

**Optimism in child development: Conceptual issues
and methodological approaches.**

Edwina M. Farrall

**School of Psychology
University of Adelaide
South Australia**

October, 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	viii
DECLARATION	x
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xv
<u>CHAPTER ONE: Introduction and Review of the Literature</u>	1
‘Optimism as a Dimension of Positive Psychology: Theories, Methodologies, and Implications for the Study of Child Development’	
<i>The genesis of ‘positive psychology’</i>	3
<i>Positive well-being and notions of resilience and thriving</i>	7
<i>The development of an organizational framework of resilience in children</i>	10
<i>External factors affecting resilience</i>	15
<i>Internal factors affecting resilience</i>	16
<i>The framework itself: Synthesizing and utilizing the knowledge base</i>	22
<i>Taking positive psychology forward</i>	23
<i>Affect and cognition in the developing child: Optimism as a potential mechanism toward ensuring resilience</i>	25
<i>On optimism: Assumptions, intuitions, and typologies</i>	28
<i>Stepping back: What is “optimism”, and what is known or assumed about it?</i>	29
<i>Optimism, temperament, and self-regulation</i>	30
<i>“Situated optimism”</i>	32
<i>“Dispositional optimism”</i>	34

<i>The measurement of dispositional optimism: The Life Orientation Test</i>	35
<i>Specific expectancies and “unrealistic optimism”</i>	40
<i>“Big” versus “little” optimism</i>	42
<i>Optimism and pessimism: Roles and relatedness</i>	44
<i>The measurement of child optimism</i>	46
<i>The new Youth Life Orientation Test</i>	47
<i>The YLOT: Development, structure, and interpretation</i>	48
<i>Alternate approaches to the measurement of optimism</i>	53
<i>Optimism and hope</i>	53
<i>Vignette-based methodologies and optimism</i>	55
<i>Optimism as an explanatory framework: Using the optimism/pessimism dichotomy to explicate issues of health and psychopathology</i>	56
<i>State-based optimism as a determinant of physical health outcomes</i>	57
<i>Trait-based optimism as the key to mental health</i>	59
<i>Cognitive models of psychopathology: The Response Style Theory of depression</i>	62
<i>The way forward: Aims of this program of research</i>	65
<u>CHAPTER TWO: Study One: Contributing Factors to Youth Optimism and Pessimism Part One</u>	71
‘Do Cognitive Coping Styles Mediate the Age-Related Decline in Optimism?’	
METHOD	77
<i>Participants</i>	77
<i>Measures</i>	78
<i>Procedure</i>	82

<i>Planned Data Analyses</i>	83
<i>Statistical analysis and interpretation: A note on statistical emphases in this, and future, studies</i>	84
RESULTS	86
<i>Extending the findings: Predictive and mediating models</i>	93
<i>Rationale and testing of the proposed mediation model</i>	98
DISCUSSION	102
<u>CHAPTER THREE: Study Two: Contributing Factors to Youth Optimism and Pessimism Part Two</u>	112
‘Assessing the Interplay of Dispositional and Cognitive Coping Factors upon Affective Outcomes in Late Childhood’	
METHOD	121
<i>Participants</i>	121
<i>Measures</i>	121
<i>Procedure</i>	125
<i>Planned data analyses</i>	126
RESULTS	127
DISCUSSION	134
<u>CHAPTER FOUR: Study Three: Comparing Optimism Methodologies</u>	144
‘The Utility of the YLOT and a Series of Hypothetical Trait-Based Vignettes as Measures of Youth Optimism and Pessimism’	
<i>The vignette methodology: Premises and practices</i>	147
<i>Children’s trait-based thinking</i>	149

<i>Attributions and domain applicability: The domains of biology and psychology</i>	150
METHOD	156
<i>Participants</i>	156
<i>Measures</i>	156
<i>Procedure</i>	162
<i>Planned data analyses</i>	163
RESULTS	164
<i>Hypotheses 1 and 2: Age and patterns of optimism and pessimism</i>	165
<i>Hypotheses 3 and 4: Measure concordance and prediction</i>	168
DISCUSSION	172
<i>Age and optimism: Implications for the scope of children's optimism and its independence from pessimism</i>	173
<i>Discerning optimism: Drawing on notions of domain-specific thinking and permissible change</i>	176
<i>Concordance between the YLOT and the vignettes: Implications for the future conceptualization of optimism and pessimism</i>	178
<u>CHAPTER FIVE: Study Four: The Functionality and Dimensionality of the YLOT</u>	184
'A Pilot- and Factor Analytic Study drawing on the Outcomes of the 'Optimistic Kids' Intervention'	
<i>'Optimistic Kids': An intervention program</i>	186
<i>Intervention programs: Penn Resilience Program (PRP) and Optimistic Kids (OK)</i>	187
METHOD	196
<i>Design and intervention procedures</i>	196
<i>The school</i>	196
<i>The participating children</i>	197

<i>The intervention</i>	198
<i>Planned analyses and participant pool characteristics</i>	203
RESULTS	205
<i>Research Question 1: Indications of intervention efficacy based on YLOT scores obtained</i>	205
<i>Research Question 2: Indications of the underlying dimensionality of the YLOT through exploratory Factor Analysis</i>	207
DISCUSSION	214
<u>CHAPTER SIX: General Discussion</u>	224
‘Constructions and Functions of Children’s Optimism and Pessimism: A Grounding Framework for the study of Discrete Domains of Resilience and Vulnerability’	
<i>The work so far: Implications for positive psychology and the systematic study of resilience</i>	225
<i>Optimism as an explanatory framework of resilience: Evidence of relevance or specificity?</i>	227
<i>Children’s cognitive and emotional development: Potential roles and benefits of optimistic and pessimistic processes through childhood and adolescence</i>	231
<i>Optimism theories as frameworks of well-being: Reduction and deduction in the epistemological pursuit of ‘resilience’</i>	237
<i>The measurement of optimism and pessimism: Alternate approaches and common conceptual premises</i>	240
<i>The dimensionality of the YLOT: Evidence in support of the discernment and uniqueness of children’s optimism</i>	243
<i>The vignette approach: Methodological benefits and theoretical implications</i>	245
<i>Reconciling the measurement of optimism and pessimism with that of cognitive coping style: Adaptive sets of expectancies or independent indices of self-regulation?</i>	248
<i>Towards a new ontology of optimism: Challenges to potential assumptions and misconceptions in its theoretical foundation</i>	258

<i>Theories of optimism: Typologies and functions</i>	259
<i>Reconciling the existing research methodologies and findings with a new foundation to the study of optimism and pessimism through childhood and adolescence</i>	262
<i>Concluding comments</i>	266
APPENDIX A: Presentation of the Youth Life Orientation Test	269
APPENDIX B: Presentation of the Children’s Response Style Questionnaire	275
APPENDIX C: Presentation of the modified ‘anxiety’ version of the Children’s Response Style Questionnaire	282
APPENDIX D: Example scenarios from the series of hypothetical trait-based vignettes	289
APPENDIX E: Statistical results from the multiple regression procedures undertaken in pursuit of the mediation model analyses in Study One	292
APPENDIX F: Statistical results from the multiple regression procedures undertaken in pursuit of the mediation model analyses in Study Two	295
APPENDIX G: Illustrated tasks from the workbook provided to children participating in the Optimistic Kids intervention in Study 4	297
REFERENCES	298

ABSTRACT

Past research into optimism and pessimism has tended to view these constructs as polar opposites of a fixed personality trait that function in mutually exclusive ways. In the field of child development in particular, this has led to theory-driven work that not only accepts this dichotomy but also uses it to drive and explicate larger issues of resilience and vulnerability. The current thesis challenges the assumptions underpinning this conceptual framework, and, through the use of divergent methodologies, seeks to establish children's optimism as a dynamic and adaptive process with predictive value during the developmental period. In the first two studies, predictors and correlates of putative dispositional optimism and pessimism in children and adolescents were examined. A significant age-related decline in optimism was found, but importantly a degree of functional independence between optimism and pessimism was also observed. The third study elicited more specific optimistic expectancies using a vignette methodology. This was seen to share some congruence with the earlier measures of dispositional optimism, but the study also elucidated some of the parameters and realism constraining children's optimism. Again an age-related decline in optimism was demonstrated that was distinct from any associated changes in pessimism. The fourth and final study involved a pilot examination of the dimensionality of the optimism construct, confirming its functional independence from pessimism, and also demonstrating the fluidity and receptivity of children's optimistic processes from an intervention perspective. From these various studies, it is concluded that optimistic and

pessimistic processes in children and adolescents reflect functionally distinct pathways and drive different aspects of vulnerability and well-being. A reconfiguration of the extant theory in this area seems warranted. Based on this conceptual and methodological critique, a preliminary proposal is put forward towards a more substantive approach to the development of optimism and pessimism during childhood and adolescence.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available in all forms of media, now or hereafter known.

Signed,

Edwina M. Farrall

Date:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the following people, all of whom have provided help and support throughout my PhD candidature:

My supervisors Professor John Taplin and Dr Lisa Kettler: for the guidance, advice, thoroughness and dedication you have both shown throughout the course of this research program. It is so deeply appreciated.

My partner Andrew Brolese: for your support, your humour and patience, your insight and care, and your constant love, all of which kept me on course through our doctoral years.

My parents Vanda and Michael Farrall, my sisters and brothers, and my close friends, especially Emily Kilpatrick and Rebecca Grivas: for encouragement, intellectual challenge and growth, laughter, motivation, and perspective.

Assoc. Professor Paul Delfabbro and Professor Deborah Turnbull: for all your help, valuable input, and support over the years.

Last but by no means least, Simon Andrews and Chris Thompson of North Eastern Psychological Services and ‘Optimistic Kids’: for the amazing opportunities you have given me.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Means (<i>SDs</i>) of all variables included in bivariate correlation analyses	88
Table 2.2: Showing correlations of Age, extraversion (E), neuroticism (N), rumination coping (Rum), distraction coping (Dist), PS coping (PS), internalising behaviour symptoms T-score (Int.B) and externalising behaviour symptoms T-score (Ext.B), with the YLOT scores of subscale optimism (Opt), subscale pessimism (Pess) and total optimism (T.Opt)	88
Table 2.3: Showing correlations between the YLOT subscale optimism (Opt) and pessimism (Pess) scores, extraversion (E) and neuroticism (N) scores, and T-scores of internalising behaviour symptoms (Int.B) and externalising behaviour symptoms (Ext.B)	90
Table 3.1: Means (<i>SDs</i>) of all variables included in bivariate correlation analyses	127
Table 3.2: Correlations between the YLOT measures (subscale optimism [Opt], pessimism [Pess], and total optimism [Total Opt]), and age, rumination coping (Rum), distraction coping (Dist), Problem-Solving coping (PS) and SCAS scores	128
Table 3.3: Correlation and regression statistics obtained with regard to ascertaining the power of CRSQ-A (Rumination subscale) for predicting scores on the SCAS	130
Table 4.1: Showing all scores obtained for Sections A, B, C, and overall, from the Vignette Method	162
Table 4.2: Means (<i>SDs</i>) of age and YLOT and vignette scores obtained	164
Table 4.3: Correlations amongst the variables of interest: Age, YLOT scores (optimism, pessimism subscales, and total optimism) and the vignette scores (total scores for all positive and all negative valence traits, as well as component subsections A, B and C)	165
Table 5.1: Mean scores (<i>SDs</i>) of subscale optimism, subscale pessimism, and total optimism at Time1 (pre-test) and Time2 (post-test)	206

Table 5.2: PCA factor loadings, factor % variances, and communalities of the items of the YLOT	210
Table 5.3: YLOT item content for each of the three Factors	211
Table E.1: Hierarchical regression for the prediction of YLOT <u>optimism subscale</u> scores from the Independent Variables of the study (age, extraversion, neuroticism, distraction coping, problem-solving (PS) coping, rumination coping, internalising behaviours and externalising behaviours)	292
Table E.2: Repetition of the above analysis for the prediction of YLOT <u>pessimism subscale</u> scores	292
Table E.3: Repetition of the above analysis for the prediction of YLOT <u>total optimism</u> scores	293
Table E.4: Step 1: Age (IV) as a predictor of PS coping (M)	293
Table E.5: Step 2: PS coping (M) as a predictor of total optimism (DV)	293
Table E.6: Step 3: Age (IV) as a predictor of total optimism (DV)	293
Table E.7: Step 4: Testing the mediation model: Hierarchical multiple regression for the prediction of total optimism by age, after controlling for PS coping	294
Table E.8: Step 2: PS coping (M) as a predictor of subscale optimism scores (DV)	294
Table E.9: Step 3: Age (IV) as a predictor of subscale optimism scores (DV)	294
Table E.10: Step 4: Testing the mediation model: Hierarchical multiple regression for the prediction of subscale optimism by age, after controlling for PS coping	294
Table F.1: Step 1: Pessimism (IV) as a predictor of rumination (M)	295
Table F.2: Step 2: Rumination (M) as a predictor of SCAS scores (DV)	295
Table F.3: Step 3: Pessimism (IV) as a predictor of SCAS scores (DV)	295

Table F.4: Step 4: Testing the mediation model: Hierarchical multiple regression for the prediction of SCAS scores by pessimism, after controlling for rumination coping	295
Table F.5: Step 1: Optimism (IV) as a predictor of PS coping (M)	296
Table F.6: Step 2: PS coping (M) as a predictor of SCAS scores (DV)	296
Table F.7: Step 1: Optimism (IV) as a predictor of rumination coping (M)	296
Table F.8: Step 2: Rumination (M) as a predictor of SCAS scores (DV)	296
Table F.9: Step 3: Optimism (IV) as a predictor of SCAS scores (DV)	296

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: The casual mediation mechanism	83
Figure 2.2: Showing PS coping as mediating the relationship between age and optimism (i.e., reduction in optimism with increasing age)	97
Figure 3.1: Rumination coping as mediating the relationship between pessimism and SCAS scores	130
Figure 3.2: PS coping as mediating the relationship between optimism and anxiety (SCAS scores)	130
Figure 3.3: Rumination coping as mediating the relationship between optimism and anxiety (SCAS score)	131
Figure 6.1: A proposed model of functionally distinct pathways of resilience or vulnerability in children and youth	249
Figure G.1: Thought substitution exercise	297
Figure G.2: The real-life problem-solving framework	297