Durham Area Survey 2011
Report on Optimism
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DURHAM AREA SURVEY 2011:
REPORT ON OPTIMISM
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Abstract The Durham Area Survey included a scale to measure optimism. The scores were aggregated and split into three categories: low optimism, medium optimism, and high optimism. Men were more likely than women to report high optimism levels, and were less likely than women to report medium optimism. Those who are middle age report higher optimism levels than those who are younger or older. Employment was a significant factor in determining whether or not someone would report low optimism. Status as a student, however, was not a factor. Finally, stress was not a factor in determining optimism level.
Optimism is correlated with psychological wellbeing and insulation from future psychological distress (Scheier & Carver, 1992). In one study, it was found that optimists were “…significantly less stressed, less depressed, less lonely, and more socially supported [than pessimists]” (Scheier & Carver, 1992, p. 206). This is highly relevant to the Durham Area Survey, as it measures the quality of life in Durham Region, of which stress and social support are a part of.

Literature on optimism and its role in well-being, both physical and psychological, is fairly extensive. Scheier and Carver (1992) have both written at length on the nature of optimism, ranging from the 1980s to present day. Their review of research on the effects of optimism on physical and psychological well-being serves as a good starting point (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Much like the DAS, Scheier and Carver (1992) used several coded phrases, half optimistic and half pessimistic, to measure respondents’ level of optimism. Higher scores equalled higher optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1992), another feature that the DAS mirrors.

Optimism is also correlated with a number of social engagement behavioural patterns; such as: subjective wellbeing in times of adversity and healthier coping strategies (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Overall, optimism has been found to be associated with higher quality of life (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Further, research establishes a difference between pessimism and optimism. As Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, and Kiecolt-Glaser (1997) ask: “Is it more important to be optimistic or not to be pessimistic?” (p. 1345). Their findings show that pessimism predicted later physical and mental health, but both optimism and pessimism predicted current health (Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997). Interestingly, they also found that being a caregiver was associated with a pessimistic outlook (Robinson-Whelen et al., 1997). This report will focus on optimistic outlook.
Optimistic attitudes towards goals lead to more long-lasting, effective, and successful outcomes; such as higher incomes (Carver, 2010; Segerstrom, 2007) and higher reported levels of happiness (Segerstrom, 2007). Wellbeing is also positively associated with higher levels of income (Jorgensen et al, 2010, Luhmann et al, 2011; Mentzakis & Moro, 2009; Sacks et al, 2012). Segerstrom (2007) showed that in law students, over a 10 year period, optimism was predictive of more accumulated wealth, suggesting they are more persistent and effective problem solvers.

Peterson (2000) provides as useful definition of what optimism is. Put simply, optimism is a socially desirable mood or attitude associated with the future (Peterson, 2000). There are different types of optimism that are able to be measured as well, such as dispositional optimism and explanatory optimism (Peterson, 2000). Dispositional optimism is a person’s general outlook towards life and the belief that things will be good in the future; whereas explanatory optimism is measured in the way participants explain bad events (Peterson, 2000). Dispositional optimism deals heavily with goals and achievement, and stems from Scheier and Carver’s research on the subject (Peterson, 2000). It is measured through the use of a questionnaire with items related to positive outlook (Peterson, 2000), much like the one featured in the DAS.

Gender is typically not a significant factor in analyses on optimism (Chang & Sanna, 2001). Most of the analyses do not distinguish between the groups for this reason; a separate analysis on gender was included to see whether or not the DAS population matched this assumption. The findings from the DAS on gender differences are displayed in table 1.
For all analyses, DAS respondents were asked ten questions, scaled from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 6 (‘strongly agree’), to judge how optimistic they were. These questions were then combined into a combination score that had a possible range of 10 (at the lowest) to 60 (being highest). The categories for optimism that appear throughout are ‘low optimism’ (scores 10 to 29), ‘moderate optimism’ (scores 30 to 49), and ‘high optimism’ (scores 50 to 60).

It is important to note that the information relayed in this study are not generalizable to the larger Durham Region population, and are only specific to the respondents of this survey. This is largely due to the online availability of the survey, where the survey was open to all those who had access to a computer and had heard about the survey. In other words, this survey did not involve random selection, and therefore the results cannot be used to make inferences about the larger regional population in which this survey was taken. The results can, however, be used to tell us a little about those who did respond to the survey, and whether there were significant differences within the group who went online to participate. More about the methodology can be found on the CESR website at http://cesr.uoit.ca, under the “Reports” tab, looking specifically at the results of the DAS 2011 survey.

Used within this report are cross-tabulations for analysis. Cross-tabulations, sometimes called contingency tables, help to show whether the value of one variable is associated with the value of another (Fiddler, Hecht, Nelson, Nelson, & Ross, 2011). If you wish to know more about this sample we encourage you to visit the Centre for Evaluation and Survey Research (CESR) website at http://cesr.uoit.ca or contact the office directly at (905) 721-8668 X 6552.
Optimism by Gender

Table 1
Level of Optimism by Gender (n = 363)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low optimism</th>
<th>Moderate optimism</th>
<th>High optimism</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.0% (n = 5)</td>
<td>58.7% (n = 74)</td>
<td>37.3% (n = 47)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.4% (n = 8)</td>
<td>71.7% (n = 170)</td>
<td>24.9% (n = 59)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender differences in optimism were similar at low optimism levels, but differed at moderate to high levels of optimism. Overall, table 1 reveals that male respondents were less likely to report moderate optimism (58.7%) than females were (71.7%). As well, male respondents were also more likely to report high optimism (37.3%) than females were (24.9%). However, low optimism was reported at similar rates for both male and female respondents (MaleDAS: 4.0%, FemaleDAS: 3.4%). Therefore, based off the DAS 2011 findings, male respondents were much more optimistic than female respondents. There was a significant relationship (p = <.05); which means there is a relationship between gender and optimism levels. The relationship, however, was not very strong: the Gamma value was .238, which means that there is a weak, positive relationship.
Age and Optimism

Table 2
Level of Optimism by Age Group (n = 363)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Low optimism</th>
<th>Moderate optimism</th>
<th>High optimism</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young adult (18 – 34)</td>
<td>4.3% (n = 7)</td>
<td>70.1% (n = 115)</td>
<td>25.6% (n = 42)</td>
<td>100% (n = 164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle age (35 – 54)</td>
<td>1.9% (n = 3)</td>
<td>63.0% (n = 97)</td>
<td>35.1% (n = 54)</td>
<td>100% (n = 154)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (55+)</td>
<td>6.7% (n = 3)</td>
<td>71.1% (n = 32)</td>
<td>22.2% (n = 10)</td>
<td>100% (n = 45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this analysis, age was changed into a three category variable from a nine category variable (18 – 24, 25 – 34, 35 – 39, 40 – 44, 45 – 49, 50 – 54, 55 – 59, 60 – 64, and 65 and over). This was to make assessing the age groups easier. These new groups were young adults (ages 18 – 34), middle aged (35 – 49), and seniors (50 – 65 and over). Young adults reported low optimism 4.3% of the time, whereas the middle aged reported it only 1.9% of the time. Seniors exceed all groups by reporting low optimism 6.7% of the time. Both young adults and seniors reported moderate optimism at similar percentages, 70.1% and 71.1% respectively, whereas middle age respondents reported moderate optimism 63% of the time. When it comes to high optimism, young adult respondents reported high optimism 25.6% of the time, nearly ten percent below middle age respondents (35.1%). Senior respondents reported high optimism at an even lower rate, only 22.2% of the time. These results, however, are not significant (p = >.05). This means that there is no relationship between age and level of optimism, as is shown by the similar percentages. A simple regression analysis showed there was a weak, positive relationship between optimism and age (b=.039, R Square=.004, df=1); as age goes up so does optimism. This value was also insignificant (p=.230).
Optimism and Employment

Table 3

*Level of Optimism by Employment Status (n = 354)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low optimism</th>
<th>Moderate optimism</th>
<th>High optimism</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>1.6% (n = 5)</td>
<td>67.0% (n = 205)</td>
<td>31.4% (n = 96)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 8)</td>
<td>62.5% (n = 30)</td>
<td>20.8% (n = 10)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DAS respondents answered questions on their employment status. Table 3 shows that respondents who were employed reported low optimism 1.6% of the time, compared to 16.7% of unemployed respondents. Of employed respondents, 67% were moderately optimistic, whereas only 62.5% of unemployed respondents were moderately optimistic. Employment was associated with high optimism, of employed DAS respondents, 31.4% scored in the high optimism range, whereas only 20.8% of unemployed respondents scored likewise. The relationship between employment and optimism was significant ($p < .05$), meaning that there is an actual relationship between the two that is not random. This relationship is moderate and negative (Gamma = -.403), this means those who are employed are less likely to report low optimism.
Optimism and Student Status

Table 4
Level of Optimism by Student Status (n = 361)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low optimism</th>
<th>Moderate optimism</th>
<th>High optimism</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.0% (n = 6)</td>
<td>66.4% (n = 79)</td>
<td>28.6% (n = 34)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.9% (n = 7)</td>
<td>67.8% (n = 164)</td>
<td>29.3% (n = 71)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, table 4 shows that level of optimism by student status does not vary much, percentage-wise, as compared to level of optimism by employment status. Respondents who are students (5%) are more likely to score in the low optimism range than are respondents who are not students (2.9%). This is the biggest percentage variation between the two groups. Students (66.4%) and non-students (67.8%) score moderate optimism at relatively similar rates. This also holds true for student (28.6%) and non-student (29.3%) scoring on high optimism. These results are not significant (p = .05), so there appears to be no relationship between student status and optimism.
Optimism and Stress

Table 5
Level of Optimism by Self-Reported Daily Stress (n = 363)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low optimism</th>
<th>Moderate optimism</th>
<th>High optimism</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little to no daily</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stress</td>
<td>(n = 4)</td>
<td>(n = 135)</td>
<td>(n = 56)</td>
<td>(n = 195)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daily stress</td>
<td>(n = 9)</td>
<td>(n = 109)</td>
<td>(n = 50)</td>
<td>(n = 168)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 5 indicates, levels of optimism by daily stress show similar patterns to the analyses done thus far. To do this analysis, the six category variable for stress was made into a two category variable to allow for better, more concise results. Those who report little to no daily stress score in the low optimism range 2.1% of the time, whereas those who report moderate to high daily stress score in the low range 5.4% of the time. For moderate optimism, 69.2% of respondents with little to no daily stress scored in the moderate range, whereas only 64.9% of those with moderate to high daily stress scored likewise. One fascinating point is that high optimism rates for both groups were nearly the same. Respondents who report little to no stress scored in the high range 28.7% of the time, compared to 29.8% of respondents with moderate to high daily stress. Also interesting is that stress, essentially, was found to have no effect on optimism levels based on respondents answers: the relationship was not significant ($p = > .05$).

Conclusion

Optimism levels are surprisingly consistent for the majority of the variables used. Only gender and employment had a significant relationship with optimism. Males were much more likely than females to report high levels of optimism and were less likely than women to report moderate optimism. This shows that, unlike previous research, gender differences in optimism
were significant for the DAS sample. Respondents, who were unemployed reported low optimism ten times more than those who were employed, and likewise, were not nearly as highly optimistic. Out of the results that were not significant, some interesting points were: those in the senior age range were more likely to report low optimism than those in the young adult and middle age groups. Also intriguing is that students were more likely to report low optimism than were non-students. Finally, stress did not play a big role in determining optimism levels, which was surprising. Overall, gender and employment have a larger, more significant, relationship with optimism levels than any of the other categories looked at. Since optimism is correlated with higher quality of life overall, male respondents who are currently employed can be thought to have a higher quality of life than female respondents or those who are unemployed.
References


