



Optimism in adolescence: A cross-sectional study of the influence of family and peer group variables on junior high school students

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ABSTRACT

The role of optimism in health and well-being is widely researched, yet there is little known about the factors contributing to its development. This study analyzes the role that family and peer group factors play on a sample of 386 junior high school students. The results show that both variables are related to optimism, while their role differs according to gender. For the most part, boys showed that having everyday positive experiences with their peers at school is related to optimism, while the opposite holds true for pessimism. In relation to girls, family communication seems to be a considerable predictor of optimism whereas family conflicts tend to affect pessimism. In both cases, it is apparent that negative incidences with peers can be associated with pessimism while the absence of these events relates to optimism. We would like to highlight the importance of analyzing the relationships between optimism and other variables regarding gender differences. Even while explained variance percentages may be low, it is necessary to continue researching other variables related to optimism in adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, psychology has shifted its interest from researching negative to positive aspects of human development. Though there is a great amount of research in this field, an area, which has hardly been of interest, is the development and formation of these personality characteristics. In this study, we will focus on the foundation of one of these concepts, optimism (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Wong & Lim, 2009). For which, regardless of the large quantity of available data, the need for research is still recognized (Chang, 2002).

Two theoretical models support this construct, dispositional optimism (Carver & Scheier, 2002) and attributive style optimism (Gillham, Shatté, Reivich, & Seligman, 2002). In the first model, optimism refers to the expectation of achieving one's goals. These expectations range from the optimist, who perceives goals as attainable, to the pessimist, whose goals are perceived as impossible or challenging to reach. It is considered that these expectations then influence behaviors and generate emotions (Carver & Scheier, 2002). The second model derives from the reformulated theory of learned helplessness (Gillham et al., 2002).

The hypotheses surrounding the nature of the birth of optimism extends from hereditary positions (Plomin et al., 1992) to environmentalist positions, revealing in the latter role-modeling and direct experiences as influential factors (Gillham et al., 2002). On a larger scale, early adverse experiences during infancy seem to be associated with a decrease in optimism, whereas quality relationships with parents show an increase in optimism. This could have a cushioning effect when facing certain stressful events that might occur during infancy such as; episodes of ill-treatment, divorce, family conflicts, prolonged economic difficulties or chronic infant illnesses (Gibb et al., 2001; Heinonen, Ramikainen, Keltikangas, & Strandberg, 2004; Korkeila, Kivela, Suominen, & Batear, 2004). Moreover, Lai (2009) proves that beyond life events, the combination of optimism and minor hassles predict depressive symptoms in a sample group of adolescents. Additionally, this study finds a strong relationship among peers, showing that people who experience more life events of this kind display lower scores in dispositional optimism. In conjunction with these factors, it is apparent that personal academic success, parents' socio-economic status, one's vocational choice, or job success can also predict adult optimism (Ek, Remes, & Sovio, 2004).

Another important factor contributing to the development of optimism is role modeling, which a child is subjected to, primarily under the influence of parents and educators. Although it was traditionally accepted that role modeling played a central part in the development of optimism, current research shows that this factor seems to be directly related to events pertaining exclusively to

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children. As Alloy et al. (2001) proved, role modeling, positive reinforcement, and approval from parents are more influential in a child's life than a child's own personal experiences. Furthermore, negative inferential feedback during their children's life events seems to be more relevant in determining cognitions than parents' own attributions (Alloy et al., 2001).

In conjunction with the role-modeling hypothesis, it has also been found that parents' behaviors have an impact on children's development of optimism. Referred to as an indirect route, it shows that parenting styles as well as parents themselves influence the beliefs of their children (Alloy et al., 2001; Jackson, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005). Parents' optimism influences parenting styles with their children, and these styles are related to optimism in adolescents. It appears that optimistic parents dedicate more time to supervising and encouraging their children and are less likely to resort to measures of punishment (Jones, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2002). On the other hand, it seems that when mothers maintain a moderate control over their children, they show higher levels of optimism. Yet, when children are not permitted a certain degree of autonomy in problem solving, they demonstrate negative symptoms (Hasan & Power, 2002).

This investigation seeks to further the understanding of variables that contribute to the development of optimism in adolescents, a critical stage in which general expectations of life events seem to be established and carried out through adulthood (Brisette, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). We intend to study the influence of variables within an educational environment, concerning peer and family relationships. Among these variables, it is known that success in school has had a positive effect on the development of optimism (Ek et al., 2004), yet there is little known about the influence of peer relationship variables. More specifically, we aim to study another domain that can sometimes be an adolescent stressor, peer bullying. This too, can be related to general expectations, taking into account the supposed effect this situation has over one's self-esteem or optimism (Avilés & Monjas, 2005; Cassidy & Taylor, 2005).

Relations between optimism and variables like the ones selected here support the environmental hypothesis in the development of optimism. In short, we assume, as we have discussed in previous paragraphs, that the development of optimism depends on a group of environmental variables, among them we have personal achievement, fundamental events and variables from family environment that determine the personal development process, and socialization also plays a major part. Furthermore, discovering that these environmental variables have a different value in boys and girls would support this situation even more. Therefore, and according to Deptula, Cohen, Phillipsen, and Ey (2006) who stated that socialization factors are different in adolescents for boys or girls, we expect to find that optimism is related to variables such as family and educational environments, and that these relations can be different according to gender.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The sample is composed of 386 subjects from three public secondary schools in a rural area of the province of Aragón. The grade levels that were chosen for this study correspond to the 4 years of Spanish Middle School and two classes in their 1st year of High School at one of the public schools. The ages of the students are between 12 and 19 years old, with an average of 14.20 (S.D. = 1.49). According to gender, the distribution shows a greater number of girls than boys ($N = 161$, 41.7% boys vs. $N = 225$, 58.3% girls). This distribution is equivalent in each class and age group that was analyzed.

2.2. Instruments

The Youth Life Orientation Test, an adaptation of the Y-LOT scale designed by Ey, Hadley, Nuttbrock, Palmer, and Klosky (2005). The items were translated from English to Spanish by an expert in the field and later revised by an American researcher. Among the 16 total items on this scale, four items are fillers (1, 2, 3 and 6). Of the remaining 12 items, five are oriented to measure optimism while seven assess pessimism. Initially, the definition of the construct is one-dimensional, but various investigations have found a bi-factorial structure. After factorizing the 12 items of the Y-LOT, Ey et al. (2005) found two factors: one in which the positive items are saturated and the other in which the negative items are saturated. In our case, the factorial analysis shows two very similar patterns of saturation, where positive and negative items are saturated in different factors. This is represented by a 47.49% variance. Using this scale and after factorizing these items, we have arrived at three scores: optimism (five items, $\alpha = .736$) pessimism (seven items, $\alpha = .797$) and total optimism (12 items, $\alpha = .818$) using the inversion of these items on the pessimism scale. In the original version of the instrument (Ey et al., 2005), the optimism subscale is related with the optimism and self efficiency measure, while pessimism does so inversely. On a minor scale, they are related with measures of teenagers of attributive style. As for its predictive validity, the Y-LOT predicts teenagers' adjustment 3 months from its measurement thru anxiety, depression and behavioral problem measures (Ey et al., 2005).

Family Communication Scale. It was designed within a Spanish context and incorporates a scale in order to analyze family relationships. The data of the creation and validity process are collected in Parra and Oliva (2002). This scale analyzes the frequency (never, rarely, sometimes and often) of communication with father and mother in addition to the overall degree of agreement or disagreement, ranging from total agreement to total disagreement, in eleven distinctive areas: (1) friends, (2) activities outside the home, (3) free time and interests, (4) family rules, (5) future plans, (6) sexuality, (7) sexual behavior, (8) boy/girlfriends (9) alcohol and tobacco, (10) drugs and (11) religion and politics. Using the same scale, we have obtained four scores, communication with father (11 items, in this study, $\alpha = .790$), agreement with father (11 items, $\alpha = .896$), communication with mother (11 items, $\alpha = .824$) and agreement with mother (11 items, $\alpha = .897$). In regards to the validity of this scale, Oliva and Parra (2001) find that it is related with other variables of the family environment, such as the educational styles or family cohesion, and it inversely predicts an indicator of adaptation and emotional autonomy of teenagers.

Conflicts with parents, similar to the previous case, taken from Parra and Oliva (2002). This scale evaluates family conflicts using the following measurements: frequency (in this study, $\alpha = .860$), intensity ($\alpha = .939$) and resolution mode ($\alpha = .946$). These conflicts can surface between parents and children in 14 different areas: (1) curfew, (2) free time, (3) time dedicated to studying, (4) friends, (5) relationships, (6) sexual behavior, (7) clothing, (8) household chores, (9) smoking and drinking, (10) drug usage, (11) hang-out areas, (12) spending money, (13) religion or politics and (14) future careers. Each one of the scores is comprised of fourteen items with four levels of response in the first case and three in the remaining two. Oliva and Parra (2001) find that conflicts with parents show a relationship with teenager emotional autonomy, particularly in the case of girls, while in the case of boys, this relationship is only seen with favorable familiar means.

Using Avilés's *Bullying Evaluation Questionnaire* (Avilés & Monjas, 2005), two indicators were found to contribute to this occurrence. One implies being a target of bullying throughout the school year, measured on three different levels (never, sometimes,

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