



## Cross-sectional age differences in dispositional optimism in Chinese children and adolescents



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### ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated the important roles of dispositional optimism played in individuals' life quality. But little is known about age differences in dispositional optimism especially in late childhood and adolescence. This study examined age differences in dispositional optimism in Chinese children and adolescents ( $N = 2738$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 12.75$  years;  $SD = 2.53$ ; age range 9–19). Results revealed that the bi-dimensional structure of dispositional optimism (i.e., optimism and pessimism) was similar in each grade. Optimism had a negative linear pattern with age. Pessimism decreased from strongly to weakly, showing a curvilinear pattern with age. Overall optimism (representing the presence of optimism and the lack of pessimism) had a positive linear relationship with age. Moreover, only the development of pessimism was moderated by gender and family socioeconomic status. These findings suggest that dispositional optimism varies by age, and that optimism and pessimism are partially independent.

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### 1. Introduction

The patterning of age-related differences in personality is an intrinsically interesting topic that can help to clarify the nature of personality development (Anusic, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2012; Donnellan & Lucas, 2008). As an important personality trait related to positive aspects of human development, dispositional optimism has been one focus of research since positive psychology was put forward. Although dispositional optimism is a cognitive construct (positive or negative expectations regarding future outcomes), it influences emotion, motivation and behaviors (Carver & Scheier, 2014). Numerous studies have indicated that dispositional optimism is related to many markers of better psychological and physical health, as well as better social connections, such as having greater social support and network size for optimists compared to pessimists (Andersson, 2012; Vollmann, Antoniw, Hartung, & Renner, 2011). However, little is known about how dispositional optimism develops with age (Orejudo, Puyuelo, Fernández-Turrado, & Ramos, 2012), especially in late childhood and adolescence. Accordingly, this study aimed to examine the cross-sectional age differences in dispositional optimism among Chinese children

and adolescents. Moreover, we also explored whether gender and SES moderated the age differences.

#### 1.1. Age differences in dispositional optimism

Previous few studies about the development of dispositional optimism mainly focused on adults, and these studies produced inconsistent findings (e.g., Gallagher, Lopez, & Pressman, 2013; Glaesmer et al., 2012; Lai & Cheng, 2004; You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). Compared to adulthood, late childhood and adolescence are periods of rapid biological, social, and psychological changes (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). Individuals during these periods have to cope with more intensive developmental tasks, and interact in new ways with others. These changes may largely influence the interaction between individuals and environments. According to the theory of life-span development (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006), dispositional optimism could develop across a lifetime as a function of the interaction between individuals and environments. So these changes may finally influence the development of dispositional optimism during these periods. Thus the question arises: how does dispositional optimism develop with age across childhood and adolescence?

Only several studies mentioned the relation between age and dispositional optimism in adolescence (Lai & Cheng, 2004; Liu, 2009). Lai and Cheng (2004) found null results in Hong Kong Chinese adolescents attending the 10th and 11th grades. Liu (2009) found that there was no

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difference in optimism among adolescents in 7th and 8th grades, but a decline among the 9th graders. These studies provided value information for prying about the development in dispositional optimism in adolescents. However, due to the convenient sampling, the narrow age range, or the limited sample sizes, much further work is needed to clarify the development in dispositional optimism in children and adolescents.

As there has been controversy about whether dispositional optimism is a bipolar or bi-dimensional structure (Carver & Scheier, 2014), we would examine the structure of dispositional optimism in each age group for further appropriate cross-age comparisons of dispositional optimism scores (Soto et al., 2011). Previous studies conducted among adolescents indicated that dispositional optimism included two separable factors (Lai & Yue, 2000; Liu, 2009; Liu & Chen, 2007). A recent behavior genetic study also documented that optimism and pessimism were distinct systems (Bates, 2015). So we hypothesized that the bi-dimensional structure of dispositional optimism would be similar across late childhood and adolescence.

During late childhood and adolescence, one important developmental task for youth is to develop autonomy (Eisenberg & Morris, 2004). Seeking autonomy may help youth to develop a sense of mastery and control about the future, which would promote their optimism (Heinonen et al., 2006). Meanwhile, the rapid biological, social, and psychological changes may bring youth stress and further erode their optimism (Atienza, Stephens, & Townsend, 2004). So we hypothesized optimism would have little change during these periods. Because only pessimism but not optimism had a positive relationship with irrational beliefs which decreased with age for cognitive development (Chang & Bridewell, 1998; Lee, Hallberg, & Haase, 1979), we hypothesized youth's pessimism would decrease with age. Accordingly, overall optimism (representing the presence of optimism and the lack of pessimism) would increase with age during these periods.

### 1.2. Effects of gender and SES on the development in dispositional optimism

Although previous research about the effect of gender on dispositional optimism produced conflicting findings (e.g., Gallagher et al., 2013; Glaesmer et al., 2012), social norms have different requirements on the roles of men and women in Chinese culture, which may cause different age trends in dispositional optimism for boys and girls across childhood and adolescence. So we hypothesized gender would moderate age trends in dispositional optimism. Moreover, because SES is especially important for the development of negative outcome expectancies and may not necessarily important for the development of positive expectancies (Taylor & Seaman, 1999), we hypothesized SES would moderate age trends only in pessimism.

### 1.3. The present study

To summarize, the objectives of our study were (1) to check the structure of dispositional optimism from late childhood to adolescence, (2) to examine age trends in dispositional optimism, (3) to explore whether age trends in dispositional optimism are moderated by gender, and (4) to explore whether age trends in dispositional optimism are moderated by SES. Based on the literature review, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** The bi-dimensional structure of dispositional optimism would be similar in each age group.

**Hypothesis 2.** Optimism would have little change while pessimism would decrease with age, and overall optimism would increase with age.

**Hypothesis 3.** Gender would moderate age trends in dispositional optimism.

**Hypothesis 4.** SES would moderate the age trends only in pessimism.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

To increase sample representativeness, particularly in terms of gender and SES, we recruited 2776 participants from three primary schools, two junior high schools, and three senior high schools during the autumn semester of 2015. We chose these schools according to the schools' locations with different socioeconomic development (Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Thirty-seven participants did not complete any of the measures and one participant's parents withdrew their child from the data usage, so 38 participants were excluded from the analysis. Youth nearly aged 9 or 10 can provide meaningful personality self-report (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2008), and the age was corresponding to the students in grade 4 in Chinese. So we recruited students starting at grade 4. In total, 2738 children and adolescents (age range 9–19) attending 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, and 11th grades participated in this study. The inclusion rate was 98.63%. The gender ratio was approximate to that of children and adolescents in Wuhan city (Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Because students attending 9th or 12th grades in China have faced with immense pressure for the entrance into high school or university, their parents and schools didn't agree to participant in the survey. So the 9th or 12th grade wasn't included in the sample. More information about participants was presented in Table 1. All grade groups were sufficiently large ( $N_s > 200$ ). There were <1% missing data and the missing data were estimated with Expectation Maximization (EM) procedure in SPSS.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Dispositional optimism

Dispositional optimism was measured by the Chinese version of the Life Orientation Test- Revised (CLOT-R; Liu & Chen, 2007). It was mainly adapted from the widely used Life Orientation Test- Revised (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). It consisted of five positively worded (e.g., When things are bad, I expect them to get better) and five negatively worded (e.g., Usually, I don't expect good things to happen to me) items, as well as two filler items (e.g., It's easy for me to relax). Participants were required to indicate on a 5-point scale the degree to which they agreed with each of the 12 items. As the CLOT-R supported a bi-dimensional structure, optimism and pessimism scores were calculated. Moreover, an overall optimism score was also calculated by summing the five positively worded and the five reverse-coded negatively worded items to represent both the presence of optimism and the absence of pessimism. Such an overall optimism score may be useful for clinical and research applications (Glaesmer et al., 2012). This scale has been shown to be internally consistent in prior studies of Chinese adolescents (e.g., Chen et al., 2016). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.73 for overall optimism, 0.67 for optimism, and 0.79 for pessimism.

#### 2.2.2. Family SES

Due to too many missing values on the traditional measures of family SES, such as family income (Currie et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2012), the Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Currie et al., 2008) was administered to youth. The scale included four items: Does your family own a car, van, or truck (No = 0; Yes, one = 1; Yes, two or more = 2); Do you have your own bedroom for yourself (No = 0; Yes = 1); During the past 12 months, how many times did you travel away on holiday with your family (Not at all = 0; Once = 1; Twice = 2; More than twice = 3); and How many computers does your family own (None = 0; One = 1; Two = 2; More than two = 3). Total scores were calculated by summing the scores on these items, with higher total scores indicating higher SES. The FAS is well established with good internal consistency

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