

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Life Orientation and Life Satisfaction:
An Exploration of a Homeostatic Model
of Subjective Wellbeing**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Science
in
Psychology**

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Rachel Helen Findlay

2005

Dedicated
with optimism about the future
to my brother
David R. J. Findlay
and all who struggle
with mental illness

Abstract

The main purpose of the current study was to explore the relationship between life orientation (optimism-pessimism) and life satisfaction. Cummins' (e.g. 1998) homeostatic model of subjective wellbeing was used as the basis for this exploration. The model was proposed to account for the fact that population life satisfaction within Western countries is repeatedly found to fall within the range 75 ± 2.5 percent of the scale maximum score (%SMS). The theory proposes that optimism is involved in the regulation and maintenance of subjective wellbeing. Two other variables, self-esteem and control, are thought to be involved in the regulatory system, however optimism was explored in light of the limited research into the connection between this variable and life satisfaction. According to the homeostatic theory, extreme adverse life events can disrupt the homeostatic system, causing a temporary decline in subjective wellbeing. The sample consisted of 200 adults from the general population of New Zealand. These were volunteers recruited within shopping centres in the Auckland area. Participants were administered a questionnaire consisting of two scales; the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) and the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI). The LOT-R is a measure of dispositional optimism-pessimism, and the PWI is a measure of life satisfaction. Additionally, the questionnaire consisted of a section designed to elicit basic demographic information, as well as details pertaining to recent experiences of significant life events. The most notable findings were as follows: After controlling for the effects of student and outlier data, the average level of life satisfaction for the current sample was 71.01 %SMS; life orientation accounted for 42 % of the variance in life satisfaction; and the experience of significant negative life events caused a decrease in mean life satisfaction. It is concluded that, overall, the findings provide support for the homeostatic model. Further research is needed to clarify the nature of the relationship between life orientation and life satisfaction. Suggestions for future research, and implications for mental health, are discussed.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my overwhelming appreciation of my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Stillman, for all her help, support, encouragement, and candid feedback throughout the process of developing this thesis. She continued to make herself available for me despite her own aversive life circumstances, the illness of her dear granddaughter. My best wishes for a full recovery extend to her family.

I would like to thank Professor Robert Cummins, for his prompt replies to my emails, and the valuable advice he provided. I am grateful to the respective shopping centre managers who permitted me to gather data within their premises.

My utmost gratitude is extended to my dearly loved parents, Sheila and Howard, without whom I would never have come this far. Your unconditional love, support, and guidance have been invaluable. I thank them for always allowing me to make my own choices, whilst always being there for me when I make the wrong ones. I wish to thank my treasured big brother, Dave, without whom I may never have realised my greatest passion – Psychology. Thank you for always believing in me, I only hope you will soon find a way to believe in yourself. My gratitude goes to my beloved big sister, Sarah, for listening and for her gentle encouragement. Thank you to Sarah and Morgan for brightening a difficult year by bringing my first nephew, Gabriel, into the world, and for honouring me as his Godmother.

Special thanks is extended to one of my longest and dearest friends, Claire, for always being there for me over the years, regardless of the geographical distance between us. I am grateful to her for taking a genuine interest in my topic, and allowing me to bounce ideas off her, particularly through the planning stages. I wish to thank my partner, Greg, for being there for me during the writing process, my most stressful time. His support, encouragement, patience, and sense of humour were imperative for my own subjective wellbeing during this period. Finally, I wish to say a big thank you to all the friends who have helped me in some way throughout this important year – Andy, Bevan, Jamie, Kris, Rachael, Ruth, and Trevor – your selfless acts have been greatly appreciated.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Introduction	1
Defining and Measuring Optimism and Pessimism	1
Quality of Life, Wellbeing, and Life Satisfaction – Definitions and Measurement	5
The Relationship between Optimism and Subjective Wellbeing.....	13
The Homeostatic Theory of Subjective Wellbeing	16
The Present Study.....	22
<i>Rationale for the present study</i>	22
<i>The research goals</i>	25
Method	27
Participants.....	27
Materials	28
<i>Subjective wellbeing</i>	28
<i>Life orientation</i>	30
<i>Demographics and significant life events</i>	33
<i>Counterbalancing</i>	36
Procedure	37

Results.....	39
Overview of the Analyses	39
Initial Exploration of Life Satisfaction Predictors	44
The Influence of Demographic Variables on PWI Data.....	47
The Influence of Significant Life Events on PWI and LOT-R Data.....	53
Results Summary	62
Discussion	64
The Average Level of Life Satisfaction.....	64
Life Satisfaction of Optimists versus Pessimists.....	66
The Impact of Significant Life Events on Life Satisfaction	69
Life Satisfaction Based on Demographic Variables.....	72
Significant Life Events and Life Orientation.....	78
The Implications of Additional Analyses	79
Suggestions for Further Research.....	80
Implications for Mental Health	81
References.....	85
Appendices.....	93
A Letter to Shopping Centre Managers	94
B MUAHEC Approval Letter	95
C Information Sheet	96
D Introductory Sign.....	97
E Questionnaire (Version 1 and 2).....	98

List of Tables

Table 1	Demographic Statistics of the Obtained Sample	39
Table 2	Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Life Satisfaction ($N = 152$) as Measured by the PWI	45
Table 3	Mean Scores Based on Age Group of Three Life Satisfaction Domains; Achievement in Life (A), Personal Relationships (R), and Feeling Part of the Community (C), as Measured with the PWI	53
Table 4	Number of People Reporting Positive and Negative Significant Life Events within each Time Frame	54
Table 5	Mean PWI Scores (%SMS) of Participants who Experienced Significant Life Events (either Positive or Negative Events) According to When the Event Occurred	55
Table 6	Mean PWI Scores (%SMS) of Participants within each Category of Significant Life Events	57
Table 7	Mean PWI Scores and T-Test Results for Optimists and Pessimists, as a Function of the Type of Significant Life Event Experienced	59
Table 8	Mean LOT-R Scores under Different Categories of Significant Life Events	61

List of Figures

Figure 1	Number of participants in each age group as a function of whether or not they were students studying at least half time	43
Figure 2	Life satisfaction measured with the PWI (%SMS) as a function of participant age group in years, showing sample size of each age group	49
Figure 3	Mean score for each life satisfaction domain as measured using the PWI, and categorised based on the relevant age group	51