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The Relationship between the Well-Being of Parents and Children

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Abstract

During their preschool years, children build and develop their optimism, which makes this an especially vital period in every individual's life. Within that developmental period in children's cognition, parents – as the most significant adults in their lives – exert a major impact on their level of optimistic/pessimistic thought. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the level of optimism in preschool children and their parents, and the relationship between the optimism of children and their parents. 328 parents of preschool children, of whom 173 were mothers and 155 fathers, and their 178 children from 10 towns in the Croatian counties of Zagreb, Karlovac and Koprivnica-Križevci participated in the study. The study confirmed that there is a significant positive correlation between of parental optimism and life satisfaction and the happiness and

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attributional style of children. These findings are discussed within the framework of the significant parental role in the development of optimistic thought in their children, which in turn plays a major role in children's well-being.

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1. Introduction

Psychological well-being is significantly determined by the attributional style and happiness. *"Until the age of eight or nine, each child develops a specific manner in which he or she explains the causes of what happens in his/her life"* (Mijočević & Rijavec, 2006, p. 347), i.e., the child consolidates his/her own explanatory style, which may be pessimistic or optimistic. Parents and teachers influence the development of the explanatory style among young and preschool children (Seligman, 1990).

Building optimism among preschool children is important, because it helps them to prevent depression and develop positive and constructive problem-solving skills (Seligman, 2005). It is therefore vital to encourage the development of a child's optimism already at the earliest age. There are a series of factors which influence the development and foundation of optimism, such as: parenting style, environment, educators or persons close and/or significant to the child as a positive example.

1.1. Determinants of preschool children's attributional style and happiness

These are the four different parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, laissez-faire and authoritative, which have different effects on children. *"Each of these styles has its reflection in the traits of children"* (Rijavec et al., 2008, p. 270). The authoritative parenting style is that which enables and encourages the development of optimism among children, because this is *"a parenting style in which there is warmth"*, so *"it prompts children to develop responsibility and self-control"* (Miljković & Rijavec, 2004, p. 20). Using this style, i.e., their specific actions and behaviour, parents should empower the child at the early, preschool age, laying down the foundations for positive thinking and develop the child's optimistic explanatory style. Some research has shown that parents who are supportive, who trust in their children, are not strict and concede autonomy to them, have children who are self-confident, sure of themselves and possess a high degree of optimism (Peterson & Bossio, 1991; Hassan & Power, 2002).

Besides that, environment also serves as a basis for establishing and developing optimism among preschool children. Parents and preschool teachers should offer an abundance of opportunities to form and enhance a base of optimism or empowerment, positivity and explanatory style, through games, exploration, active participation, discovery, eating, dressing and interaction with other children and adults (socialization).

For parents, *"When parents criticize their children, they influence children's theory of the way their world works"* (Seligman, 2005, p. 84). The child, following their lead, use the explanatory style of not only his/her parents, but also his/her teacher or mentor. It is very important to show a child that he/she is valued, believing that he/she is capable of thinking, learning, making decisions

and solving problems that may arise (Jenson et al., 2004; Seligman et al., 2009; Huebner & Hills, 2010).

This empirical research examines this and similar questions tied to the relationship between the attributional style and happiness of preschool children and the life satisfaction of their parents. The focus of this work is thus placed on an analysis of the relationship between the psychological well-being of parents and their children by testing the above-mentioned variables. It is therefore exceptionally important to orient a certain portion of research efforts in the direction of a child's attributional style and happiness, and the child's connection to the optimism of the parents. Since research into the relationship between these variables among very young and preschool children and their parents is quite rare – and even more so in Croatia – the primary objective of this research is to examine the attributional style and happiness of preschool children, and the optimism, happiness and life satisfaction of their parents, and the interrelation between these variables.

1.2. Attributional style, optimism, happiness and life satisfaction

There are two key theoretical approaches to defining optimism, and these are dispositional optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985) and optimism as an explanatory or attributional style (Seligman, 1998). Dispositional optimism is the expectation that more good than bad things will happen to us in our lives, presenting problems in the best possible light, and seeking hidden advantages when difficulties arise (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). *“Thus, dispositional optimism was originally conceptualized as a unitary trait representing a single bipolar continuum, with optimism on one end of the spectrum and pessimism on the other”* (Bryant & Cvengros, 2004, p. 275). It is therefore genetically conditioned, even though it is also influenced by the earliest childhood experiences.

Seligman (1998) applied the concept of attributional style, i.e., the manner in which people explain their successes and failures to themselves (Cheng & Furnham, 2001), to optimism as an explanatory style. This style can be considered through three aspects: permanence, pervasiveness and personalization, and it may be either optimistic or pessimistic. So, as opposed to Scheier and Carver (1985), who conceived of optimism as a personality trait, Seligman (1998) conceived of optimism as an explanatory style (attributional style) that pertains *“to the manner in which people explain the causes of events in their lives”* (Rijavec et al., 2008, p. 118).

Today, most psychologists define happiness as the general feeling of a person that his/her life is good, i.e., fulfilling, purposeful and pleasant. *“Happiness is not short-term euphoria, it is a deep and permanent feeling that, regardless of any momentary setbacks or pain in our life, everything is good or will be good”* (Myers, 1992, according to Miljković & Rijavec, 2008, p. 12). A great deal of research has shown that long-term happiness among adults is a relatively stable variable which is determined on the one hand by personality traits such as extraversion or neuroticism, and by inheritance on the other (according to Rijavec et al., 2008).

2. Purpose of the study & research questions

The basic objective of this research was to examine the link between parental and child well-being by measuring the level of optimism among preschool children and their parents, and by analyzing the relationship between them. In this process, the following research tasks were set. The first constituted examination of the level of optimism, life satisfaction and happiness of the parents of preschool children; the second constituted examination of the level of happiness and attributional

style of the preschool children; the third involved an analysis of the interaction between the socio-demographic variables of the parents and children and the variables of optimism, life satisfaction, happiness and attributional style; the fourth was an analysis of the relationship between the optimism, life satisfaction and happiness of the parents and the attributional style and happiness of the children. Based on the knowledge obtained in previous research and the relevant sources, it was expected to determine higher levels of parents' and children's well-being, same as their significant relatedness.

3. Research methods

3.1. Participants

Parents of preschool children (N=328) with an average age of 35.56 years and their preschool children (N=178) from 10 towns in the territory of Zagreb, Karlovac and Koprivnica-Križevci Counties participated in this research. The surveys were conducted in four institutions for early and preschool care and education as follows: Didi Kindergarten in Krašić, Križevci Kindergarten in Križevci, Karlovac Kindergarten in Karlovac and Bistrac Kindergarten in Ogulin. Out of all of the parents, 173 mothers with an average age of 34.09 (SD=5.42) ranging in age from 23 to 49 years and 155 fathers with an average age of 36.9 years (SD=6.1) ranging in age from 23 to 62 were questioned. Of the total number of mothers, 73.99% were employed, while 20.23% are unemployed, and 5.78% of them did not respond to this question. Of the total number of fathers, 89.68% were employed, while 20.23% were unemployed.

As to the sampling of children, N=178 children participated in the research, of whom 93 were boys and 85 girls. The average age of the children is 6.1 years (SD=0.42). Of the total number of surveyed children, most attended Didi Kindergarten, more precisely 69.1%. 13.5% of them attended Bistrac, 9% attended Karlovac, and the least, 8.4% attended Križevci.

3.2. Measuring instruments

Questionnaires for parents and a questionnaire for children were used in this research. The *parent questionnaires* encompassed the set of variables such as optimism, life satisfaction and happiness: the revised *Life Orientation Test* (LOT-R, Scheier et al., 1994), the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985) and the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). All respondents – both in the original and in this research – exhibited satisfactory levels of reliability of the internal consistency type, according to Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha_{\text{optimism}} = .628$; $\alpha_{\text{life satisfaction}} = .794$; and $\alpha_{\text{happiness}} = .775$.

Scheier and Carver (1985, 1994) constructed a test to measure dispositional optimism called the *Life Orientation Test*. This test measures general optimism. The Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R) contains 6 items. The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener et al., 1985) consists of 5 items which pertain to life satisfaction. The *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) attempts to directly encompass the affective component of life happiness, using simple statements (N=4). For all scales, Five-point Likert's scale was used.

Scales for measuring children happiness and attributional style. The happiness variable for children was measured by a single question which indicates the level of happiness among children: "Please tell me how happy you are?" The scale is a Likert type from 1 to 5 (1 – I'm not happy at all to 5 – Happier than anybody in the world). Besides this, and due to the absence of an adequate measuring instrument for dispositional optimism among children, a set of 12 variables applied which were derived from the *Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire* (CASQ, Seligman et al., 1984) and adapted to preschool children. This set consists of 6 categories of two questions for each

category (12 statements that describe hypothetical events: 6 positive and 6 negative). i.e. pervasiveness, personalization and permanence for positive events and pervasiveness, personalization and permanence for negative events. Those statements were selected which, in pre-testing on a random sampling of $N=15$ preschool children (5-7 years), indicated that the original questionnaire was too long ($N=48$ items) and that they best understand precisely those statements which were selected (shown later in the results). Each question has two responses which are descriptive, and then the response is given a value of 0 or 1. A higher level of optimism indicates a greater presence of positive events in all three dimensions.

3.3. Procedure

Since this was research conducted for the purpose of completing an undergraduate thesis (Pavlic, 2012), it was approved by the Teacher Education Faculty in Rijeka, which forwarded its formal request for cooperation to the superintendents of the kindergartens that participated in the research. The preschool teachers themselves proposed holding brief meetings with the randomly selected parents. Each parent received an Informed Consent Form and a sample of the questionnaire for them and for their children. The anonymity and confidentiality of the gathered data were guaranteed. Completing questionnaires for parents took about 10-15 minutes. The individual completion of the questionnaire for children was run by preschool teachers and took between 15 and 20 minutes.

Statistical analyses that were applied in this research were descriptive analysis and correlational analysis, using SPSS 18.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive results from parents

With reference to the first research problem, and within the framework of the descriptive analysis of optimism, life satisfaction and happiness of the parents, the arithmetic mean, standard deviations, results' range and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for each of these variables were computed, as shown in Table 1. On the optimism scale, the parents exhibited a high result ($M=22.45$, $SD=4.45$), which indicates that the parents were generally optimistic, as it was supposed.

Table 1. Arithmetic mean, standard deviations, ranges, z-value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and level of significance to optimism, life satisfaction and happiness of parents

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>K-Sz</i>	<i>p</i>
Optimism	22.54	4.45	6-30	.06	.00
Life satisfaction	18.87	4.11	6-25	.13	.00
Happiness	14.81	2.85	4-20	.10	.00

In the life satisfaction measure, the parents showed a medium high result ($M=18.87$, $SD=4.11$), which means that they are relatively satisfied with their lives, i.e. they see the point of their own efforts and the challenges they put before themselves, and their expectations align with the current situation.

Based on the average values on the subjective happiness scale, it may be concluded that the parents exhibit relatively high level of subjective happiness ($M=14.81$, $SD=2.85$). In line with the results which indicate a considerable deviation from the distribution of focused variables in relation to the norm, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were computed in further analysis.

In Table 2, it is apparent that the level of mean values on the scales of optimism, life satisfaction and subjective happiness are identical for mothers and fathers, which was to be expected.

Table 2. Arithmetic means, standard deviations and ranges presented separately for mothers and separately for fathers, with the z and p values from the Mann-Whitney test

Variables	Parents	N	M	SD	Range	Mann-Whitney test z (p)
Optimism	Mothers	176	22.31	4.45	10-36	z=-1.261 (p=.207)
	Fathers	154	22.81	4.38	6-30	
Life satisfaction	Mothers	177	18.51	4.03	6-25	z=-1.710 (p=.087)
	Fathers	155	19.19	4.18	6-25	
Happiness	Mothers	177	14.93	2.75	7-20	z=-1.620 (p=.105)
	Fathers	157	14.66	2.95	4-20	

4.2. Descriptive children's results

The descriptive analysis of happiness and the attributional style among children ascertained that most children responded with "*Happier than anybody in the world*" (68%), followed by "*Very much, but not more than anybody*" (26.4%), "*So-so, I'm not happy, but I'm not unhappy*" (3.4%), "*Not very happy, but not too much*" (1.7%) and only one child resounded with "*I'm not happy at all*" (0.6%). These results confirm the second hypothesis within which framework it was stressed that the children would exhibit a higher degree of happiness given that this is an exceptionally happy and hopeful sample of preschool children (Seligman, 2006).

Table 3. Arithmetic means (M) and standard deviations (SD) values of the results for each of the 12 variables and their corresponding three dimensions that measure the attributional style of preschool children

	VARIABLES	M	SD	M	SD
Pervasiveness	You play a game and you win (od1)	0.59	0.49	0.61	0.93
	Mommy makes your favourite dish for dinner (od2)	0.60	0.49		
	The preschool teacher explains how to fill in an assignment, but you don't understand (ol1)	0.29	0.46		
	Someone stole your toy (ol2)	0.29	0.45		
Personalization	You go on a trip with the children from your group and have a good time (pd1)	0.64	0.48	0.57	1.00
	You make a new friend (pd2)	0.38	0.49		
	Some children you know say they don't like you (pl1)	0.20	0.40		
	You tell a joke, but nobody laughs (pl2)	0.25	0.44		
Permanence	You always get all of the toys you want for your birthday (td1)	0.48	0.50	0.48	1.03
	A new preschool teacher comes to your group and she likes you (td2)	0.81	0.39		
	You miss the ball and the team you're playing for loses the game (tl1)	0.25	0.44		
	Mommy and you take a train which is so late that you miss the movie (tl2)	0.55	0.50		

Table 3 shows descriptive data for each variable selected from the *Attributional Style Questionnaire* and modified for preschool children. The highest mean value was recorded for the variable “A new preschool teacher comes to your group and likes you” ($M=0.81$, $SD=0.39$), so the permanence of positive events among children is expressed the most, and this is a rather high arithmetic mean value. This result indicates that the children explain positive events as resulting from permanent causes. It might be said that the children believe that positive events do not happen by chance and that they themselves deserve credit for them. Thus, the children exhibited a high degree of a positive explanatory style, thereby confirming the second hypothesis that preschool children show a higher degree of happiness and an optimistic attributional style.

4.3. Parents and children's well-being

Spearman's correlation coefficients between socio-demographic variables and levels of optimism, life satisfaction and happiness among parents were calculated. The employment status of the parents is linked to the gender of the parent ($r_{ho}=0.14$, $p<0.05$), which means that mothers have a higher unemployment rate. Life satisfaction is considerably positively linked to optimism ($r_{ho}=0.45$, $p<0.01$). More satisfied parents are also more optimistic. A variable that has the most significant links to other variables is happiness among parents. Parental happiness is considerably positively linked to optimism ($r_{ho}=0.29$, $p<0.01$) and life satisfaction ($r_{ho}=0.47$, $p<0.01$). In separate correlational analyses, employment status proved to be a relevant variable in the experiences of the preceding variables among the fathers, but not the mothers.

In addition, the correlations between socio-demographic variables and attributional style and happiness of the children were calculated, too. The variable “You're playing a game and win” does not correlate significantly with even a single socio-demographic variable, but it does positively correlate with the variable “Someone stole your toy” ($r_{ho}=0.15$, $p<0.05$) and significantly negatively with the variable “You always get all of the toys you want on your birthday” ($r_{ho}=-0.16$, $p<0.05$). Thus, children who have a pronounced pervasiveness of positive events will have an even more pronounced pervasiveness of negative events, and a less pronounced permanence of positive events. The variable “The preschool teacher explains how to fill in the assignment, but you don't understand” positively correlates significantly with the variable “Some children you know don't like you” ($r_{ho}=0.15$, $p<0.05$) which measures the personalization of negative events. Children who have a pronounced pervasiveness of negative events will also have a higher personalization of negative events. The personalization of positive events was measured by the variables “You go on a trip with children from your group” and “You make a new friend”. The variable “You go on a trip with children from your group” negatively correlates significantly with the age of the children ($r_{ho}=-0.17$, $p<0.05$). Thus, children who exhibit a marked personalization of positive events are younger.

The second variable used to measure personalization of negative events was “You tell a joke, but nobody laughs” negatively correlates significantly with the variable “You go on a trip with the children from your group and have a good time” ($r_{ho}=-0.16$, $p<0.05$) which measures personalization of positive events. The same variable positively correlates significantly with the variable “Some children you know say they don't like you” ($r_{ho}=0.23$, $p<0.01$) which measures personalization of negative events. It is to be expected that these two variables would have a significant positive link, as they measure the same thing.

Item “A new preschool teacher comes to your group and likes you”, significantly positively correlates with the children's gender ($r_{ho}=0.15$, $p<0.05$) and significantly negatively correlates with the variable “Some children you know say they don't like you” ($r_{ho}=-0.23$, $p<0.01$) what is used to

measure personalization of negative events. It is apparent that older children had a higher pronounced permanence of positive events. It is to be expected to children who have a pronounced permanence of positive events will have a pronounced personalization of negative events.

The variable used to measure the permanence of negative events, “*Mommy and you took a train which was so late you missed the movie*” significantly positively correlates with the variable “*Somebody stole your toy*” ($r_{ho}=0.20$, $p<0.01$), which measures the pervasiveness of negative events. The variable “*Mommy and you took a train which was so late you missed the movie*” significantly negatively correlates with the variable “*You always get every toy you want for your birthday*” ($r_{ho}=-.18$, $p<0.05$) which measures the permanence of positive events. So children who express the permanence of negative events exhibit less permanence of positive events, which is to be expected.

Furthermore, children’s happiness significantly positively correlates with the variable “*You always get all the toys you wanted on your birthday*” ($r_{ho}=0.30$, $p<0.01$). This variable measures the permanence of positive events. Thus, those children who explain positive events as longer lasting are happier. Happiness significantly negatively correlates with the variable “*You miss the ball and the team you play for loses the game*” ($r_{ho}=-0.16$, $p<0.05$) which measures the permanence of negative events, meaning that the children who explain negative events as short term are happier. It follows from the preceding that there are no gender and age differences in the expression of happiness among children, nor differences in the attributional style of children, thereby confirming a part of the third hypothesis that there would be no gender and age differences in children’s happiness and attributional style.

With the aim of analysing, the parents’ and children’s well-being relationship the correlational analysis of the parents’ optimism, life satisfaction and happiness with children’s happiness and the attributional style has been run (Table 4). Presented items in the table from *od1* to *tl2* are described in the text in detail.

Table 4. Correlation matrix of variables of parents’ optimism, life satisfaction and happiness with the their children’s happiness and attributional style (12 variables)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Parents</i>		
	<i>Optimism</i>	<i>Life satisfaction</i>	<i>Happiness</i>
<i>Children’s happiness</i>	0.06	0.16**	0.10
<i>od1</i>	-0.03	-0.01	-0.06
<i>od2</i>	0.11*	0.01	-0.01
<i>ol1</i>	0.09	0.03	0.04
<i>ol2</i>	-.16**	-0.10	-0.04
<i>pd1</i>	0.02	0.06	0.09
<i>pd2</i>	-0.10	-0.04	-0.02
<i>ol1</i>	0.04	-0.02	0.08
<i>pl2</i>	-0.01	0.06	0.01
<i>td1</i>	0.06	0.16**	0.06
<i>td2</i>	0.04	0.05	0.04
<i>tl1</i>	-0.08	-0.13*	-0.05
<i>tl2</i>	-0.05	-0.21**	-0.06

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$

First, parental optimism significantly positively correlates with the variable measuring pervasiveness of positive events, (*od2*) “*Mommy makes your favourite dish for dinner*” ($r_{ho}=0.11$, $p<0.05$) and significantly negatively with the variable measuring pervasiveness of negative events, (*ol2*) “*Somebody stole your toy*” ($r_{ho}=-0.16$, $p<0.01$). The children of those parents who are

optimistic exhibit higher pervasiveness of positive events and less pervasiveness of negative events. Parental satisfaction significantly positively correlates with children's happiness ($r_{ho}=-0.16$, $p<0.01$), which means that they are the children of parents who are more satisfied with life and happier.

Parental life satisfaction significantly positively correlates with the variable measuring the permanence of positive events, (td1) *"You always get all the toys you wanted on your birthday"* ($r_{ho}=0.16$, $p<0.01$), which means that the children of parents who are satisfied exhibit higher permanence of positive events. It was actually expected that parental satisfaction would negatively correlate significantly with the variables measuring the permanence of negative events, (tl1) *"You miss the ball and the team you play for loses the game"* ($r_{ho}=-0.13$, $p<0.05$) and (tl2) *"Mommy and you took a train which was so late you missed the movie"* ($r_{ho}=-0.21$, $p<0.01$). So, the children of parents who are satisfied will exhibit a lesser measure of permanence of negative events. The measure for parental happiness does not correlate significantly with any variable of children's attributional style, and it is quite interesting that it does not correlate with the measure of children's happiness, either.

Thus, in general it may be said that the parents' optimism and life satisfaction of parents are significantly positively linked to the happiness and attributional style of children. An intriguing finding is that this research has not confirmed a part of the fourth hypothesis, which posits the existence of a significant positive link between parental happiness and children's happiness. Also, only few variables of children's attributional style showed significant correlation with the parents' well-being, which may certainly serve as a foundation for future research.

5. Conclusion

Based on the problems and hypotheses put forth, and the established findings, it may be concluded that a relatively high level of optimism, happiness and life satisfaction was ascertained in the test sampling of parents, and that there are no significant differences between the gender. Additionally, the preschool children exhibited a high level of happiness and an optimistic attributional style. Finally, it was established that parental optimism and life satisfaction are significantly positively linked to the happiness and attributional style of children. A significant link between parental happiness and the happiness and positive attributional style of children was not established.

Research of this type is rare in Croatia, and it points to very significant factors of maintaining a high level of well-being among children, and a very significant interaction between them. Given that this involved a casual sampling of parents and children attending kindergarten, the research certainly had limitations where this concerns the generalization of results. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the applied set of 12 variables from the original Attributional Style Questionnaire for preschool children is not an entirely adequate measure of children's attributional style, since the objective of this research was not the adaptation and validation of that same scale. Thus, one of the implications, among others, of this research is the existence of a pressing need for a valid and reliable measuring instrument for the attributional style of preschool children, which could serve as a foundation for future avenues of research. Furthermore, its significant contribution to the positive implications for successful parenting and high-quality educational practice is a powerful means that ensures the path to protection of the mental health of children. So over and above research aimed at the interaction of children and parents, the level of optimism of preschool teachers should also be examined, to ascertain whether there is any link between their optimism and the optimism of such children. The systematic encouragement of the development of optimism at an early age achieves long-term effects on an individual's life (Seligman, 2005), the importance of

which has been acknowledged within the framework of early and preschool learning and education (Tatalović, Vorkapić & Vujičić, 2013).

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