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# 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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*Keywords:* Pessimistic explanatory style; Negative affectivity; Generational differences; Psychological adjustment

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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

the generalizability of the findings obtained from studies on dispositional optimism to research on pessimistic explanatory style. However, based on the pattern of past findings noted earlier, one might expect that once affectivity is included in a prediction model, pessimistic explanatory style may not account for much additional unique variance in psychological adjustment. Beyond a need to test for this possibility directly, there is also some reason to also look across different age groups. Specifically, recent findings suggest that holding a pessimistic explanatory style may not be as dysfunctional (i.e., weaker association with depressive symptoms) as holding an optimistic explanatory style in older adult populations (Isaacowitz & Seligman, 2001). Accordingly, the extent to which pessimistic explanatory style may uniquely be involved in predicting psychological adjustment may vary across young and more mature adults. In that regard, and because of growing interest in studying family and intergenerational processes (e.g., Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994; Kaslow, 1996), as well as some evidence implicating biological factors in the development of pessimistic explanatory style (Schulman, Keith, & Seligman, 1991), it may be particularly interesting to compare findings across two generations of biologically-related adults, namely, across young adults and their middle-aged adult parents.

## 2. Purpose of the present study

Given the aforementioned concerns associated with previous research on pessimistic explanatory style in adults, the goals of the present study were to (a) examine differences on pessimistic explanatory style between young adults (i.e., college students) and middle-aged adults (i.e., their biologically-related parents); (2) examine the associations of pessimistic explanatory style, affectivity, psychological adjustment (viz., depressive symptoms and life satisfaction) in young adults and middle-aged adults; and (3) examine a prediction model of psychological adjustment involving pessimistic explanatory style and affectivity in young adults and middle-aged adults. Consistent with past findings, we expected that the predictive strength of pessimistic explanatory style would be weakened after accounting for affectivity in predicting depressive symptoms and life satisfaction in both young adults and their parents. Moreover, we expected the predictive strength of pessimistic explanatory style to be weaker in predicting psychological adjustment, especially depressive symptoms, among middle-aged adults than among young adults (Isaacowitz & Seligman, 2001).

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

The initial pool of participants involved 259 college students and 259 “parents”. Student participants were from a mid-sized Midwestern university. All student participants were enrolled in an upper-division psychology course (e.g., Social Psychology, Animal Learning) and earned course credit for participating. “Parent” participants were solicited by students. Of the initial student participant sample, 1 student participant provided an incomplete set of surveys, and thus left a total of 258 completed pair of responses that were available for subsequent analyses. Of this

group, we only looked at the 207 pairs of surveys completed by students (young adults) and their biologically-related parents (middle-aged adults) given our present research focus. The young adult sample was composed of 45 men and 162 women ( $M = 22.45$  years,  $SD = 4.21$  years). The middle-aged adult sample was composed of 53 men and 154 women ( $M = 49.31$  years,  $SD = 8.55$  years). Importantly, results of a multivariate analysis of variance indicated that there were no significant multivariate differences between the selected group of 207 students and the 51 students dropped from the study in pessimistic explanatory style, affectivity, and psychological adjustment,  $F(5, 252) = .97$ .

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire (EASQ)

The EASQ (Peterson & Villanova, 1988) is based on and expands on Peterson et al.'s (1982) Attributional Style Questionnaire or ASQ. Similar to the format used with the ASQ, respondents given the EASQ are presented with various life event items. For each event (e.g., "you have been looking for a job unsuccessfully for some time"), respondents are asked to provide ratings across a 7-point Likert-type scale for internality, stability, and globality. Unlike the ASQ, which only includes 12 negative event items, the EASQ includes 24 negative event items and is therefore considered a more reliable measure (Peterson & Villanova, 1988). For the parent version, 6 events were dropped given their questionable frequency or relevance to this population. Specifically, the following event items "You go out on a date and it goes badly," "Your steady romantic relationship ends," "After your first term at school, you are on academic probation," "Your roommate tells you he/she is switching to a room down the hall," "You have trouble with one of your instructors," and "Your attempt to capture the interest of a specific member of the opposite sex is a failure" were dropped from the EASQ on the parent version of the survey.

Because we were primarily interested in studying pessimistic explanatory style as a whole and because our preliminary analyses failed to discern any meaningful pattern using EASQ subscale scores in our samples, we used only composite EASQ scores in this study. Higher composite scores on the EASQ reflect a stronger pessimistic explanatory style.

#### 3.2.2. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

The PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988a; Watson et al., 1988b) is a 20-item self-report measure of positive and negative affect, with 10 items assessing for positive affect or PA (e.g., "enthusiasm") and 10 items for negative affect or NA (e.g., "irritable"). Respondents are asked to rate how they feel for each item across a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly*) to 5 (*extremely*). For the present study, instructions asked how respondents felt in general (i.e., "Indicate to what extent you *generally* feel this way, that is, how you feel on the *average*."). Evidence for the construct validity of the PANAS has been reported in Watson et al. (1988a, 1988b).

#### 3.2.3. Self-rating Depression Scale (SDS)

The SDS (Zung, 1965) is a 20-item self-report measure of depressive symptoms (e.g., "I feel down-hearted, blue, and sad"). Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced each symptom across a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*a little of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*). Higher scores on the SDS generally indicate more severe levels of depressive

symptomatology, and have been found to be sensitive in distinguishing depression among inpatients (Zung, 1965). Moreover, SDS scores have also been found to correlate with scores on other popular self-report measures of depression, including the Beck Depression Inventory (Kerner & Jacobs, 1983).

#### 3.2.4. *Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)*

The SWLS (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item measure of global life satisfaction (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”), or a person’s satisfaction with life as a whole, rather than any specific domain. Respondents are asked to rate the extent of their agreement to these items across a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores on the SWLS reflect greater life satisfaction. Test–retest reliability (8 weeks) for the SWLS scale has been reported to be .82 (Diener et al., 1985).

### 3.3. *Procedure*

All study measures were administered to all 259 college student participants in the form of a take home survey. Each participant was asked to give a second set of questionnaires nearly identical to the one he or she was to complete to a parent the student was living with and who knew him or her well. If a parent was not available, then they were instructed to try and distribute the survey to an older relative, an older friend, or a friend/relative, in that particular order, who also knew him or her well.

Participants were not made aware of the purpose of the study until after the study was completed. To protect the participants’ anonymity, only participant numbers were placed on the instruments. In addition, all student and non-student participants signed consent forms that indicated that all test data would be kept strictly confidential.

## 4. Results

Results of conducting a series of *t*-tests for dependent samples (as well as computing for effect sizes) are presented in Table 1. As this table shows, there were significant differences, ranging from small to medium effect sizes, between young adults and their middle-aged parents on levels of pessimistic explanatory style, affectivity, and life satisfaction. Specifically, young adults reported greater levels of pessimistic explanatory style and negative affectivity compared to their parents. In contrast, parents reported greater levels of positive affectivity and life satisfaction compared to their adult children. However, no significant difference emerged between the two groups on depressive symptoms levels. It is worth noting that these comparative findings for affectivity are relatively consistent with recent findings indicating a decline in level of negative affect with age (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001) and findings indicating an increase or stability in level of positive affect with age (Charles et al., 2001; Gross et al., 1997).

Correlations between the present set of variables for young adults and their parents are presented in Table 2. As the table shows, pessimistic explanatory style functioned similarly within the present set of study variables across the two groups. However, there was one exception. For young adults, greater pessimistic explanatory style was significantly associated with less life

Table 1

Group differences between young adults and middle-aged adults on measures of pessimistic explanatory style, affectivity, and psychological adjustment

Measure	Group				<i>t</i> (206)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Young adults		Middle-aged adults			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Pessimistic Explanatory Style <sup>a</sup>	12.98	2.18	12.27	2.17	3.33***	.33
Positive Affectivity	33.06	6.49	34.82	6.58	−2.87**	.27
Negative Affectivity	22.75	7.77	19.05	6.77	5.64***	.51
Depressive Symptoms	36.84	8.54	35.68	9.61	1.55	.13
Life Satisfaction	24.23	5.78	25.25	6.35	−2.14*	.17

Note: For young adult sample, *n* = 207. For middle-aged adult sample, *n* = 207.

<sup>a</sup> Pessimistic explanatory style scores are based on dividing the total score on the Extended Attributional Style Questionnaire by the number of events used in the student survey (*n* = 24 events) and in the parent survey (*n* = 18 events).

\* *p* < .05.

\*\* *p* < .01.

\*\*\* *p* < .001.

Table 2

Zero-order correlations between measures of pessimistic explanatory style, affectivity, and psychological adjustment

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
1. EASQ	–				
2. PA	−.24** (−.26**)	–			
3. NA	.33** (.28**)	−.38** (−.55**)	–		
4. SWLS	−.18* (−.10)	.47** (.33**)	−.46** (−.50**)	–	
5. SDS	.38** (.25**)	−.53** (−.65**)	.69** (.60**)	−.60** (−.53**)	–
$\alpha$	.89 (.86)	.88 (.89)	.90 (.89)	.90 (.91)	.86 (.88)

Notes: Numbers outside of the parentheses are for students (*n* = 207). Numbers within the parentheses are for parents (*n* = 207). EASQ = Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire; PA = Positive Affectivity; NA = Negative Affectivity; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale; SDS = Self-Rating Depression Scale.

\* *p* < .01.

\*\* *p* < .001.

satisfaction ( $r = -.18, p < .01$ ). For middle-aged parents, there was no significant association between pessimistic explanatory style and life satisfaction ( $r = -.10, n.s.$ ).

To examine pessimistic explanatory style as an important predictor of psychological adjustment, we conducted two sets of hierarchical regression analyses. These analyses sought to deter-

mine the amount of variance in depressive symptoms and life satisfaction accounted for by pessimistic explanatory style for each group. In the first set of analyses, we entered pessimistic explanatory style in the First Step, followed by affectivity (as a set) in the Second Step (see Table 3). In the second set of analyses, we reversed the order of these steps to determine the extent to which the inclusion of affectivity weakened the importance of pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of psychological adjustment relative to the previous regression results (see Table 4).

As Table 3 shows, pessimistic explanatory style accounted for small to medium amounts of the variance ( $f^2$ s  $\geq .03$ ) in predicting depressive symptoms in both young adults and middle-aged adults ( $R^2$ s = .16 and .07, respectively), and in predicting life satisfaction in young adults ( $R^2 = .03$ ). Within these results, pessimistic explanatory style emerged as a significant predictor. As expected, affectivity accounted for large amounts of additional unique variance ( $f^2$ s  $\geq .35$ ) in predicting depressive symptoms and life satisfaction in both young adults ( $\Delta R^2$ s = .45 and .28, respectively) and their middle-aged parents ( $\Delta R^2$ s = .46 and .26, respectively). In general, both positive affectivity and negative affectivity emerged as significant and unique predictors of psychological adjustment. However, only negative affectivity emerged as a significant unique predictor of life satisfaction in middle-aged adults.

Table 3

Hierarchical regression analyses showing amount of variance in depressive symptoms and life satisfaction accounted for by pessimistic explanatory style and affectivity in young and middle-aged adults

Psychological Adjustment	$\beta$	$R$	$\Delta R^2$	df	$F$
<b>Young Adults (<math>n = 207</math>)</b>					
<i>Depressive Symptoms</i>					
Step 1: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.38**	.38		1, 205	34.63**
Step 2: Affectivity		.77	.45	2, 203	108.38**
Positive Affectivity	-.30**				
Negative Affectivity	.54**				
<i>Life Satisfaction</i>					
Step 1: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	-.18*	.18		1, 205	6.82*
Step 2: Affectivity		.56	.28	2, 203	43.24**
Positive Affectivity	.35**				
Negative Affectivity	-.33**				
<b>Middle-Aged Adult Parents (<math>n = 207</math>)</b>					
<i>Depressive Symptoms</i>					
Step 1: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.25**	.25		1, 205	13.31**
Step 2: Affectivity		.72	.46	2, 203	96.66**
Positive Affectivity	-.46**				
Negative Affectivity	.35**				
<i>Life Satisfaction</i>					
Step 1: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.10	.10		1, 205	1.88
Step 2: Affectivity		.51	.26	2, 203	34.62**
Positive Affectivity	.09				
Negative Affectivity	-.47**				

\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4

Hierarchical regression analyses showing amount of variance in depressive symptoms and life satisfaction accounted for by affectivity and pessimistic explanatory style in young and middle-aged adults

Psychological Adjustment	$\beta$	$R$	$\Delta R^2$	df	$F$
Young Adults ( $n = 207$ )					
<i>Depressive Symptoms</i>					
Step 1: Affectivity		.75	.56	2,204	136.19**
Positive Affectivity	-.32**				
Negative Affectivity	.57**				
Step 2: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.14*	.77	.03	1,203	4.89*
<i>Life Satisfaction</i>					
Step 1: Affectivity		.56	.32	2,204	48.21**
Positive Affectivity	.35**				
Negative Affectivity	-.33**				
Step 2: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.02	.56	.00	1,203	.07
Middle-Aged Adult Parents ( $n = 207$ )					
<i>Depressive Symptoms</i>					
Step 1: Affectivity		.71	.51	2,204	107.07**
Positive Affectivity	-.46**				
Negative Affectivity	.35**				
Step 2: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.04	.72	.00	1,203	.50
<i>Life Satisfaction</i>					
Step 1: Affectivity		.50	.25	2,204	34.39**
Positive Affectivity	.08				
Negative Affectivity	-.45**				
Step 2: Pessimistic Explanatory Style	.06	.51	.00	1,203	.37

\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

As Table 4 shows, when we reversed the order of entry, affectivity again accounted for large amounts of variance ( $f^2$ s  $\geq .35$ ) in predicting depressive symptoms and life satisfaction in both young adults ( $R^2$ s = .56 and .32, respectively) and their middle-aged parents ( $R^2$ s = .51 and .25, respectively). However, consistent with expectations, pessimistic explanatory style failed to account for additional unique variance in psychological adjustment in both young adults and their parents after the inclusion affectivity in these analyses. However, there was one exception. Although pessimistic explanatory style played a weaker role in predicting depressive symptoms in young adults after the inclusion of affectivity ( $\Delta\beta = -.24$ ), it still accounted for a small amount ( $f^2 = .02$ ) of additional unique variance.

## 5. Discussion

Findings from numerous studies over the past three decades have pointed to pessimistic explanatory style as an important predictor of psychological adjustment in adults (e.g., Buchanan &

Seligman, 1995; Gillham et al., 2001). However, this view has been largely based on studies of young adults, leaving largely unanswered questions about the usefulness of pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of psychological adjustment in more mature adults. Moreover, little effort has been made to critically evaluate the relative power of pessimistic explanatory style to predict psychological adjustment over powerful affective predictors such as positive and negative affectivity (Watson et al., 1988a, 1988b). Accordingly, a central goal of the present study was to determine if pessimistic explanatory style still remained an important predictor of psychological adjustment even after accounting for the role of affectivity across two generations of adults, namely, young adult college students and their middle-aged parents.

Results from the present study indicated that affectivity represented a robust predictor of psychological adjustment in both young and middle-aged adults. This is not too surprising given that much of the variance in depressive symptoms in adults are commonly believed to be determined by variations in positive and negative affectivity (Watson et al., 1988a). Relatedly, given that life satisfaction, as measured by the SWLS, assessed for an individual's appraisal of satisfaction with his or her life as a whole (Diener et al., 1985), it was not surprising that we found affectivity to account for less variance in life satisfaction than it did in depressive symptoms for both adult groups. Interestingly, whereas both positive and negative affectivity significantly were found to predict depressive symptoms in young and middle-aged adults and to predict life satisfaction in young adults, only negative affectivity was found to significantly predict life satisfaction in middle-aged adults. Hence, among more mature adults, it appears that greater life satisfaction is more strongly associated with lesser chronic feelings of negative affect, than it is with greater chronic feelings of positive affect. Consistent with a Stoic approach to well-being (Rist, 1969), the source of life satisfaction among more mature adults appears to be one that is more strongly based on the absence of painful experiences, rather than based on the presence of pleasurable experiences. In fostering greater psychological well-being in middle-aged adults, our findings point to the potential positive value of interventions that focus on limiting or avoiding negative affective experiences, over those that focus on maximizing positive affective experiences. Nonetheless, because life satisfaction represents only one useful measure of psychological adjustment (Ryff, 1989), it would be important to see if there are additional source differences in what predicts or determines psychological adjustment (e.g., purpose in life, personal growth) across young and middle-aged adults.

As expected, pessimistic explanatory style failed to emerge as a strong or significant unique predictor of psychological adjustment independent of affectivity in both adult groups. In general, pessimistic explanatory style became a nonsignificant predictor of life satisfaction in young adults and of depressive symptoms in middle-aged adults once affectivity was included as a predictor. This pattern is consistent with findings from past studies that have shown a drop in the predictive strength or utility of cognitive variables when affectivity is accounted for (e.g. Chang & Sanna, 2001). However, one important exception was found. Namely, pessimistic explanatory style remained a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in young adults, accounting for a small but significant amount of additional variance in symptoms. In that regard, despite the robust explanatory power of affectivity in predicting psychological adjustment, this finding for young adults is consistent with past research and theory pointing to pessimistic explanatory style as a critical vulnerability factor linked to the development of depressive symptoms and clinical depression in adults (Gillham et al., 2001). However, with more mature adults, our findings suggest that

pessimistic explanatory style may not be as useful a predictor of psychological adjustment once affectivity is taken into account.

Some limitations to the present study warrant discussion. First, the present study was cross-sectional in design. Therefore, causal inferences are not possible. Second, the present study was based on adult participants drawn from the US. Findings from some studies indicate that the function of explanatory style may vary across Westerners and Easterners (e.g., Lee & Seligman, 1997). Third, although our findings for young adults and middle-aged adults provided only limited support for the notion that pessimistic explanatory style remains an important predictor of psychological adjustment beyond affectivity, it may be that pessimistic explanatory style plays a more robust role than affectivity in more specific populations (e.g., clinically depressed adults). Finally, the present study focused on psychological adjustment. However, a considerable body of research has also pointed to explanatory style as an important predictor of physical adjustment and outcome (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988). Therefore, it would be important in future research to determine if the inclusion of affectivity also weakens the importance of pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of physical adjustment.

In conclusion, the present study is the first to directly compare the relative utility of pessimistic explanatory style, over affectivity, as a predictor of psychological adjustment across young and middle-aged adults. Overall, we found that affectivity played a stronger role than pessimistic explanatory style in predicting both depressive symptoms and life satisfaction across two adult generations (i.e., college students and their parents). Although our findings do raise some serious questions about past research and theory pointing to the robust role of pessimistic explanatory style in predicting psychological adjustment in adults, more research is clearly needed before one can draw any definitive conclusions about the relative value of pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of psychological adjustment across the adult lifespan.

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