic people assume that failure in one area of life means failure in life as a whole. Optimistic people also allow good events to brighten every area of their lives rather than just the particular area in which the event occurred.
- **Personalization:** Optimists blame bad events on causes outside of themselves, whereas pessimists blame themselves for events that occur. Optimists are therefore generally more confident. Optimists also quickly internalize positive events while pessimists externalize them.

Learned optimism was noted to have effect, too. People who practiced their optimism skills are reported to be more successful in the world of business. Again, the reason is not because optimists have some magical power. Recall the ABCDE model. Once you're in the full optimistic attitude, a benefit is improved energy, and with more energy, there is usually an increase in productivity. The more productive you are at work, on average, the more successful you will be.

So there you have it. What was once thought to be impossible to change has evidence to suggest otherwise. If you're interested in continuing to learn about the issue, then perhaps you might check out Martin Seligman's book on the subject, or read the research for yourself, so you can come to your own conclusion. There is nothing inherently wrong with seeing the glass half empty. Sometimes it could be helpful. However, that doesn't mean you shouldn't take a look at the benefits of being an optimist!

The illiterate of the 21st century," Alvin Toffler famously said, "will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." Our outlook on the world and our daily choices of disposition and behavior are in many ways learned patterns to which Toffler's insight applies with all the greater urgency — the capacity to "learn, unlearn, and relearn" emotional behaviors and psychological patterns is, indeed, a form of existential literacy. 'Happiness' is a scientifically unwieldy notion, but there are three different forms of it if you can pursue. For the 'Pleasant Life,' you aim to have as much positive emotion as possible and learn the skills to amplify positive emotion. For the 'Engaged Life,' you identify your highest strengths and talents and recraft your life to use them as much as you can in work, love, friendship, parenting, and leisure. For the 'Meaningful Life,' you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self.

Seligman begins by identifying the three types of happiness of which our favorite psychology grab-bag term is composed:

'Happiness' is a scientifically unwieldy notion, but there are three different forms of it if you can pursue. For the 'Pleasant Life,' you aim to have as much positive emotion as possible and learn the skills to amplify positive emotion. For the 'Engaged Life,' you identify your highest strengths and talents and redraft your life to use them as much as you can in work, love, friendship, parenting, and leisure. For the 'Meaningful Life,' you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self.

He then defines optimism and pessimism, pointing out the challenge to self-identify as either, and offers a heartening, heavily researched reassurance:

The optimists and the pessimists: he have been studying them for the past twenty-five years. The defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault. The optimists, who are confronted with the same hard knocks of this world, think about misfortune in the opposite way. They tend to believe defeat is just a temporary setback, that its causes are confined to this one case.

The optimists believe defeat is not their fault: Circumstances, bad luck, or other people brought it about. Such people are unfazed by defeat. Confronted by a bad situation, they perceive it as a challenge and try harder.

He have seen that, in tests of hundreds of thousands of people, a surprisingly large number will be found to be deep-dyed pessimists and another large portion will have serious, debilitating tendencies towards pessimism. He have learned that it is not always easy to know if you are a pessimist, and that far more people than realize it are living in this shadow. A pessimistic attitude may seem so deeply rooted as to be permanent. He have found, however, that pessimism is escapable. Pessimists can in fact learn to be optimists, and not through mindless devices like whistling a happy tune or mouthing platitudes...but by learning a new set of cognitive skills. Far from being the creations of boosters or of the popular media, these skills were discovered in the laboratories and clinics of leading psychologists and psychiatrists and then rigorously validated.

Seligman, however, also corroborates what's perhaps Burkeman's most central admonition — that the extreme individualism and ambition our society worships has created a culture in which the fear of failure dictates all. As Seligman puts it:

Depression is a disorder of the 'I,' failing in your own eyes relative to your goals. In a society in which individualism is becoming rampant, people more and more believe that they are the center of the world. Such a belief system makes individual failure almost inconsolable.

The first wave of research focused on defining optimism and creating measurement tools. This then allowed researchers to investigate what optimistic people could do and would do. The resulting studies showed an almost startlingly positive picture in favour of the benefits of an optimistic outlook, whether this is dispositional (Carver and Scheier) or the way we explain events that happen to us (Seligman and Peterson). This coupled with the work of Shelley Taylor who argued strongly in her book *Positive Illusions* (1989) that positive distortions of personal attributes, mastery and assessment of the future are widespread and actually the sign of healthy, well adjusted people, heralded optimism as a desirable and positive trait.

Carver and Scheier -Dispositional Optimism: Charles Carver and Michael Scheier coined the term 'dispositional optimism' to describe their approach – the global expectation that good things will be plentiful in the future and bad things scarce. They argued that optimism is associated with, and leads to, securing positive outcomes whereas pessimism is associated with greater negative outcomes (Scheier and Carver 1992, Scheier, Carver and Bridges 2001). For example, in studies of young adults, optimism has been found to be associated with greater life satisfaction (Chang, Maydeu-Olivares & D'Zurilla, 1997) whereas pessimism has been found to be associated with greater depressive symptoms (Chang et al 1997). Carver and Scheier see optimism as dispositional. They have found that optimists report fewer physical symptoms, better health habits and better coping strategies. Even among a group who had experienced the bad outcome of being diagnosed with breast cancer (Carver et al 1997) found that optimistic personality types experienced less distress, engaged in more active coping and were less likely to engage in avoidance or denial strategies.

Explanatory Style

Arising from Seligman's famous "learned helplessness" research in the 70s and 80s, i.e. the reaction of giving up when faced with the belief that whatever you do does not matter, was the related concept of "explanatory style". This was developed from the analysis and patterns of how people explained events that happened to them. Seligman developed this analysis into the field of optimism with several other colleagues. He authored the books *Learned Optimism* and later *The Optimistic Child* to highlight the relationship between optimism and pessimism and certain styles of explanatory style. Seligman claimed in the former book, "An optimistic explanatory style stops helplessness, whereas pessimistic explanatory style spreads helplessness" (p. 15). Seligman developed attribution retraining to help people "learn optimism". According to this perspective, those who explain away bad events with internal (caused by themselves), stable (will continue to

occur) and global (will happen in other spheres of life) causes are described as pessimistic whilst those who favor external, unstable and specific causes are described as optimistic. (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995)

The theory was devised in the context of learned helplessness and, as such, it may rely too heavily on the notion that the absence of pessimism creates optimism. The application of “learned optimism” focuses on reducing helplessness/depression through the cognitive therapy models developed by Beck (1967, 1979) and Ellis (Ellis and Harper, 1975). These cognitive behavioural techniques may not actually be teaching people “optimism”, but instead may just be reducing pessimism. Peterson, himself a proponent of explanatory style, warns that “Research on optimism (i.e. optimistic explanatory style) will not be as substantial if it remains closely tied to helplessness theory.” (Peterson, 2006 p. 122)

II. OBJECTIVES

- 1 To study the learned optimism level among employees of automobile industry in Pithampur.
- 2 To compare the learned optimism level of male and female employees of automobile industry in Pithampur.
- 3 To compare the learned optimism level of employees working at various functional departments of automobile industry in Pithampur.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is a descriptive investigation to explore learned optimism level of the various optimism levels if the various employees in automobile industry in Pithampur. A sample of 100 respondents was collected using survey techniques. The respondents were approached through convenience method at various organizations working at Pithampur. The data was collected by using standard instrument developed by Dr. Upinder dhar, its reliability and validity were very high.

H1: There is no significant effect of gender on learned optimism.

T-Test

Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
lo_tot	Male	58	69.4483	12.34187	1.62057
	female	42	63.5000	11.48753	1.77256

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
lo_to	Equal variances assumed	1.501	.223	2.448	98	.016	5.94828	2.42967	1.12667	10.76988
	Equal variances not assumed			2.477	91.967	.015	5.94828	2.40171	1.17824	10.71831

H1

Here t cal= 2.448 and t tab= 1.96 at 5% and so the null hypothesis is rejected.

Also it is observed that p value <0.05.

It is concluded that there is significant effect of gender on learned optimism , Males are better than females.

H2:There is no significant effect of functional area on learned optimism.

Oneway

Descriptives

lo_tot

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Finance	1	79.0000	79.00	79.00
Marketing	28	68.0000	15.57538	2.94347	61.9605	74.0395	50.00	98.00
Engg.	38	65.5526	10.27381	1.66663	62.1757	68.9295	50.00	91.00
Others	33	67.3030	11.51761	2.00496	63.2191	71.3870	50.00	98.00
Total	100	66.9500	12.29057	1.22906	64.5113	69.3887	50.00	98.00

ANOVA

lo_tot

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	254.386	3	84.795	.554	.647
Within Groups	14700.364	96	153.129		
Total	14954.750	99			

H2

It is observed that $0.554 < F_{tab}$ and p value is > 0.05 , the null hypothesis is accepted.

It is concluded that there is no significant effect of functional area on learned optimism.

IV. CONCLUSION

Significant effect of gender has been observed on learned optimism with males being more optimistic than females. This conclusion is matching with the other studies as females are generally more cautious towards working and due to work life balance are more pessimistic. In automobile companies the functional area of the employee is an important dimension to be discussed, so the present study has considered this also. The results show that there is no significant difference between the employees working in different functional areas.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Buchanan, G. M., & Seligman M. E. P. (Eds.). (1995) Explanatory style. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Carver, C.S., & Gaines, J. G. (1987). Optimism, pessimism, and postpartum depression. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 11, 449-462.
- [2]. Chang, E. C., Maydeu-Olivares, A., & D'Zurilla, T. J. (1997). Optimism and pessimism as partially independent constructs: Relations to positive and negative affectivity and psychological well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 23, 433-440.
- [3]. Ellis, A., & Harper, R. A. (1975) A new guide to rational living. North Hollywood, California: Wilshire Books.
- [4]. Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (1984). Causal explanations as a risk factor for depression: Theory and evidence. *Psychological Review*, 91, 347-374.
- [5]. Seligman, M. E. P. (1990). *Learned Optimism*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc Scheier, M. F., & Carver, C. S. (1992). Effects of optimism on psychological and physical well-being: Theoretical overview and empirical update. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 16, 201-228.