

Optimism: A Factor of Intrinsic Motivation and Achievement

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Abstract

The concept of optimism as mechanism for improving individual performance has been discussed in the management literature by different researchers. Though studies concerning optimism in the workplace are comparatively limited, yet specific evidences exist that connect the optimism with the achievement and improvement in individual's personal and professional growth. In Academic field, optimism is one of the significant organizational and individual characteristics that have recently fascinated educational researchers' consideration in improving academic learning and achievement. The ability to live in optimistic manner is most probably drawn from an inherent inclination to be positive. Optimism is generally defined as the mental attitude in which an individual views life from a positive perspective. It means that it is intrinsic in nature which motivates an individual to believe in positive side of life and put efforts for the desired results. The purpose of this study is to discuss the relationships between optimism and different other dimensions such as intrinsic motivation, leadership, components of optimism in teacher's perspective and how optimism deals with interpersonal relationships.

Key words: *Optimism, achievement, intrinsic motivation, performance, positive perspective*

1. Introduction

Research is plentiful in connecting optimists with positivity and pessimists with negativity. Optimistic people have been categorized as having positive expectations for life, and believe that the future will hold favorable outcomes. In comparison, pessimistic individuals focus on a more negative perception towards life and see the future as unfavorable (Carver & Scheier, 1987). Optimists view negative events as temporary. They know it will pass soon and tomorrow will bring something good in the basket. Optimists view positive events as the result of something inside them which is permanent. In his book titled "Learned Optimism" Seligman explained that positive events cause optimistic people to try even harder the next time. Optimists

believe that events that turn out as they wish enhance everything they do. In case of events that don't turn out, Optimists want to understand specific causes and measures to change the situation. They don't stop, they move on. Failure hurts but it goes away quickly in case of optimistic people. Optimists are more self-confident and have higher levels of self-efficacy in their ability to perform in well manner and achieve predefined goals. Optimism reduces the level of stress and increases the coping abilities of individuals in adverse situations. Carver and Scheier (2002) proposed that the links between optimism and positive outcomes can be explained by means of an expectancy-value model of self-regulation and goals. This model is based on the key

assumption that almost all human behavior is driven by goals, either in implicit manner or explicit manner. According to the expectancy-value model, goal-driven behavior of individual is strengthened by two factors. The *value* of a goal refers to its desirability to the individual. *Expectancies* refer to the beliefs about the chances of attainability of goals. An individual will be more determined in pursuing a goal when the goal is really valued and when the individual expects that he will be successful in achieving that goal. Within the expectancy-value framework, the proposed role of optimism is that optimists tend to have more favorable expectancies than the pessimists. Thus, optimists are expected to be more persistent in pursuing anticipated goals, and attain better outcomes. When optimists face challenges or hindrances, they are more likely to use approach-oriented coping strategies like effective planning, active coping, positive reanalysis, and less likely to apply avoidance-oriented coping strategies like denial and behavioral disengagement. But when a problem is not resolved or not controlled, they utilize emotion-based strategies like acceptance of outcomes, hilarity, and positive reframing in order to reduce the impact of problem.

2. Optimism and Overconfidence

Most of the time people are not clear about the difference between optimism and overconfidence. Optimists are those people who see the positive side of life and tackle negative events with patience, they are not overconfident. When the person is over-confident he tends to ignore the obstacles all together, with an attitude of "this couldn't happen to me." On the other hand when someone is optimistic he will have an attitude of "It may happen to me, but if it does I will find a way to get

through it, and I will make it even better at the end. Overconfidence can also lead to over-valuation of one's own efforts, investment in nonprofit avenues, and introducing risky innovations because of an extremely strong belief in the success. The argument about the adverse effect of overconfidence on decision-making is based on the claim that overconfident people do not assess risks completely. There is one mechanism, Prevention focus, which directs the individual's efforts towards activities that minimize risk. Prevention focused people analyze the obstacles and risks involved in available courses of action and decide to engage in those tasks which have lower risk of failure. A prevention focus individual takes time in gathering information and assessing that information carefully before taking decision. Overconfident individuals do not have a prevention focus. Therefore, a confident and positive outlook has twofold outcomes. On the one hand optimism promotes action and commitment, and on the other hand over confidence promotes frame blindness, decision-making shortcuts and failure in adaption. So there should be a balance of optimism and unrealistic optimism. Optimism is helpful up to certain point, but extreme levels of optimism become problematic. So, a combination of optimistic and realistically confident attitudes and behaviors are needed for success.

3. Optimism and Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation has been defined as the activation of goal-oriented behavior within an individual due to internal factors within a person rather than due to some external factors acting on the individual (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When the person is intrinsically motivated, he/she feel happy and satisfied while performing the task and that is intrinsic reward for that person.

No external benefit is required to motivate that person. One of the proposals that best incorporates the complex of motivational processes in the academic settings comes from Pintrich and DeGroot (1990). They distinguished some general categories of relevant constructs for motivation in academic contexts:

- (1) An expectation component which includes individual's beliefs about their ability to complete a task, significance and interest.
- (2) An effective component, which includes effective emotional consequences resulting from completing a task, as well as the results of success or failure at an academic performance level.

Thus, various research papers claim that human beings adopting intrinsic motivational orientation use cognitive strategies and self-regulating behavior to a greater degree than others who adopt an extrinsic motivational orientation (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). The teachers, who are intrinsically motivated towards their profession and academic growth, motivate and influence their students to create interest in valuable tasks and learning oriented activities.

Control and Competence are two factors of intrinsic motivation which are defined by researchers. Hope, optimism, and self-efficacy are expectancy beliefs that form a cognitive set because each focuses on different aspects of control and competence. Self-efficacy is the confidence one has about their capability to perform specific tasks, and is a competence belief characterized by the statement "I think I can" (Bandura, 1977). Control beliefs are important within self-efficacy theory, but are conceptualized as an outcome of competence beliefs

(Bandura, 1997). Optimism is a general disposition to expect positive outcomes, rather than negative outcomes, results in circumstances and situations (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimism is a control belief characterized by such statement "good things happen to me." Competence beliefs are essential within optimism theory, but are conceptualized as an outcome of control beliefs (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

Optimism is evaluated in different ways by different behavioral analysts and it has been linked to positive mood and high morale, to diligence and effective problem solving, to academic, sports, military, occupational success, to good health and even to happy life and freedom from strain. In contrast, Pessimism indicates depression, passivity, failure, social disaffection, sickness, and mortality. When the person is optimistic, he views the brighter side of life. Optimism includes increased motivation which comes through intrinsic drives, which leads to achievement in various domains. Optimists differ in their approach to life and they have different perceptions of complex situations. Most probably, the optimists see adversity as a challenge and they have the ability to create opportunities and find way out from initial problems. They put more efforts in improving their skills that boosts the confidence level and have ability to quickly cope up with negative circumstances. The strongest statement that optimism is an inherent aspect of human nature is found in Tiger's (1979) book *Optimism: The Biology of Hope*. He positioned optimism in the biology of our species and stated that optimism is one of our most defining and adaptive characteristics. Tiger proposed that optimism is an integral part of human nature, selected for in the course of evolution that is developing along with

our cognitive abilities and indeed the human capacity for culture. Specific to the workplace, Luthans (2003) has reported that optimistic individuals are effortlessly motivated to work harder, possess high morale, and exhibit more goal-directed behavior. Optimists furthermore have the ability to persist under severe conditions, regard disappointments as temporary and valuable life experiences, and have a general inclination to be cheerful and mentally and physically energized.

4. Optimism in Teacher's perspective

The ultimate goal of education is to develop lifelong learners who enjoy learning and this is not possible without intrinsic motivation. Generally Intrinsically motivating classroom experience: promoting fun through active involvement and variety, enhancing learning through curiosity and challenge and connecting people through sense of belongingness. The teachers are more concerned for learning, while students have a desire for fun. Students also enjoy learning when it involves something for which they are curious and when learning involves challenge. For learning purpose the teacher should structure tasks that satisfy curiosity and promote challenge. More specifically, different researchers have examined the association between personality traits of individuals, with major emphasis on optimism, teacher's efficacy, and achievement. Research has found significant positive correlations between optimism and self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation of teachers as well as students. According to Bandura (1977; 1993), it is essential that an individual has a strong belief on his capability of achieving his goals or getting through stressful situations successfully; this outlook will increase satisfaction and optimism. Consistent with this view, when individuals face a difficult task, those with

high levels of optimism are more likely to believe that they have the required abilities to complete the task and, if they fail, they utilize their failure as a learning experience. In Academics, Optimism is the shared belief that a faculty can work with students to succeed academically (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). It includes three concepts: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust. When these three components are present and completely developed in academic setting, success is achieved. Optimism provides a foundation to the construct and motivating spirit of academic optimism in that optimism brings out "views of teachers as capable, students as willing, parents as supportive, and the task as achievable" (Hoy, 2006).

There are three parts of academic optimism. The cognitive part (collective efficacy), behavioral part (academic emphasis), and affective part (faculty trust), all these work together to make academic optimism the strength for change in academics. Hoy, Tarter, and Wool folk Hoy (2006) define the three parts of academic optimism the "dependent triadic set of interactions".

- 1- Academic emphasis: Academic emphasis is the behavioral component of academic optimism. Hoy, Tarter, and Wool folk Hoy (2006) define an academic emphasis as "the extent to which an academic structure is driven by a goal of academic excellence- a press for academic achievement". It involves setting realistic and achievable goals for students and requires a systematic learning environment which is valued by all.
- 2- Collective Efficacy: Basically, collective efficacy is the confidence of teachers that, as a group, they can influence and

motivate students towards learning.

3- Trust: The affective part of academic optimism is faculty trust in students and parents. Trust

is marked with frankness and honesty and trust is the key to maintain proper Student-

Teacher - Parent interactions. Through trust the other components of academic optimism

thrive and grow. Again when all parts work together, academic success is possible.

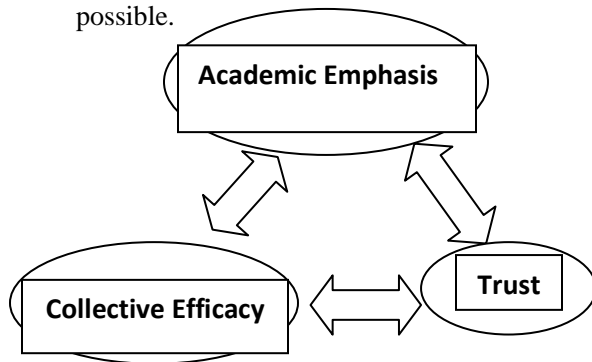


Figure: Relationship among three factors of optimism in Academics (Smith, 2008)

At the individual teacher level also, Academic optimism is a viable construct. At the teacher level it is comprised of teacher sense of efficacy, teacher trust, and academic emphasis, similar to the collective components of academic optimism discussed above.

- Teacher sense of efficacy: Teachers' sense of efficacy is defined as a "judgment of his or her capability to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be problematic or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Teachers' sense of efficacy is the only one

characteristics consistently correlated with student achievement. If teachers believe that they are capable enough to create impact on student learning, teachers set higher expectations, exert more effort, and are stronger when things are difficult (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Thus, it should not be difficult to understand that teacher sense of efficacy is consistently and positively related to student achievement.

- Teacher trust in parents and students: In addition to teacher sense of efficacy, teachers must be able to form trusting relationships with parents and students. Trust is an essential component needed to cultivate and maximize positive relationships among students. When teachers create a secure and trustworthy environment, students feel comfortable to take challenges and learn from their mistakes, and parents come to believe that teachers are motivated by the best interests of their children.
- Teacher sense of academic emphasis: According to Woolfolk, only one-third of the hours students spend in institute, are devoted to successful learning tasks, known as academic learning time. Yet, quality teachers make sure students are "actively engaged in worthwhile, appropriate learning activities". Therefore, teachers' sense of academic emphasis is the degree to which teachers find different ways to engage students in appropriate, academic tasks.

5. Optimism and Leadership

Optimism is one of the important ingredients to become an inspiring leader. Carmine Gallo, who is the communications coach for the world's most admired brands, believe that it is the essential trait that today's leaders must exhibit. Here are five reasons why optimists make better leaders:

5.1 Optimists start new ventures: An optimistic sees opportunity where others see uncertainty and despair. As Winston Churchill once said, "optimists see opportunities in every difficulty." Optimists have the successful mindset.

5.2 Optimists are inspiring communicators: One cannot stimulate enthusiasm for an idea unless he is a strong communicator. Ronald Reagan, one of the most optimistic Americans, was designated as "the great communicator." Colin Powell served under Reagan and mentioned that optimism was the secret behind Reagan's charisma and success. In fact everyone who knew Reagan called him as an eternal optimist, someone who believed in a better future. It is found that world's best communicators are more optimistic than the average person.

5.3 Optimists rally people to a better future: Optimists have the ability to influence people and develop confidence in them. They have the ability to connect people and motivate them. Through their words and direction they can encourage people to behave in a particular direction. During the World War II, Winston Churchill, who was a great optimist, shifted British people attitude towards bravery through his words and positive orientation.

5.4 Optimists see the immense picture: Optimists see the bigger picture of life in comparison to other people. They do not evaluate the situations only on the basis of recent events occurred with them. They know that the situations and

outcomes change with the time so we should not predict every situation and outcome in similar manner.

5.5 Optimists believe in themselves: Optimists know that the things will get better because they themselves will make them better. Maybe it can't be done, but always start out believing it can be done until all the options are closed and there is no way left behind. Don't surround yourself with doubts; put your efforts to correct the situations as long as possible.

6. Optimism and Relationship Processes

Optimism factor has links with the outcomes in interpersonal relationships. Research has indicated that individuals with optimistic outlooks are better liked by others and are socially rejected rarely; have longer-lasting friendships; have very less negative social interactions; and experience reduced social separation and anxiety. In passionate relationships, both optimists and their partners relish better relationship satisfaction. Research on optimism and relationships show that a globally optimistic outlook is associated with a variety of positive social outcomes. Optimism helps in bringing positive outcomes in relationships in different ways:

6.1 Perceived Social Support:

Researchers have focused on one key factor Perceived support. Perceived support refers to the belief that other people will be available to provide support and relief if needed. Perceived support is associated with adaptive coping, favorable expectancies, and positive affect. It is more specific indicator of optimism in which one expects a particular good thing as social support in a particular context as close relationships.

6.2 Supportive Behaviors in Relationships:

One other way through which optimism can lead to positive relational outcomes is

actual social support, both offered and received by optimistic people. Optimism is a socially valued attribute, and as a result optimists tend to be admired by others and have more social networks. In their relationships, in case of difficulties, optimists believe in constructive problem-solving approach by which optimism brings about positive relationship outcomes and settlement.

6. Conclusion

Optimism is inner attribute of an individual which guides and motivates that person to move towards the target and believe in positive outcomes. Even in negative situations, optimists believe in their capabilities and leave no stone unturned to change the situation. Optimists emphasize on favorable aspects of situations, actions, and events and they believe in the best possible outcomes in the future. Optimism brings about positive outcomes in interpersonal relationships by promoting favorable expectancies, which in turn cause individuals to pursue their relationship goals with more compliance and determination. Although it would seem natural to always connect optimistic view points and positive psychology, perhaps it should be considered that too much optimism is not good for individuals because it leads to over confidence. Individuals should select a careful balance between optimism and pessimism to generate a positive evaluation and appraisal of life that is realistic. Real optimism leads to effective leadership, high achievement, desired outcomes, effective performance and growth both in personal and professional front.

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