
Optimistic attributional style matters after all: linking explanations of positive events to well-being and academic achievement

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Résumé

Background. Optimistic thinking is one of the basic positive psychology topics which was studied within the theory of optimistic attributional style (M.Seligman, L.Abramson, C.Peterson) and dispositional optimism (C. Carver & M. Scheier). Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) proposed the construct of optimistic and pessimistic attributional styles, which refer to how people habitually explain the causes of different events in their lives. Clinically-oriented research has consistently shown that people prone to pessimistic attributional style for negative events are vulnerable to depression (e.g., Peterson, Seligman, 1987). Since then, attributional style research has focused mainly on how people explain negative events and mainly as a predictor of negative outcomes, like depression or anxiety. Attributional style for positive events, in relation to positive outcomes like subjective well-being have received significantly less attention. As to relations of attributional style to academic achievement the research on this topic has yielded rather contradictory and complex results (e.g., Houston 1994, 2016). We sought to examine the question anew by conducting two studies of the relationship between students' attributional styles for both positive and negative events and their well-being, ill-being (depression), and academic achievement.

Study 1

Participants were 202 9–11th grade students aged 14-18 years old (MA= 15.37, SD = 1.02).

Measures. Attributional style was measured by Adolescents' version of ASQ (Gordeeva, Osin, Shevyakhova, 2009). Reliability coefficients (alpha Cronbach) ranged from 0.77 for positive events to 0.84 for negative events.

Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), LOT (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994), and Trait Depression Scale (Ritterband & Spielberger, 1996) were used to measure well-being.

The end of the year grades for three main school subjects (math, native language, and literature) were averaged ($\alpha=.79$).

Results. GPA significantly positively correlated with attributional style for positive events

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($r = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$), whereas attributional style for negative events was unrelated to GPA. Indicators of well-being were equally and significantly related with attributional style for positive events and negative events.

In order to further analyze the relations between attributional style for positive and negative events, well-being and academic performance we used structural educational modeling. In the model attributional style for positive events predicted both well-being and academic performance and attributional style for negative events predicted well-being. A SEM model revealed a good fit to the data (MLR, $\chi^2 = 69.58$; $df = 40$; $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.954; TLI = 0.938; RMSEA = 0.061; 90% CI for RMSEA: 0.036-0.084, PCLOSE = 0.220).

Study 2

Longitudinal design was used in this study. Participants were 153 Moscow State University students ($M = 17.70$; $SD = 0.96$). When students were freshmen at the middle of Spring semester they completed the ASQ measure, a year later they completed well-being measures.

Measures. Attributional style was measured using an adapted Russian version of the ASQ (SFASQ, Gordeeva et al., 2009). Reliability coefficients ranged from 0.80 for positive events to 0.89 for negative events.

Well-being was measured using Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and Subjective Vitality Scales (Ryan & Frederick, 1997).

The actual academic performance was measured using averaged examinations results for four prospective examination sessions.

Results. Using structural educational modeling, we examined the role of attributional style for positive and negative events as predictors of well-being and academic performance. In the model attributional style for positive events predicted both well-being and academic performance and attributional style for negative events predicted well-being. The model fitted the data well with CFI = 0.979; TLI = 0.970; RMSEA = 0.050, 90% CI for RMSEA: 0.000-0.087, PCLOSE = 0.470, $\chi^2 = 34.45$; $df = 25$; $p = 0.10$.

General Discussion and Conclusions

In two studies using structural equation modeling it was shown that across high-schoolers and college students, separate factors for optimistic attributional styles for positive and negative events emerged in the data, and both factors independently predicted student well-being. However, only optimistic attributional style for positive events reliably predicted student academic achievement, including boosted achievement over time.

Although most prior research has focused on attributional style for negative events because of clinical psychology's traditional interest in helping people to cope with problems, it appears that attributional style for positive events is just as important, not only for limiting depression and negative well-being, but also for promoting positive affect and positive well-being.

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Mots-Clés: Attributional style for positive events, optimistic thinking, well-being, academic achievement.