College Student Disposition and Academic Self-Efficacy

Timothy W. Conner II, Ronald L. Skidmore, and Lola Aagaard

Morehead State University

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Abstract

Dispositional optimism is an adopted orientation in which one believes that goals will generally be attained and that tasks can generally be successfully completed, whereas pessimists orient toward less belief in successful task or goal completion. A related concept, individuals with high self-efficacy believe they will be successful at particular tasks. The type of self-efficacy related to learning tasks is termed "Academic self-efficacy" and it, along with generalized optimism/pessimism, appear to influence motivation and engagement decisions pertaining to completion of goal-oriented tasks. A cluster sample (n=105) of undergraduate students at a regional university in the midsouth was administered two instruments. The 19-item *Self-Efficacy for Learning Form – Abridged* (SELF-A) was employed to gauge student academic self-efficacy. Participants also completed the Revised Life Orientation Test, an instrument designed to measure outcome expectancies and dispositional optimism/pessimism. Students that reported higher self-efficacy reported significantly lower pessimism whereas participants with reported lower self-efficacy displayed significantly higher levels of pessimism. Questions still remain, but educators desiring students to attain successful outcomes in class should employ instructional strategies that orient learners toward optimism and higher rates of self-efficacy.

KEYWORDS: Dispositional optimism/pessimism, Academic self-efficacy, College Success, Student beliefs

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Expectancy-value theories conceptualize motivation as an interaction between internal thoughts and environmental contexts. These theories are seminal to the work of researchers and theorists in the areas of (a) social learning and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977a, 1986), particularly with reference to behavioral self-regulation; (b) models of self-regulated learning (e.g., Schunk, 1989; Zimmerman, 1986); (c) self- efficacy (Bandura, 1977b); and (d) dispositional optimism-pessimism (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1990). In general, people will continue to engage in the production of behaviors, thoughts, and actions that they perceive will garner attainment of cognized goals, as long as expectancies of success remain intact. When success is jeopardized or in doubt, individuals are likely to cease persistence toward these established goals and to disengage from the task.

Scheier and Carver (1992) define dispositional optimism as the generalized predisposition toward expecting outcomes to be positive, assert that optimism-pessimism mediates expectancies of success, and that differences in outcomes can be attributed, at least partially, to differences in how optimists and pessimists perceive and cope with life challenges (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). People who are optimists generally hold positive expectancies for the future, whereas people who are pessimists tend to hold negative expectancies for the future (Scheier et al., 1994). Scheier and Carver (1985, 1992) suggest that optimism-pessimism mediates these generalized expectancies in a self- regulatory function. Goal-directed behavior is therefore guided by an individual's assessment of the congruency between behavior and attainment of a goal.

Research indicates that dispositional optimism is a beneficial factor in the establishment of physical and psychological well-being, adjustment to life transitions, and post-surgery recovery.

(Allison, Guichard, & Gilain, 2000; Aspinwell & Taylor, 1992; Scheier et al.,1989; Scheier & Carver, 1992). In academic situations at the post-secondary level, previous research has indicated that optimism was related to the study habits of college students and the final grade attained in a course (Skidmore & Aagaard, 2010). Greater pessimism was associated with non-preparation for examinations, including non-review of notes taken during class time. With regard to course grade, students earning a C grade were more pessimistic than students earning an A grade. Interestingly students exhibited earning D or F grades exhibited less pessimism that B or C students. In general terms, persons exhibiting dispositional optimism more effectively and more favorably adjust to transitional life events than do persons who exhibit a pessimistic outlook.

Self-efficacy can be conceptualized as an individual's belief in their ability to be successful at a given task. (Bandura, 1977b). An individual may know what specific behaviors and skills are necessary to produce desired outcomes, yet they may have varying beliefs about the degree to which they can be adequately produce and engage in those behaviors, partially accounting for differences in performance on the tasks at hand (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

As stated by Bandura (1977b), although self-efficacy is not the only factor responsible for individual behaviors and success on tasks, "perceived self-efficacy [has] a directive influence on choice of activities and settings [and] through expectations of eventual success, it can affect coping efforts once they are initiated" (p. 194). As applied to academic learning, learners with higher levels of belief in their ability to engage in behaviors appropriate for learning (i.e. higher academic self-efficacy) are more likely to choose to engage in learning activities and, if they should initially meet a task unsuccessfully, they are more likely to persist and try again.

Therefore, given that dispositional optimism / pessimism and self-efficacy have common theoretical foundations, and that both are found to mediate judgments regarding tasks related to motivation and engagement in tasks associated with goal attainment, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between dispositional optimism/pessimism and self-efficacy of students in a post-secondary academic context.

Method

Participants

This study employed a convenient cluster sample of 105 students taking summer classes at a regional university in the mid-south. Sixty-one percent of respondents were female and nearly 100% were Caucasian. They reported 29 different majors, with the highest concentrations being education (17%), biology-related (13%), and agriculture-related (10%). The distribution across year in college is shown in Table 1. Sophomores were under-represented compared to the other years of undergraduate students.

Table 1

Sample Distribution Across Year in College

Year	n	%
Freshman	26	25
Sophomore	19	18
Junior	26	25
Senior	33	31
Graduate	1	1

Students were asked to self-report their GPA range. A large majority (63%) claimed a B average, while 30% reported a C average. The remaining 7% were split between A and D average grade point averages.

Instrumentation

The 19-item *Self-Efficacy for Learning Form – Abridged* (SELF-A) (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007) was employed to gauge student academic self-efficacy (see Appendix A). This instrument has a single factor structure and is highly consistent internally (Cronbach's alpha=0.92). The SELF-A assesses student confidence with skills such as taking notes, getting ready for tests, and studying, as well as with motivation, time management, and attention. Participants are asked to indicate the percentage of confidence they have regarding the topic of each item, from 0% (Definitely Cannot Do It) up to 100% (Definitely Can Do It).

Participants also completed the Revised Life Orientation Test (see Appendix B). Scheier and Carver (1985) developed the Life Orientation Test (LOT) to assess an individual's generalized outcome expectancies / dispositional optimism with eight scored items. In response to questions and criticisms of the instrument (e.g., Smith, Pope, Rhodewalt, & Poulton, 1989), the developers of the LOT undertook a reevaluation of the instrument (Scheier et al. 1994), determining that the LOT was effective in assessing an individual's generalized optimism. Additional questions and considerations led to the construction of the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), containing six scored items. The instrument is scored so that high scores on any scale indicate higher optimism. Thus, low scores on the pessimism scale indicate increased pessimism.

Initial psychometric analysis by the Scheier et al. (1994) found that the instrument demonstrated acceptable discriminate validity, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .78), and test-retest reliability. (In the current study, Cronbach's alphas for the total LOT-R and the pessimism scale were 0.80, but only 0.62 for the optimism scale.) The instrument has been extensively implemented in the investigation of attributes and beliefs of various college student

populations, including subjective well-being (Ayyash-Abdo & Alamuddin, 2007), irrational beliefs (Chang & Bridewell, 1998), worldview (Coll & Draves, 2008), and prediction of depressive symptoms (Vickers & Vogeltanz, 2000).

Procedure

Researchers requested permission from course instructors to administer both instruments to their students in the last 15 minutes of a regularly scheduled class period. Courses surveyed were spread across the departments of agriculture, geology, biology, physics, philosophy, education, English, and history.

Analysis

The study participants were divided into above-average and below-average sub-groups based on a comparison of their individual academic self-efficacy to the group average. Three independent t-tests were run to see whether the LOT variables differed between the above/below-average sub-groups. Using Pearson correlation, all three LOT variables were analyzed for a relationship to student self-efficacy, plus exploratory correlations were run between scale totals of each instrument and individual item scores of the other.

Results

Overall scale means and standard deviations for the instruments administered to participants are displayed in Table 2. Although higher scores on both sub-scales of the LOT are interpreted as meaning higher levels of optimism, the optimism and pessimism scale totals correlated at only 0.54 in this study, so they do not share more than 30% common variance.

Table 2

Overall Scale Means and Standard Deviations

Scale	n	Mean	Std.
LOT Total	105	20.46	4.69
Pessimism	105	9.41	2.87
Optimism	105	11.05	2.47
Self-efficacy	105	65.33	13.94

The t-test procedure showed no significant differences between students with above-average self-efficacy and those with below-average self-efficacy on LOT total score or optimism. However, as shown in Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference between the sub-groups on the pessimism scale, with lower self-efficacy being associated with higher levels of pessimism (shown by a lower pessimism score). The effect size of the difference was 0.46 – nearly a medium-sized effect.

Table 3

Results of t-test on Pessimism Scale between Self-Efficacy Sub-groups

Sub-group	n	Mean	Std.	t	df	p-value
Above-average self-efficacy	57	10.02	2.55	2.42	103	0.0174
Below-average self-efficacy	48	8.69	3.09			

The exploratory correlational analyses between items of the two instruments revealed only five correlations that were 0.28 or larger. Four of these involved the same SELF-A item, as shown in Table 4. These correlations indicate that people with greater optimism (items 4 and 10) or less pessimism (a higher score on items 7 and 9) feel more capable of being academically successful in some way even if they are struggling in the subject or fallen behind.

Table 4

Correlations between Items of the LOT and the SELF-A

	LOT Items			
	Item 4	Item 7	Item 9	Item 10
SELF-A Item	*Always optimistic about my future* r (p)	*Hardly ever expect things to go my way* r (p)	*Rarely count on good things happening to me* r (p)	*Expect more good things to happen than bad* r (p)
Item 8 – Capable of being an effective study partner even if struggling in a subject	0.28 (.0036)	0.38 (<.0001)	0.47 (<.0001)	0.34 (.0004)
Item 11 – Can increase study time to catch up in course where really behind	- -	- -	0.29 (.0028)	- -

There were other statistically significant correlations, but none as high as the ones in Table 4. Item 3 on the LOT ("If something can go wrong for me, it will.") showed positive correlations between 0.20 and 0.27 with 11 out of the 19 SELF-A items. No other LOT item approached that much association with the SELF-A.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between dispositional optimism/pessimism and self-efficacy of students in a post-secondary academic context. Given the conceptual and theoretical 'common ground' of these constructs, a more definitive association might have been expected. The results of this study are somewhat ambiguous, but nonetheless interesting and indicate opportunities for additional investigation.

It should be noted here that, as reported in a previous study (Conner, Aagaard, & Skidmore, 2011), the SELF instrument scores of students for this study were approximately one

standard deviation below those tallied by Zimmerman and Kitsantis (2007) in the study that established the psychometric properties of the instrument. Participants in their study sample were students from a large metropolitan university. The participants for the present study were from a small, comprehensive state university that historically reports a high percentage of first-generation college students, situated in a region that reports one of the highest poverty rates in the country, and in which schools are continually "under fire" for inadequately preparing students for post-secondary education experiences. A common finding is that socioeconomic status (SES) is positively correlated with self-efficacy – individuals from higher-income backgrounds have higher self-efficacy and those with lower income have lower self-efficacy. Gilani (2003), in a study of the homeless, found the ones with the lowest self-efficacy were the least likely to persist in patterns of activity that would help ameliorate their poverty, so they remained homeless. Additionally, Caprara et al. (2008) found that the self-efficacy for self-regulated learning dropped between the ages of 12 and 18. Although they found no difference in self-efficacy at age 12 across SES groups, the rate of decline in the subsequent years was related to SES, with the poorest students having the largest drops in self-efficacy by the age of 18.

Additionally, in a study of academic self-efficacy in the college age population, Wang and Castañeda-Sound (2008) found that first-generation college students reported an overall lower sense of academic self-efficacy compared to students whose parents had previously attended college. According to Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012), these first-generation college students are more likely to be from working-class families of lower SES and may experience cultural discontinuity when they arrive at college, as they are moving from a background that stressed interdependence to one that expects independence. They may have come from high schools that did not adequately prepare them for the rigors of college

studies, so they do not really know how to be college students, which makes them question their ability to be successful academically (Stephens et al.). In this regard the results displayed in Table 4 are particularly interesting. It would seem that student's pessimistic perceptions of their own academic success may be somewhat mediated by the belief that they are capable of being good study partners (i.e., engaging in cooperative study activities, an action or strategy often put forth by agents of the college community as being beneficial), thus protecting self-esteem to a degree, regardless of outcomes.

Also, in the present study, participants exhibiting a lower degree of self-efficacy exhibited a high degree of pessimism (see Table 3). Previous research (Skidmore & Aagaard, 2010) has shown greater pessimism to be related to students not engaging in behaviors associated with successful participation in the college context (e.g., not preparing at all for tests, not preparing ahead of time for tests, and not reading the notes taken in class), similar to the outcomes found by Conner et al. (2011) regarding self-efficacy. It would seem fair to investigate whether this greater pessimism is indicative of a stereotype threat manifested and continually influenced by perceptions of regional schools, and more broadly, the degree to which the general population / culture of the region 'sees' value in education.

It can be inferred from these results that the relationship between self-efficacy and dispositional optimism / pessimism are components of the personal academic milieu that are to be considered in the discussion of factors that influence student perceptions of, and actions taken toward, success in the post-secondary context. As it is with educational and social research, questions remain. There is at least one path for future research that deserves mention here in light of the results of this study. Given the established S.E.S associations regarding self-efficacy, it

would be of interest to determine if there are self-efficacy and dispositional differences between low S.E.S. and high S.E.S. populations from the same region, or even within schools.

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Appendix A

SELF-EFFICACY FOR LEARNING FORM (SELF)

Circle a percentage to indicate your answer for each item.

1. When you miss a class, can you find another student who can explain the lecture notes as clearly as your teacher did?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

2. When your teacher*s lecture is very complex, can you write an effective summary of your original notes before the next class?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

3. When a lecture is especially boring, can you motivate yourself to keep good notes?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

4. When you had trouble understanding your instructor*s lecture, can you clarify the confusion before the next class meeting by comparing notes with a classmate?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

5. When you have trouble studying your class notes because they are incomplete or confusing, can you revise and rewrite them clearly after every lecture?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

6. When you are taking a course covering a huge amount of material, can you condense your notes down to just the essential facts?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

7. When you are trying to understand a new topic, can you associate new concepts with old ones sufficiently well to remember them?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

8. When another student asks you to study together for a course in which you are experiencing difficulty, can you be an effective study partner?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

9. When problems with friends and peers conflict with schoolwork, can you keep up with your assignments?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

10. When you feel moody or restless during studying, can you focus your attention well enough to finish your assigned work?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

11. When you find yourself getting increasingly behind in a new course, can you increase your study time sufficiently to catch up?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

12. When you discover that your homework assignments for the semester are much longer than expected, can you change your other priorities to have enough time for studying?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

13. When you have trouble recalling an abstract concept, can you think of a good example that will help you remember it on the test?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

14. When you have to take a test in a school subject you dislike, can you find a way to motivate yourself to earn a good grade?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

15. When you are feeling depressed about a forthcoming test, can you find a way to motivate yourself to do well?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

16. When your last test results were poor, can you figure out potential questions before the next test that will improve your score greatly?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

17. When you are struggling to remember technical details of a concept for a test, can you find a way to associate them together that will ensure recall?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

18. When you think you did poorly on a test you just finished, can you go back to your notes and locate all the information you had forgotten?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

19. When you find that you had to *cram* at the last minute for a test, can you begin your test preparation much earlier so you won*t need to cram the next time?

Definitely Cannot Do it			Probably Cannot		Maybe Can		Probably Can Do It			Definitely
0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

From: Zimmerman, B., & Kitsantas, A. (2007). Reliability and validity of Self-Efficacy for Learning Form (SELF) scores of college students. *Journal of Psychology, 215*(3), 157-163. Retrieved from PsycARTICLES database.

Appendix B

Life Orientation Test – Revised

Please be as honest and accurate as you can throughout. Try not to let your response to one statement influence your responses to other statements. There are no "correct" or "incorrect" answers. Answer according to your own feelings, rather than how you think "most people" would answer.

Item	**I agree a LOT**	**I agree a LITTLE**	**I neither agree nor disagree**	**I <u>dis</u>agree a LITTLE**	**I <u>dis</u>agree a LOT**
1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.					
2. It's easy for me to relax.					
3. If something can go wrong for me, it will.					
4. I'm always optimistic about my future.					
5. I enjoy my friends a lot.					
6. It's important for me to keep busy.					
7. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.					
8. I don't get upset too easily					
9. I rarely count on good things happening to me.					
10. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.					

From: Scheier, M.F., Carver, C.S., & Bridges, M.W. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): A re-evaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 1063-1078.