

**EDU WORLD 2018**  
**The 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OPTIMISM AND LIFE  
SATISFACTION: CASE STUDY**

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***Abstract***

Striving to achieve happiness is the fundamental goal of any person. Researchers of phenomenon of happiness operationalize this concept using the term of well-being. In the theoretical studies, the subjective state of well-being is defined as having two dimensions - affective and cognitive. Affective dimension refers to the balance of positive emotions / negative emotions, and the cognitive one refers to life satisfaction (judgments on life satisfaction). In a series of studies that focused on the affective dimension of well-being, it was pointed out that positive and negative emotions are relatively independent and that the lack of negative emotions does not attract a greater life satisfaction. The explanation has been identified in concepts such as optimism and pessimism. This means that when a person is optimistic is more likely to perceive life in a positive sense and to feel a higher satisfaction with life. This paper attempts to verify the correlations established previously by other empirical studies between the level of satisfaction with life and the optimism / pessimism of a person using two well-established instruments: Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Life Orientation Test. The research is conducted on 150 students from The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. We also propose practical recommendations for effective development of well-being, measures that can be implemented by the university in counselling programs.

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**Keywords:** Optimism, pessimism, satisfaction with life, counselling, subjective well-being.



## 1. Introduction

Striving to achieve happiness is the fundamental goal of any person. Researchers of phenomenon of happiness operationalize this concept using the term of well-being. In the theoretical studies, the subjective state of well-being it is defined as having two dimensions - affective and cognitive - which reflects the way in which each individual assesses his own life or the extent to which he considers his existence to be a fulfilled one. Affective dimension refers to the balance of positive emotions / negative emotions, and the cognitive one refers to life satisfaction (judgments on life satisfaction) (Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, & Oishi 1997). Subjective well-being is studied as synonymous with mental health (Diener, Lukas, & Oishi, 2003) and reveals the protective role it has against stressor agents and the ability to prevent depression.

In researches regarding the *cognitive dimension*, there are two perspectives of approaching and measuring life satisfaction: the bottom-up and top-bottom model. According to the bottom-up perspective, general satisfaction with life is the result of the overall assessment of all aspects of life by the individual, while the top-down perspective asserts that general satisfaction with life ( which is established under the influence of the individual's psychic characteristics) determines how the individual evaluates the various aspects of life (Diener, 1984). In other words, the bottom-up model affirms the existence of a bottom-up determinant relationship (from the aspects of life to the overall satisfaction assessment), while the top-down model supports the existence of a top-down causal relationship (from general satisfaction to evaluation of different aspects of life). Although there is some evidence that the top-bottom model is a valuable one, the bottom-up model is a more widespread and easier to use model (which we will also use in our research).

In a series of studies (Trope, Ferguson and Raghumantan, Taylor and Brown, as cited in Argyle, 2001) that focused on the *affective dimension* of well-being, it was pointed out that positive and negative emotions are relatively independent and that the lack of negative emotions does not attract a greater life satisfaction. The explanation has been identified in concepts such as optimism and pessimism (an individual's tendency to focus on positive or negative events). This means that when a person is optimistic is more likely to perceive life in a positive sense and to feel a higher satisfaction with life.

Starting from this two dimensions of well-being, cognitive and affective, researchers have tried to understand if a person with a more positive emotions have a greater satisfaction with life.

Practically, the state of well-being is outlined by the judgments made about the satisfaction of life (cognitive dimension) and affective balance or the extent to which the level of positive affectivity exceeds that of negative affectivity (Diener & Lukas, 2000; Seligman, 2004).

The present study tries to reunite the two dimensions of wellbeing, by identifying the level of satisfaction (cognitive dimension) and the level of optimism (positive emotion of an individual) to see if an more optimistic person has a greater satisfaction with life.

The idea is not entirely new. Previous studies have tried to identify similar correlation. We present here a few findings.

In a study of life satisfaction and optimism in relation to psychological well-being among working and non-working women, Shaheen (2015) found out that satisfaction with life, psychological well-being is correlated with optimism and is higher at working women.

In another study (Leung, Moneta, & McBride-Chang, 2005) optimism predicted life satisfaction directly, and indirectly through self-esteem and relationship harmony. The research conclude that optimism

is a key contributor to subjective well-being because it fosters self-esteem, relationship harmony, and positive perceptions of financial conditions.

One of the most interesting studies on hope, optimism and their capacity of predicting life satisfaction was proposed by Bailey, Eng, Frisch, and Snyder, in 2007. Using the subscales (Agency and Pathways) of the Adult Hope Scale, the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) to measure optimism and pessimism and Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI®) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) for measuring life satisfaction, the study reveals that optimism is a predictor of life satisfaction.

In a previous study (Richițeanu-Năstase, Stăiculescu, & Lăcătuș, 2018) regarding life satisfaction and time management skills (it includes three dimensions: short range planning, long range planning and attitudes) we have found out that women have a more optimistic attitude towards time than men and that affects the level of satisfaction with life.

## **2. Problem Statement**

This paper attempts to verify the correlations established previously by other empirical studies between the level of satisfaction with life and the level of optimism of a person using two well-established instruments: Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 2000) and the Life Orientation Test (LOT, Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994).

The research is conducted on 150 students from The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania enrolled in bachelor, master and doctoral programs.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main research question was if the more optimistic persons have a greater satisfaction with life. Another question that we asked ourselves was: are women in our study more optimistic than men?

Another question of the study was that if the working status affect in any way the level of satisfaction or the optimism/pessimism level? Are the working participants/students more pessimist or more optimist than the nonworking ones?.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

This paper attempts to verify the nature of the correlation, if any, between the level of satisfaction with life and the level of optimism of a person.

Also, the study tries to identify those objective factors that can influence the level of satisfaction (age, gender, working status, the level of education).

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Instruments**

To achieve our purpose we used two well-established instruments: Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 2000) and the Life Orientation Test (LOT), (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). The instrument used to study satisfaction with life was the Satisfaction with life scale proposed by Ed Diener in 1985. We used the 2006 form of the instrument. The instrument has 5 items with a 7 Likert scale. The scores range

from 5 to 35. The 30 – 35 score is a very high score and means a highly satisfied individual, 25- 29 is a high score and means a satisfied individual, 20 – 24 is an average score, 15 – 19 is a slightly below average in life satisfaction, 10 – 14 dissatisfied and 5-9 Extremely Dissatisfied. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was developed to assess satisfaction with the respondent's life as a whole.

The second instrument used was the LOT-R (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). The Life Orientation Test (LOT) and the revised test LOT-R was developed to assess individual differences in generalized optimism versus pessimism. The instrument is a research instrument, not intended for clinical applications. The instrument has 10 statements that participants are asked to answer using a letter A (I agree a lot) through E (I disagree a lot). Items 3, 7 and 9 are reversed (and can be scored separately used to measure pessimism). Items 2, 5, 6 and 8 are fillers and do not need to be scored. There is no standard regarding the high level of optimism. However, the highest level that can be obtained on the optimism scale is 30.

For our present research we used along identification elements – gender, age, the level of education, working status as to explore if they affect the level of satisfaction with life and optimism. To obtain the necessary data to our research we integrated the instruments in only one instrument using Google forms application and we distributed, collected and analysed the obtained data using SPSS.

## 5.2. Participants

The research was conducted on 150 students from the University of Economic Studies enrolled in bachelor, master and doctoral programs. The participants are 42 male students (28%) and 108 female students (72%), with ages varying from 19 to 52 years old, 30,7% enrolled in bachelor degree programs, 60, 7% were enrolled in master programs and 8,7 in doctoral programs. Regarding the working status of the respondents, 10% were not working and 90% were working, with a full time job.

## 6. Findings

The main research question was if the more optimistic persons have a greater satisfaction with life. As results show the answer is yes. After primary data analysis of correlation between satisfaction with life and the level of optimism of students, between satisfaction with life and working status, the level of education and gender we have found the following (Table 01. Correlations):

**Table 01.** Correlations

Variable	Correlation	Level of satisfaction	Level of optimism	Gender	Age	Level of education	Working status
Level of satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	1	,326**	,124	-,093	,142	,271**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,131	,258	,083	,001
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150
Level of optimism	Pearson Correlation	,326**	1	-,068	,164*	-,036	-,186*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,407	,045	,665	,022
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150
Gender	Pearson Correlation	,124	-,068	1	-,350**	-,208*	-,059
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,131	,407		,000	,011	,470

	N	150	150	150	150	150	150
Age	Pearson Correlation	-,093	,164*	-,350**	1	,185*	,095
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,258	,045	,000		,023	,248
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150
Level of education	Pearson Correlation	,142	-,036	-,208*	,185*	1	,140
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,083	,665	,011	,023		,088
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150
Working status	Pearson Correlation	,271**	-,186*	-,059	,095	,140	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,001	,022	,470	,248	,088	
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							

The first and the most important finding was that the level of satisfaction and optimism are highly correlated (correlation is significant at the 0.01 level). Also, the level of satisfaction depends on the working status. The employed participants have a higher level of satisfaction (correlation is significant at the 0.01 level).

When we tried to identify which one of the five statements of the Satisfaction with life test is the most correlated with optimism we found out that the 3<sup>rd</sup> one is the most relevant (I am satisfied with my life). The affirmation is very general so we can state that the bottom-up model of satisfaction with life research in correlation with optimism is relevant to our study.

Another important result of our research is that higher level of optimism is correlated with age. That tells us that as we grow older we become more optimistic. This is probably because we have a different understanding of the reality around us and more maturity.

However, another question that we asked in the beginning of our study was if the working students are more pessimist or more optimist than the nonworking ones. The answer to this question is that they are more pessimist. We have to keep in mind that the working participants are also students, enrolled in educational programs, so maybe is difficult for them to have a full time job and to be on campus and be optimistic about life.

Another question that we asked ourselves was: are women in our study more optimistic than man? The answer is no, women in our study aren't more optimistic than man and the gender doesn't affect the level of satisfaction with life.

As results show, not only does the working status affect the level of satisfaction but affects the level of optimism. We have found out that the statements of the instrument used regarding pessimism are a better indicator for optimism and the level of satisfaction (correlation is significant at the 0.01 level). This is an interesting result that tells us that we have to work with negative, pessimistic thoughts and believe to increase the level of optimism and satisfaction.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of our present study have a great value. Not only does it confirm other studies that say that positive emotions, optimism can be a predictor on life satisfaction, but reveals the idea that our future

studies must focus on applied research -how can we raise the level of optimism when we now that it affects directly the level of satisfaction?

Our findings confirm the study that reveal that women are more optimistic than men. Women in our study aren't more optimistic than men and the gender doesn't affect the level of satisfaction with life.

In terms of research, we recommend expanding the present research on different age categories and education level as to see if the correlation is maintained.

Another important, practical idea that our study can suggest is that students must be helped to cope with the stress that results from having a full time job and being on campus (our study reveals a lower satisfaction and pessimism on full time jobbers). More than that, we think that this can be done through counselling centres of the university, for all students, starting from 1<sup>st</sup> year and focus on proactive skills: building positive thinking and optimism. We consider that is desirable that the university transforms in an initiator and promoter of counselling services and in a responsible partner in relationship with his number one client-the student.

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