



Research article

DISPOSITIONAL OPTIMISM IN GREEK AND BULGARIAN SENIOR ADULTS: A COMPARATIVE CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract: The article presents the results of a study aiming to compare the level of dispositional optimism between Greek and Bulgarian senior adults. 165 Greek senior adults (89 women and 76 men), and 147 Bulgarian senior adults (86 women and 61 men), aged 60 – 89 years, were examined with the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) (Schier, Carver & Bridges, 1994), which is a widely used instrument for measuring dispositional optimism. The results revealed significant between-group differences in the level of dispositional optimism with the Greek elderly sample demonstrating higher dispositional optimism in comparison to the Bulgarian elderly sample.

Keywords: dispositional optimism, senior adults, cross-cultural comparison.

Introduction

Life Orientation refers to the extent to which individuals are optimistic about their life and future. Studies' results showed that the level of optimism was related to the subject's mental and physical health and the low levels of optimism were a risk factor for the emergence and persistence of mood and anxiety disorders (Bates, 2015). Also there was evidence that optimism correlated with the person's lifestyle, with the effectiveness of coping strategies the person uses, with the person's adaptation styles and quality of life, and other psychological phenomena (for a review see Conversano et al., 2010).

Actually, the literature review outlined three main approaches in conceptualizing optimism. The first approach is related to the research of Scheier and Carver (1985). They introduced the term "dispositional optimism". These authors viewed optimism as a personality trait that influences the manner in which an individual rationalizes, "reprocesses" and accepts negative life events and challenges, but also life in general. Therefore, optimism is seen as a stable feature of a person, that impacts the manner that individuals use in assessment and management of their daily activities. Logically, people with a high level of optimism have a positive attitude towards life, have a higher resistance to stress, use more effective strategies for coping with stressful events, and have better health (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

The second approach to researching and conceptualizing optimism is associated with the names of Peterson and Seligman (1987). In the focus of their research approach is the attempt to understand the psychological basis of the antipode of optimism, namely pessimism. In this framework the researchers considered optimism as an attributional style, the main features reflected in the following beliefs: negative life events are not permanent; negative life events are external and are not the responsibility of the person; negative life events are specific (i.e. every negative event happens only to itself, separately,

without connection and influence on the total life of the given person). In this context of conceptualizing optimism, optimistic people are people who have the attitude that good things in life are more frequent and more lasting than bad things, that they themselves can avoid bad things in life, and if they happen to them - can cope with them (Peterson & Seligman, 1987).

The third approach to researching and conceptualizing optimism took shape within the socio-cognitive perspective. From this position, optimism is understood as a result of underestimating risk and focusing on one-self, with the optimistic subject having the attitude that more good things will happen to him than others because he is "lucky", while the pessimistic subject on the contrary - he thinks that he is unlucky, and therefore bad things happen to him more often than to others (Weinstein, 1984). Therefore, in this perspective, optimism is seen as a cognitive bias and not as a personality characteristic.

Although the results regarding the age dynamics of optimism were ambiguous (for a review see You & Fung, 2009), most of them indicated an increase in optimism with age, including during old age (Lennings, 2000).

In a longitudinal study (covering a 4-year period) on changes in optimism, a representative American sample was examined, in which all participants were over 51 years of age. The results showed that first, the optimism gradually increased in the period from the 51st to the 70th year, after which its level started to decrease. Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between optimism and health status of the senior adults (Chopik, Kim, & Smith, 2015).

Durbin and co-workers (2019) found that people in adulthood demonstrated higher optimism regarding their future in comparison to elderly people.

Another issue related to optimism as a psychological construct, is associated with culture-related differences in dispositional optimism. Research on this issue is still impressively insufficient. For example, a similar study was carried out by Chang, Asakawa and Sanna (2001). Comparing a group of European Americans with a group of Japanese on different aspects of optimistic and pessimistic attitudes, the researchers found more pronounced pessimism in the European American participants in comparison to the Japanese participants.

In a recent study, You, Fung and Isaacowitz (2009) compared American and Hong Kong Chinese individuals regarding their dispositional optimism and found that younger American subjects and older Chinese subjects demonstrated lower level of dispositional optimism in comparison to older American subjects and younger Chinese subjects.

The few and conflicting data regarding culture-related differences in the level of optimism in old age and the lack of such a comparative study between Greek and Bulgarian old people, inspired the present study. It was targeted at comparing the level of optimism between Greek and Bulgarian senior adults.

Method

The total sample included 294 Greek and the Bulgarian senior adults, aged 60–89 years. All they were not institutionalized. The Greek elderly group consisted of 165 participants aged 60 – 89 years, as 89 were women and 76 were men. The Bulgarian elderly group consisted of 147 participants, also aged 60 – 89 years, as 86 were women and 61 were men.

Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R), belonging to Schier, Carver and Bridges (1994), was used for measuring dispositional optimism. The total test reflects the degree of predominance of positive expectations over negative ones. A higher score means a higher level of optimism.

Results and Discussion

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The results from the Independent-Samples T Tests which inform us about the culture-related differences in the mean scores of the Greek and the Bulgarian elderly samples on Life Orientation Test, which measured dispositional optimism, were presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Mean scores on the Life Orientation Test of the Greek and the Bulgarian elderly samples

	Greek group				Bulgarian group				$t_{(310)}$ (p)
	N	Mean	SD	SE	N	Mean	SD	SE	
Dispositional Optimism	165	16.8	4.2	.332	147	13.3	3.5	.295	7.757 (.000)

As we suggested, Greek and Bulgarian elderly samples differed significantly in the mean scores on the Life Orientation Test ($t_{(310)} = 7.757$; $p < .000$), with the Greek elderly sample demonstrating higher dispositional optimism in comparison to the Bulgarian elderly sample.

Thus, the overall pattern of the present study's results confirmed our hypothesis, that the Greek elderly people could be more optimistic than the Bulgarian elderly people.

This finding was expected, according to the data that among the European nations, the elderly population in Bulgaria is at the greatest risk of poverty, social exclusion and isolation (Babakova, 2021; Petrov & Coleman, 2019).

Although Greeks and Bulgarians are neighboring Balkan peoples and share the same religion, at the same time these two peoples differ in a number of aspects: they differ in language, life style, folklore, culture, historical past and historical traditions. In our opinion, a factor with a potential to initiate additional culture-related differences between the two elderly samples is the different historical context they lived in - different economic, political and socio-cultural contexts.

The Bulgarian sample is composed of individuals representing the generation that lived during the time of socialism and the transition from socialism to capitalism, i.e. the generation that was developed and lived in a communist and post-communist state. Therefore, the Greek and the Bulgarian samples have lived in different economic, political and socio-cultural contexts as the Bulgarian participants have spent their lives in a time of serious historical changes in living conditions which in turn could decrease the level of dispositional optimism.

These our results are in agreement with the findings of previous cross-cultural studies showing that Bulgarians have a sustained and exceptionally low levels of perception of their well-being and quality of life in comparison to all other European peoples (for a review see Tilkidjiev, 2011).

In addition, our findings provide albeit indirect support for the Tov and Diener's conclusion (2007) that some aspects of subjective well-being and its determinants can be seen in all cultures, but other aspects remain unique for each culture and therefore – uncomparable across cultures. Moreover, our findings are consistent with the results, reported by Steptoe, Deaton and Stone (2015) for the biggest reduction of the level of psychological well-being in the former communist countries in East Europe, as well as with the results of Petrov and Coleman (2019) showing very high levels of life dissatisfaction and unusually high incidence of late life depression among the Bulgarian elderly people, especially those who were living alone.

The main limitation of the present study is the non-matched size of the Greek and Bulgarian samples, which may affect the statistical power of the comparative analyses. Regardless of that, present study's findings shed light on important problems of our modern society and can find application in the

development of social and healthcare programs aimed at improving the quality of life of the elderly especially in Greece and Bulgaria.

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