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## The relationships between daily optimism, daily pessimism, and affect differ in young and old age

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined whether daily optimism and pessimism differently relate to each other among young adults ( $n = 96$ , mean age = 27) and old people ( $n = 95$ , mean age = 72), and whether they differently interact with each other in promoting adaptive emotional experience in these age groups. Findings show that daily optimism and pessimism were less strongly related to each other among old people. Moreover, a combination of high daily optimism – low daily pessimism was found as most emotionally beneficial for young people. In contrast combinations in which both daily optimism and pessimism were either low or high were most emotionally beneficial for old people. To conclude, in late-life daily optimism and pessimism are less interdependent as they interact in more diversified ways to maintain an emotionally adaptive experience. These adaptive interactions (e.g., low–low or high–high daily optimism and pessimism) may either reflect an attempt to preserve the functional status quo or may signal a highly complex mental organization.

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Optimism and pessimism, respectively reflecting the extent to which individuals hold generalized favorable and unfavorable expectancies for their future, are important concomitants of functioning (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Rasmussen, Scheier, & Greenhouse, 2009).

Although optimism and pessimism are usually considered as dependent (i.e., when one of them is high the other is necessarily low, and vice versa), the relationship between the two constructs may change to relatively independent. To date, few studies have examined the conditions that affect their interrelations (e.g., Herzberg, Glaesmer, & Hoyer, 2006). Moreover, few works assessed how optimism and pessimism interact in associating with functional concomitants (e.g., Benyamini, 2005).

The current study aimed to examine whether the relationship between daily optimism and daily pessimism differs between young and old people, and if so, in what manner. The study also examined whether different combinations of daily optimism and daily pessimism are emotionally adaptive (i.e., associated with high positive affect and low negative affect) in young and old age.

As aforementioned, optimism and pessimism are generally thought to represent opposite ends of the same continuum. How-

ever, contrasting evaluations may be more dynamic than intuitively presumed, and under certain conditions, people may hold complex appraisals that do not fit with the bipolar view (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Reich, Zautra, & Davis, 2003; Shmotkin, 2005). Moreover, there are even reasons to assume that the optimism–pessimism relationship vary across the lifespan. According to the socio-emotional selectivity theory (Charles & Carstensen, 2009), the aging process includes adaptational mental reorganization that involves the ability to contain inconsistent cognitive and emotional evaluations, including more elaborated expectations regarding the future. Similarly, Lomranz's (1998) 'aintegration' theory suggests that as people get older, they improve their ability to bear contradictions and inherent inconsistencies. Corroborating these views, several lifespan studies found that whereas the correlation between optimism and pessimism tend to be extremely dependent during early life, it becomes relatively independent in late-life (Herzberg et al., 2006; Mroczek, Spiro, Aldwin, Ozer, & Bossé, 1993). Nevertheless, these studies did not examine optimism and pessimism in both young and old age.

The current study aimed to expand the existing evidence by examining whether optimism and pessimism reported on a daily basis differently relate to each other among young and old people. Daily optimism and daily pessimism as measured in the current study respectively refer to favorable and unfavorable expectancies

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for the next day. These expectancies may be more relevant to late-life functioning, as previous studies have shown that old people have difficulty to rate their expectations for the distant future (Palgi & Shmotkin, 2010) and better relate to the close future (Lennings, 2000).

Not only that the relationship between optimism and pessimism may change as a function of age, theories also allude that the advantageousness of different optimism–pessimism combinations should differ from early to late life. First, there is a shift from a gain-achieving and growth-related orientation in young age (Busseri, Choma, & Sadava, 2009; Lachman, Röcke, Rosnick, & Ryff, 2008), into a maintenance-related and prevention-of-loss orientation in old age (Baltes, 1997; Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006; Palgi & Shmotkin, 2010). Therefore, the high optimism–low pessimism combination should be most adaptive in young age as it catalyzes goal pursuit. However, as old people are relatively more motivated to maintain their current functional status, low expectation, either for favorable or unfavorable developments, may be adaptive in late life. That is, the low optimism–low pessimism combination may be more adaptive among old people. Moreover, as greater mental complexity is related to better resilience in old age (Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Lomranz, 1998; Ong & Bergeman, 2004), or in situations of declining health (Reich et al., 2003), there is also a basis to presume that the dialectical high optimism–high pessimism combination would be most adaptive in old age. Accordingly, Benyamini (2005) found that old patients who suffer from arthritis and reported both high optimism and pessimism also used better pain-coping strategies than those with other optimism–pessimism combinations. As previous studies focused on old age (Benyamini, 2005), it is still unknown whether beneficial optimism–pessimism combinations differ from early to late-life. Therefore, the current study directly compared young and old people.

In the current study, positive and negative affect – the extent to which individuals generally feel positive and negative emotions respectively (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) – were the outcome measures. Positive and negative affect are amongst the major markers of healthy functioning (Keyes, 2005). Previous studies found optimism, pessimism, and affect to be discriminable from each other (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996), and moderately correlated (Benyamini & Roziner, 2008; Chang & Sanna, 2001).

Based on the above literature, we hypothesized the following: (1) the inverted relationship between daily optimism and pessimism would be stronger among young than among old people; (2) the high daily optimism–low daily pessimism combination would be related to the highest positive affect and lowest negative affect among young people, yet combinations of both low or both high daily optimism and pessimism would be related to the highest positive affect and lowest negative affect among old people.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 191 participants divided into two groups: young ( $n = 96$ ) and old ( $n = 95$ ). The mean age of the young group was 27.83 ( $SD = 4.70$ , range 20–40) and the mean age of the old group was 72.92 ( $SD = 6.98$ , range 62–89). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the background characteristics of the study groups.

The two groups differed on all background demographics, except for gender. The young group reported more years of education, had a lower percentage of married participants, a higher percentage of Israeli-born, and reported a higher level of subjective health in comparison to the old group.

**Table 1**

Background characteristics of the study groups.

Variable	Young ( $n = 96$ )	Old ( $n = 95$ )	Difference test
Age			$t(188) = -52.35^{***}$
M	27.83	72.92	
SD	4.70	6.98	
Range	20–40	62–89	
Gender (%)			$\chi^2(1, N = 191) = 0.05$
Woman	51.0	49.5	
Man	49.0	50.5	
Years of education			$t(186) = 5.07^{***}$
M	14.39	12.06	
SD	1.98	4.00	
Marital status (%)			$\chi^2(1, N = 190) = 13.67^{***}$
Not married <sup>a</sup>	55.2	28.7	
Married	44.8	71.3	
Place of birth (%)			$\chi^2(1, N = 190) = 61.96^{***}$
Israel	88.5	33.0	
Other countries	11.5	67.0	
Self-rated health			$t(187) = 10.96^{***}$
M	2.49	1.44	
SD	0.60	0.71	

Note: Total  $N = 191$ .

<sup>a</sup> Includes the categories of never married, divorced, and widowed.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### 1.2. Measures

Background characteristics included age, gender, years of education, marital status (dichotomized into currently married and unmarried), place of birth (dichotomized into Israeli-born vs. born in other countries), and self-rated health (see Benyamini and Idler, 1999) assessed by the question: “How do you rate your general health?” on which respondents answered on a four-point scale: “very poor” (1), “poor” (2), “good” (3), and “very good” (4).

Daily optimism and pessimism were measured by the Hebrew version of the revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). We used the six scored items (without the filler items): three for optimism, and three for pessimism. Across 14 successive days respondents indicate the extent to which they agree with each of the items on a 5-point scale ranged from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”) when referring to the next day (items were rephrased to refer to the next day). Alpha coefficient was .88 and .86 for daily optimism and pessimism, respectively.

Positive and negative affect were measured with the Hebrew version of the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010). This scale which has several advantages over classic positive and negative scales (for more details see Diener et al., 2010) includes 12-item, six items measuring positive experiences (e.g., contented, joyful) and six items measuring negative experiences (e.g., sad, angry). Each item was scored on a scale ranging from 1 (“very rarely or never”) to 5 (“very often or always”). At the end of the study, the participants were asked to fill their feelings in regard to the last two weeks in which they completed the daily measures of optimism and pessimism. A mean score was computed for the positive items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ) and for the negative ones (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ). The Hebrew adaptation of this scale was agreed upon by three judges after examining a translation from English into Hebrew as well as an independent reverse translation and its reliability coefficients resembled those reported by Diener et al. (2010).

### 1.3. Procedure

Young group participants' were located by research students at the Campus of an Israeli university. Old group participants were

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