



The mediating role of optimism in the relations between sense of coherence, subjective and psychological well-being among late adolescents



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether optimism is a mediator between sense of coherence, subjective well-being and psychological well-being among late adolescents. Two hundred and eleven participants completed the Sense of Coherence Scale, the Life Orientation Test-Revised, the Satisfaction With Life Scale, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, and the Psychological Well-Being Scale. Results of path analysis revealed both direct and indirect effects of sense of coherence on subjective and psychological well-being measures, suggesting that optimism served as a partial mediator. The mediating role of optimism may be more fully understood within the framework of the self-concordance model. Consistent with the model, individuals who have formed meaningful goals tend to experience more positive affective states, which in turn enhances well-being. The findings also suggest that sense of coherence should not be interpreted as an autonomous resource contributing to a favorable development of late adolescents' well-being, but as a factor that works in connection with dispositional optimism.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, much attention has been paid to well-being in academic literature (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009; McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Waterman, 2013). Extensive research has demonstrated links between personality traits and well-being, and pointed out that their relationships are complex in nature (Sheldon & Hoon, 2013). Both sense of coherence and optimism proved to be important predictors of well-being. However, the research on how sense of coherence and optimism may account for variation in both types of well-being has not been examined. In addition, most studies examining sense of coherence and well-being focused mainly on adults, while adolescents have been under-investigated. Yet, the period of adolescence is associated with significant changes in decision-making processes regarding coherence and meaning, and with establishing a coherent philosophy of life that contributes to well-being (Erikson, 1982; Moksnes, Løhre, & Espnes, 2013). The purpose of this study is to investigate the associations between sense of coherence, optimism and well-being among Polish late adolescents.

1.1. The relationships between sense of coherence and well-being

The concept “sense of coherence” was introduced by Antonovsky (1979) who defined it as a specific way of perceiving life as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. Sense of coherence was presented as a global orientation that expresses the extent to which individuals have an enduring and dynamic feeling of confidence in their lives. Three dimensions are essential in Antonovsky's salutogenic concept: (1) comprehensibility, which reflects the extent to which one perceives the stimuli that confront one as consistent, structured and clear; (2) manageability, which is the extent to which one understands that the resources at one's disposal are adequate to meet life's demands; and (3) meaningfulness, which refers to the extent to which one feels that life makes sense (Antonovsky, 1987).

There is empirical evidence that sense of coherence contributes to well-being (Krok, 2009; Pallant & Lae, 2002). In recent decades two different approaches have been developed with regard to the study of well-being. Subjective well-being (SWB) focuses on the hedonic aspect of well-being which reflects the pursuit of happiness and a pleasant life. It is understood as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of one's life as a whole and encompasses three components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 2009). Psychological

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well-being (PWB) is based on an eudaimonic approach which stresses the fulfillment of human potential and a meaningful life. It focuses on growing and developing as a person, pursuing meaningful goals and values, and coping with life challenges (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Although there is ongoing debate regarding the conceptual distinction between these two types of well-being, research has shown that they are two related yet distinct concepts (Chen, Jing, Hayes, & Lee, 2013).

Research has shown that sense of coherence is connected to general well-being (Krok, 2009), quality of life among patients with chronic pulmonary disease (Delgado, 2007), physical and mental health among the elderly (Nygren et al., 2005), and positive well-being outcomes in work places (Feldt, 1997). The results suggest that sense of coherence is important for individuals' well-being, because it can facilitate positive human functioning and imbue life with a sense of purpose. Having a strong sense of coherence allows individuals to integrate essential parts of their approach to life as a whole (comprehensibility, manageability) and their striving to attain inner harmony and ultimate purpose (meaningfulness) which are all embedded in subjective and psychological well-being.

1.2. *The associations between optimism and well-being*

Optimism (vs. pessimism) is a dimension of personality defined by the expectation that good (vs. bad) things will happen to oneself in important domains of life (Scheier & Carver, 2009). Generalized optimism pertains to the person's entire life, rather than to just one domain or another. Optimism also reflects the human capacity to anticipate a positive future (Reker, 1997). In this sense, optimists tend to be confident and persistent in the face of challenging and difficult situations.

Optimism can be better understood in the perspective of broad expectancy-incentive models of motivation. The theories assume that behavior occurs in order to attain desired goals: states or actions. Individuals try to fit their behaviors to what they perceive as desirable. Engagement of effort depends on two elements: (1) having a goal that matters enough to try to reach it, and (2) expectancy i.e. confidence versus doubt that the goal can be obtained (Carver, 2014). Optimism plays an important role in adolescence, as the pursuit of meaningful goals and their attainment are central components of adaptive self-regulation processes for young people.

There is strong evidence found in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that optimism is connected with well-being. For instance, optimism significantly predicted positive affective aspects of subjective well-being in middle-aged adults and their psychological adjustment (Chang & Sanna, 2001). It was also negatively related to depressive symptomatology in both the general population (Vickers & Vogeltanz, 2000) and populations with various chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease (Shnek, Irvine, Stewart, & Abbey, 2001). Analysing links between personality and quality of life Wrosch and Scheier (2003) found that optimism was related to self-esteem, low depression, low negative emotions, and life satisfaction. Optimism is positively associated with positive affect and negatively associated with negative affect among adolescents (Ben-Zur, 2003). The above findings imply that optimism can be related to well-being indicators among late adolescents.

1.3. *The mediational model in research on sense of coherence and well-being*

Although empirical studies have examined the relationships between sense of coherence and well-being, little attention has been paid to the systematic study of the underlying mechanisms and potential mediators. Previous research has demonstrated that optimism plays a mediating role between several variables

associated with sense of coherence and well-being. It served as a mediator of the relation between perceived parental authoritative-ness and adjustment among adolescents (Jackson, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005). The finding is worth noting as adjustment is closely related to well-being. Karademas (2006) found that optimism partially mediates the relation of self-efficacy and perceived social support to well-being. In addition, optimism predicted a higher level of satisfaction with life and lower level of depressive symptoms which both served as indicators of well-being.

Research on a large group of adolescents showed that optimism served as a partial mediator in the relationships between meaning in life and both positive and negative aspects of well-being. However, the mediating role of optimism did not differ across gender (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010). The concept of meaning in life bears conspicuous resemblance to sense of coherence as they both contain ultimate purpose and meaning. Taking into account the above findings it is plausible that adaptive cognitive strategies (e.g., perceiving one's life in terms of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) may generate positive expectancies (e.g., optimism), which ultimately leads to enhanced levels of well-being.

The underlying mechanisms of the relationships between sense of coherence and well-being can be explained by the self-concordance model (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon et al., 2004) which has been widely applied in research on well-being (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005; Smith, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2007). The self-concordance model focuses on the motives underlying personal goal striving, the influences of goal motives on goal attainment, and their consequences for well-being. According to the model, autonomous goal motivation would predict positive expectancies, which can finally predict greater well-being (Sheldon & Cooper, 2008). Individuals who have meaningful goals and engage in meaning making activities tend to experience greater self-concordance, which in turn, increases the frequency of these activities. The more frequently people attain goals, the greater positive expectancies (i.e., optimism) they have. As a consequence, the attainment of goals, which are congruent with an individual's values and interests, will elevate well-being because they offer substantial support toward personal growth and development. Therefore, the association between attaining meaningful goals and outcomes (i.e., well-being) is likely to be mediated by positive expectancies (i.e., optimism).

1.4. *The present study*

In summary, this research evidence to date provides the rationale for the model proposed in the present study, in which we examine the mediating effects of optimism on the relationship between sense of coherence, subjective well-being and psychological well-being in a sample of Polish late adolescents. Central to this prospective study is an estimation of the mediation concerning optimism in relation to two different types of well-being: subjective and psychological. Based on the current research, the following hypotheses are thus formulated: (1) sense of coherence and optimism would be positively associated with subjective and psychological well-being indicators, (2) optimism would mediate the relation between sense of coherence and cognitive and affective domains of subjective well-being, (3) optimism would serve as a mediator between sense of coherence and psychological well-being on a basis of important goals and values.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants and procedure*

Two hundred and eleven participants (108 women and 103 men) took part in this study. Ages ranged from 16 to 20, with a

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