

Affectivity and psychological adjustment across two adult generations: Does pessimistic explanatory style still matter?

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Abstract

Past research and theory have pointed to the role of pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of psychological adjustment in adults. This study examined the extent to which, beyond affectivity, pessimistic explanatory style uniquely predicted depressive symptoms and life satisfaction in and across two adult generations, namely, among young adults and their middle-aged parents. For both adult groups, results of conducting hierarchical regression analyses indicated that pessimistic explanatory style did not add uniquely to the prediction of either dependent variable. These findings are taken to suggest that pessimistic explanatory style may play a more limited role in predicting psychological adjustment in adults than previously thought when other important predictors are taken into account.

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1. Introduction

Since the cognitive turn in psychology three decades ago (Dember, 1974), cognitive models of psychological adjustment have proliferated in the empirical literature (Dobson & Kendall, 1993).

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Although there is still no consensus on a universal cognitive model of psychological adjustment, one model that has come to stand out in recent years is the one associated with the works of Seligman (1975); for a review, see Gillham, Shatté, Reivich, and Seligman (2001).

Originally, Seligman (1975) had argued that the root of psychological morbidity was the development of a belief that one was helpless from controlling or preventing negative outcomes from occurring. Shortly thereafter, the original cognitive model was revised and reformulated. The reformulated cognitive model of learned helplessness posited that causal attributions were linked to psychological adjustment (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). According to Abramson et al. (1978), Abramson, Metalsky, and Alloy (1989), individuals with a *pessimistic explanatory* style who reliably make negative or pessimistic attributions for undesirable events by viewing such events as a function of *internal* (something about the individual), *stable* (happens all the time), and *global* (happens in all situations) factors were believed to be at greater risk for poor psychological adjustment (e.g., depression, low satisfaction and achievement) than those who do not make such attributions for themselves. Consistent with this reformulated model, hundreds of empirical studies over the past twenty years have looked at and found a reliable link between the presence of a pessimistic explanatory style for negative events and a wide range of poor psychological outcomes in adult populations (for reviews, see Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Gillham et al., 2001). However, past findings supporting the robust role of pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of psychological adjustment in adults have often failed to consider the role of other important predictors such as positive and negative affectivity.

According to Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988b), mood is composed of two distinguishable dimensions, namely positive and negative affect. Whereas *positive affect* reflects the extent to which individuals feel active, alert, and enthusiastic, *negative affect* reflects the extent to which individuals feel upset or unpleasantly aroused. Findings from studies on positive and negative affectivity, dispositions to experience pleasant and aversive emotional states, respectively, have also shown that affectivity can also predict variations in psychological adjustment (Watson, 2000). Because, pessimistic explanatory style has been found to be associated with affect, particularly negative affect (Luten, Ralph, & Mineka, 1997), it may be that some of the variance in psychological adjustment accounted for by pessimistic explanatory style in past studies of adults is related to affectivity. Consistent with this possibility, findings from studies looking at a construct related to pessimistic explanatory style, namely, dispositional optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985), have shown that the inclusion of variables involving affectivity often weaken the association found between optimism and psychological adjustment in adults. For example, in a study of young adults, Chang (2002) found that the inclusion of positive and negative affectivity weakened the associations of dispositional optimism with various measures of psychological disturbance. Similarly, in a study of middle-aged and older adults, Mroczek, Spiro, Aldwin, Ozer, and Bossé (1993) found the inclusion of negative affectivity (as measured by neuroticism) weakened the association of dispositional optimism with psychological symptoms. Furthermore, in a recent study of middle-aged adults, Chang and Sanna (2001) found that negative affectivity was more than twice as strong a predictor of depressive symptoms than was dispositional optimism. Taken together, these findings make clear that the inclusion of affectivity in a prediction model of psychological adjustment limits the extent to which cognitive predictors may play a role.

Nonetheless, because pessimistic explanatory style and dispositional optimism do not represent redundant constructs (Gillham et al., 2001), it is impossible to draw any strong conclusions about

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