



## Short Communication

## Dispositional bases of self-serving positive evaluations

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 21 December 2012

Received in revised form 27 May 2013

Accepted 17 July 2013

Available online 7 August 2013

## Keywords:

Self-esteem

Optimism

Life satisfaction

Positive orientation

Positive evaluations

Better-than-average effect

## ABSTRACT

Positive orientation (POS) is the name given to the latent dimension common to self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction. Earlier findings attest to the trait-like nature of POS and to its unique contribution to well-adjustment across domains of functioning. The present study investigates the extent to which POS accounts for individuals' tendency to distort their self-assessment in a positive direction. Taking a class of students ( $N = 190$ ) at the beginning of their academic year, POS predicted the individuals' tendency to perform academically better-than-average (BTA) peers. POS accounted for BTA beyond what is merely due to self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism.

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## 1. Introduction

Interest in the positive features of individual functioning has gained increased attention over recent decades. Despite conflicting point of views, there is some agreement with a notion of well-being as a state in which individuals fully realize their potential, manage their life successfully, and contribute effectively to their community (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). This calls for a strong commitment of both scholars and practitioners to the identification of the major determinants and proper indicators of optimal functioning, and to the design of effective interventions aimed at enabling people to fully express their potential. Whereas a number of authors, in various ways and under different labels, have argued about a general disposition conducive to face experience under a positive outlook (e.g., "positive thinking", Scheier & Carver, 1993), Caprara et al. (2012) have focused on what is common to self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism, and have identified a trait-like basic disposition, named *positive orientation* (POS). Several authors have reported a high degree of correlation ( $r = .50$ ) between self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism (i.e., Cummins & Nistico, 2002; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). However, to our knowledge, no study has investigated the extent to which they can be traced to a common latent dimension, nor the gain that may derive from examining what they have in common and their distinctive features. Findings from twin studies (Caprara et al., 2009) have converged with longitudinal and cross-sectional findings in attest-

ing to the trait-like nature of POS and to its stability (Alessandri, Caprara, & Tisak, 2012a, 2012b). Cross-cultural studies document the generalizability of POS factorial structure across countries that widely differ in terms of cultural models of self, language, cultural and historical roots, and ways of life (Caprara et al., 2012). Positive associations with several indicators of well-functioning including health ( $r = .30$ ), quality of friendships ( $r = .30$ ), positive affectivity ( $r = .60$ ), ego-resiliency ( $r = .40$ ), the Big-Five traits (openness  $r = .36$ , conscientiousness  $r = .18$ , extraversion  $r = .48$ , agreeableness  $r = .34$ , and emotional stability  $r = .22$ ) further attest to the POS construct validity (Alessandri et al., 2012b).

The unique and pervasive contribution of positive POS to well-adjustment and success has been recently documented by findings showing that the specific variance of self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction have little or no significant influence on relevant outcomes like job-performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (Alessandri et al., 2012c). Whereas one cannot exclude that other constructs might be traced to POS in addition to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism, previous models which have included other individual differences that are usually correlated with self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism (e.g., trust, emotional stability, positive affectivity and generalized self-efficacy) have shown a worse fit than the posited model. Likewise, what self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction have in common is a unique basic and pervasive disposition to face, construe, and assess experience under a positive outlook. Viewing experience under a general positive outlook distinguishes the trait of POS from: (a) other traits focusing on habitual behaviors (e.g., personality traits) and (b) from other dispositions regarding specific goal-oriented tendencies (e.g., hope). It has been reasoned that

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people would not be able to stand the awareness of their own limitations or cope with the difficulties, adversities and losses in life unless they were predisposed to believe that they are worthy of regard, that life is worth living, and that the future is promising. Previous findings have shown that, after removing the shared variance of self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction, the covariation of their uniqueness with indicators of well-functioning is negligible (Alessandri, Caprara, & Tisak, 2012a).

As a large body of literature attests to a self-enhancement motive and namely the individuals' need to hold a positive view of themselves and to its impact on well-functioning and well-being (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), we are inclined to posit a kind of self-care at the core of POS, since it seems unlikely that people convey a rosy view of their own past and future unless they believe it is worthwhile. Yet, previous findings suggest that POS may operate as a potential predisposing to self-enhancement and going beyond self-esteem. Thus, it is crucial to examine the extent to which POS and self-esteem are sides of the same coin or distinct, although related, phenomena. To this end, we believe that to examine the extent to which POS may account for phenomena that have been commonly traced to self-protection and self-enhancement, like the individuals' tendency towards self-serving positive cognitive bias (Cummins & Nistico, 2002) and illusory beliefs (Taylor & Brown, 1988), may be a good start.

Based on these premises, the present study aimed to investigate the extent to which individuals' tendency to expect to perform better-than-average peers can be traced to POS. The so-called better-than-average effect (BTA) has been reported among the most robust expressions of self-enhancement phenomena (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Previous studies have already shown that self-assessments are usually biased in the direction of positively distorted evaluations (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005) and point to positive associations of self-esteem with the individual's tendency towards positive cognitive distortions (Cummins & Nistico, 2002). Taking a class of students at the beginning of their academic year, we sought to provide support for the assumptions that (1) only BTA (and not real academic outcome) is significantly associated with POS when subjects are invited to predict their academic performance in comparison with their peers; (2) the contributions of self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction to the BTA effect are negligible once POS is taken into consideration.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 190 sophomores (72% females) pursuing a degree in Psychology, with a mean age of 21.08 years ( $SD = 3.64$ ).

### 2.2. Procedure

During the first week of the academic year, subjects attending the course of Personality Psychology were invited to take part in the study and, after obtaining their consent, to fill in a number of questionnaires geared to assessing the variables under examination: self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction from which to derive their POS. The participants were also invited to predict their mark in the final examination and the average mark of their class. A partial credit was granted for student participation.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Self-esteem (RSE)

Self-esteem was assessed by using the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ) which measures the extent to which partici-

pants feel they possess good qualities and have achieved personal success (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"). Each item is scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

#### 2.3.2. Optimism (LOT-R)

Optimism was assessed by using the 10-item set from the "Life Orientation Test" (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). In particular, the 6 scale items (four items were "fillers") measured the subjects' expectations regarding their future and their general sense of optimism ( $\alpha = .77$ ). The participants provided their ratings using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item for optimism is: "in uncertain times, I usually expect the best".

#### 2.3.3. Life satisfaction (SWLS)

Participants' life satisfaction was assessed using the 5-item set of the "Satisfaction with Life Scale" (Diener, 1984). For each item, participants rated the extent to which they felt generally satisfied with life on a 7-point rating scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item for life satisfaction is: "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal". Alpha coefficient was .83.

#### 2.3.4. Final evaluation

The final evaluation ranged from 18 (*sufficient*) to 30 (*excellent*).

#### 2.3.5. Previous academic achievement

Participants were asked to report their average score resulting from previous examinations using the same range from 18 (*sufficient*) to 30 (*excellent*).

#### 2.3.6. BTA

Participants were further asked to report (a) their expected mark and (b) the expected average mark of the class, at the end of the course by using the same scale from 18 (*sufficient*) to 30 (*excellent*). Then, a BTA index was obtained for each subject by subtracting the average expected mark of the class from the mark he or she expected to achieve. We argued that the greater the difference between self- and other-assessment, the higher the BTA effect.

### 2.4. Data analysis strategy and model evaluation

In order to test our main hypotheses, we used a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach (Kline, 2010). Parameters were estimated by Maximum-Likelihood (ML) using the *Mplus* 5.1 program (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). Missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum-Likelihood (Kline, 2010). Model fit was evaluated following standard procedure: the sensitive chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ; Kline, 2010) was complemented by the inspection of the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square of Approximation (RMSEA) with 90% confidence interval (CI) and the Root Mean Square Residuals Standardized (SRMR). A nonsignificant chi-square is indicative of a perfect fit (Kline, 2010). In terms of alternative fit indices, we accepted models with RMSEA  $<.08$ , SRMR  $<.06$ , and CFI  $>.90$  (Kline, 2010).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics

The zero order correlations (Table 1) showed that self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction were positively correlated among each other and moderately and positively correlated with the BTA effect. BTA reported a high positive correlation with previous

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