

Positive Personality as a Predictor of High Resilience in Adolescence

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Abstract

This study was realized in order to explore the predictive relationships of dispositional optimism, life satisfaction, and generalized self-efficacy beliefs with resilience in a sample of 464 early, middle, and late Sicilian adolescents, randomly chosen from different Public Schools in Sicily, Italy. We used the following measures: the Italian version of Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014), the Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener et al., 1985), the Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier & Carver, 1992), and the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer et al., 1995). Consistently with initial hypotheses, we found that highly optimist adolescents reported a more resilient profile than lowly optimist ones; highly satisfied and self-efficient adolescents showed a more resilient profile than lowly satisfied and self-efficient ones; additionally, the more the adolescents were optimist, the more they considered themselves as highly self-efficient and satisfied with their life, as well as the more the adolescents were satisfied with their life, the more they valued themselves as highly self-efficient in various circumstances. Future research will develop the role of positive aspects in depth (that is, optimism and life satisfaction) in healthy growth during infancy.

Keywords: Resilience, life satisfaction, self-efficacy beliefs, optimism, adolescence

Framework of research

This research has been carried out in order to deeply analyze the influence of three important psychological dimensions, that is, dispositional optimism (see Scheier & Carver, 1992), life satisfaction (see Diener et al., 1985), and generalized self-efficacy beliefs (see Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) on resilience examined as a multi-factorial construct (Hurtes & Allen, 2001). This investigation represents a part of a continuum of interests addressed toward the quality of life span in Italian adolescents and adds itself to recent explorative analyses on psychological well-being and resilience in adolescence and youth (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2014a; Sagone & De Caroli, 2014).

Several researchers have dealt with the exploration of protective factors that tend to improve the development of individuals in various domains of everyday life: these factors have been included into the “positive psychology perspective” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), according to which there are conditions and dimensions that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of individuals and groups.

One of the most important aspects in the healthy development of adolescents is to see the trajectory about their future with an optimistic point of view; this perspective reduces the negativity of the developmental challenges and emphasizes the positivity of life skills as human qualities for adaptation to both routines and changes.

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According to Scheier and Carver (1985, 1987), the optimistic disposition has been considered as a general tendency to expect a positive outcome even in the face of obstacles or when bad things happen; so, it positively predicts physical and psychological well-being of each individual, reducing the negative effects of stress, improving self-esteem, forming and maintaining positive relationships, and influencing the use of coping strategies, scholastic competence, and peers perceived support (Krypel & Henderson-King, 2010; Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Orejudo et al., 2012). This positive disposition is considered as a protective factor of a positive development from infancy (Seligman, 1995) to adulthood (Ferguson & Goodwin, 2010), also independently from the other individual characteristics, such as extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Marshall et al., 1992; Sharpe, Martin, & Roth, 2011; Monzani, Steca & Greco, 2014): it can be used to attract more people, to allow an individual to build positive relationships with the others, and to increase social support during periods of stress (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Dougall et al., 2001).

As found by Ey and her colleagues (2005), in a sample between 3rd and 6th grade, children with optimistic expectations for the future rated themselves as more competent and hopeful compared to those with pessimistic expectations. As reported by Brissette and his colleagues (2002), the optimists (first year college students) reported a greater perception of social support compared to their pessimist peers; additionally, with reference to coping strategies, the optimists were more likely to adopt the positive reinterpretation, planning, and active coping strategies, whereas the pessimists tended to use the denial and behavioral disengagement coping strategies. Furthermore, Pacico and colleagues (2011) found significant relationships among hope, optimism and self-esteem in a sample of Brazilian adolescents. Also, in Dawson and Pooley' recent study (2013), first year university students with high levels of optimism, independent and volitional functioning, and perceived social support experienced higher levels of resilience than the others.

In relation to those aspects useful to guarantee the growth of adolescents in a positive pathway, the perceived self-efficacy's beliefs have been considered very important dimensions correlated with optimistic disposition, satisfaction with life, and psychological resilience (see Sagone & De Caroli, 2013); if adolescents receive positive feedbacks from those close to them and are generally regarded well by the others, they are likely to believe to be competent in activities important to them (Saarni, 1999). Generalized self-efficacy has been defined by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) as a general ability functional to predict coping with daily hassles as well as adaptation after experiencing all kinds of stressful events, independently by specific context in which this ability is hardly put to the test. Perceived self-efficacy affects individuals' ability to deal flexibly with complex and difficult situations and has effects on individuals' aspirations, analytical thinking, and perseverance in the face of failure (Bandura et al., 2001). For example, the adolescents who perceived themselves as highly efficient and able to cope with novelty in various domains of human functioning were more resilient than those who perceived themselves as lowly efficient (Sagone & De Caroli, 2013). Furthermore, in scholastic context, we found that the adolescents who perceived themselves as highly efficient in scholastic performances expressed higher mean scores in environmental mastery, personal growth and, marginally, in self-acceptance than those who felt themselves lowly efficient in the same performances (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014a).

The generalized self-efficacy seems to be related with life satisfaction that represents a measure of global cognitive judgments of subjective well-being; it was found significantly correlated with some personality traits, positively with self-esteem (Westaway, Maritz, & Golele, 2003) and optimism (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996), but negatively with neuroticism and emotionality (Diener et al., 1985); moreover, it positively correlated with global happiness as well as with affect balance (Pavot et al., 1991); positive correlations were also demonstrated with social acceptance, self-efficacy, psychological maturity, impulsivity/activity, self-concept, physical attractiveness, and happiness while negative correlations were reported between life satisfaction and loneliness, social anxiety, and shyness (see Neto, 1993, 1999). This construct has been analyzed in several countries, providing a confirmation of its unidimensionality (for example, USA: Diener et al., 1985; Czech: Lewis et al., 1999; Spain: Atienza et al., 2000; Pons et al., 2000, 2002; Portugal: Laranjeira, 2008; Italy: Zani & Cicognani, 1999) and using the Satisfaction with Life Scale to verify its validity.

In addition, more recently, both in Gadermann, Schonert-Reichl, and Zumbo' study (2010) and in Gadermann, Guhn, and Zumbo's one (2011), this scale has been tested with children and teenagers, demonstrating positive and strong correlations with other measures as optimism, self-concept, emphatic concern, perspective taking, and self-efficacy. The last topic investigated in this study as a characteristic typically associated to the so called "positive personality" has been the psychological resilience considered as a personal quality that allows individuals to overcome adversities and flourish in the face of them (e.g., Wagnild & Young, 1993; Ryff & Singer, 2003). Recently, Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) have suggested that resilience was referred to "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (p.543) and Newman (2005) described it as "the human ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, adversity, hardship and ongoing significant life stressors" (p.227). More recently, Smith and his colleagues (2008) defined it as the ability to "bounce back" or to recover from stressful circumstances, claiming that individuals with high levels of resilience were better at maintaining their psychological health and recovering themselves from stressful events than the others. According to the empirical analysis of this construct, scholars agreed with the idea that resilience is a multi-dimensional characteristic, typically present in all adolescents (and not only in them) oriented to positively overcome the challenges using a variety of life skills.

In relation to this theoretical evidence, Hurtes and Allen (2001) recognized a set of skills and attitudes specifically distinguishable in the resilient profile: 1) "the ability to read and interpret situations, people, and subtle nuances of both verbal and nonverbal communication" (termed as *insight*); 2) "a balance between being true to oneself and accommodating the concerns of others" (defined as *independence*); 3) the ability to "generate options and alternatives to cope with the challenges of life" (that is, *creativity*); 4) "the ability to laugh at oneself and to find joy in one's surroundings" (that is, *sense of humor*); 5) "the desire and determination to take proactively charge of one's own life" (termed as *initiative*); 6) the ability to seek out and maintain fulfilling and healthy relationships with the others (defined as *supportive relationships*); finally, 7) the need to identify what is morally just and appropriate, independently from one's own desires (that is, the *values orientation*). Subsequently, we examined the resilient profile in a large sample of Italian middle and late adolescents, maintaining the dimension of *sense of humor* but modifying the other dimensions, by means of factorial analysis, with the labels of "control", "adaptability", "engagement", and "competence" (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014b); we found that the more the adolescents were engaged, adapted, and believed they were competent in front of adversities (three dimensions of resilience measured by the Italian-RASP), the more they were curious, complexity-loving, and willing to take risks, thus having the traits typically included in the creative personality; in addition, the more the adolescents practiced their control on surroundings and used their sense of humor, the more they were curious and complexity-loving, and prone to take risks.

2. Methodology

2.1. Hypotheses

The main purpose of the present study is to deepen the relationships among optimism, self-efficacy beliefs, life satisfaction, and resilience in a sample of Sicilian adolescents. Consistently with the general purpose, we have hypothesized that: H₁) adolescents with high optimism would report a higher resilient profile than those with low optimism; H₂) adolescents with high levels of self-efficacy would display a higher resilient profile than those with low levels of self-efficacy; H₃) adolescents with high levels of life satisfaction would express a higher resilient profile than those with low levels of life satisfaction. As a corollary, we have predicted that: H₄) adolescents with high optimism will show higher levels of self-efficacy than those with low optimism; H₅) adolescents with high optimism will display higher levels of life satisfaction than those with low optimism; H₆) satisfied adolescents will report higher levels of self-efficacy than the unsatisfied ones. Differences for sex and age groups will be analyzed to find similarities or differences with the empirical evidences from other countries in each construct investigated in the Italian school-context.

2.2. Participants

The sample of this study has been randomly chosen from the population attending four State Junior and High Schools in different parts of Sicily (Italy) and is composed by 464 adolescents between 11 and 19 years-old, divided in 228 boys and 236 girls.

Participants were clustered into three age-groups: early ($n=200$; $M_{age}=12,1$, $sd=,77$), middle ($n=154$; $M_{age}=14,8$, $sd=,90$), and late adolescents ($n=110$; $M_{age}=17,9$, $sd=,66$). Parental consent for the underage adolescents' participation to this study was obtained.

2.3. Measures and procedure

LOT-R – The Italian version of Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier & Carver, 1992; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) is a measure of dispositional optimism, composed by 10 items each evaluable on a five-point Likert scale ($\alpha=.61$) from 1 (corresponding to *strongly disagree*) to 5 intervals (corresponding to *strongly agree*). Of the 10 items, three positively phrased items have assessed the optimistic disposition (e.g., "Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad"), three negatively phrased items have measured the pessimistic one (e.g., "I rarely count on good things happening to me"), and four items have been used as fillers. For the original version of LOT-r, it was possible to obtain both two different scores, respectively, for optimism and pessimism (see Monzani, Steca, & Greco, 2014), and one total score only for optimism considered as a continuum from low to high optimism (see Segerstrom, Evans, & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2011). More recently, other researchers have adapted this test to culturally different populations and to various age-groups (China: Lai et al., 1998; Lai & Yue, 2000; Vautier, Raufaste, & Cariou, 2003; Chile: Vera-Villaruel, Córdova-Rubio, & Celis-Atenas, 2008; Italy: Chiesi et al., 2013; Brazil: Bastianello et al., 2014), verifying its validity and internal reliability. In the current study, consistently with the empirical evidences by Monzani et al. (2014) obtained with middle and late Italian adolescents, we use the total score to assess the dispositional optimism as a measure of generalized expectancy about individual's future.

LSS – The Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener et al., 1985) is utilized to measure the extent to which individuals feel themselves satisfied with their life; this scale consists of five items each evaluable on a seven-point Likert scale (e.g., "The conditions of my life are excellent", "I am satisfied with my life") ($\alpha=.84$) ranging from 1 (equal to *strongly disagree*) to 7 intervals (equal to *strongly agree*). Total score ranges from 5 to 35 points.

GSE - The Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Sibilia, Schwarzer, & Jerusalem, 1995) assesses the global sense of perceived self-efficacy in order to predict coping with different kinds of stressful events. This scale consists of 10 items (e.g. "When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions", "I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort", "If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want") evaluable on a four-point Likert scale ($\alpha=.77$) ranging from 1 (corresponding to *not at all true*) to 4 intervals (corresponding to *exactly true*). Total score ranges from 10 to 40 points.

RASP – The Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile, created by Hurtes and Allen (2001) on the basis of theoretical evidences by Wolin and Wolin (1993), measures the characteristics of resilient individuals. This inventory consists of 34 items and each item has been rated according to a six-point Likert scale from 1 (corresponding to *strongly disagree*) to 6 intervals (corresponding to *strongly agree*). After conducting the factorial analysis with PCA and Promax rotation, using eigenvalues > 1 , reported in a more recent our study with middle and late adolescents (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2014b), we use the Italian version of RASP with the best five-components solution out of all the others, including the following dimensions of resilient profile: (a) *sense of humor* ($\alpha=.67$; e.g., "Laughter helps me deal with stress"), (b) *competence* ($\alpha=.55$; e.g., "I know when I am good at something"), (c) *adaptability* ($\alpha=.70$; e.g., "I can change my behavior to match the situation"), (d) *engagement* ($\alpha=.62$; e.g. "I try to figure out things I do not understand"), and (e) *control* ($\alpha=.61$; e.g., "I avoid situations where I could get into trouble"). This construct has also been analyzed by means of several measures among which it is possible to mention the Wagnild and Young's Resilience Scale (1993), the Connor-Davidson's Resilience Scale (2003), the Hjemdal et al.'s Resilience Scale for Adolescents (2006), the Prince-Embury's Resiliency Scales for Children & Adolescents (2008), the Gartland et al.'s Adolescent Resilience Questionnaire (2011).

2.4. Data analyses

Statistical significance of data is analyzed by means of SPSS 20 (Statistical Package for Social Science), using linear regressions with optimism, life satisfaction, and generalized self-efficacy as predictor variables and dimensions of resilience as dependent variables. Differences in relation to sex and age-groups for each construct are examined with t-tests and ANOVA.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analyses for all constructs

Descriptive analyses have displayed that participants have obtained high-medium levels of optimism (range 6-30; $M_{total}=19,8$, $sd=3,9$) and high-medium levels of generalized self-efficacy (range 10-40; $M_{total}=30,1$, $sd=4,3$), with significant differences for sex: so, boys have expressed higher levels of optimism ($M_{boys}=20,3$, $sd=3,7$; $M_{girls}=19,4$, $sd=4,1$; $t(462)=2,433$, $p=.015$) and self-efficacy ($M_{boys}=30,5$, $sd=4,1$; $M_{girls}=29,7$, $sd=4,4$; $t(462)=2,205$, $p=.028$) than girls. Regarding to the levels of life satisfaction, statistical analyses indicate that participants have obtained high-medium levels (range 5-35; $M_{total}=24,22$, $sd=6,4$), with significant differences for sex and age-groups: so, boys have expressed higher levels of life satisfaction than girls ($M_{boys}=25,5$, $sd=5,4$; $M_{girls}=22,9$, $sd=7,0$; $t(462)=4,322$, $p<.001$) and early adolescents have showed higher levels of life satisfaction than middle and late ones ($M_{early}=25,6$, $sd=6,3$; $M_{middle}=23,6$, $sd=6,4$; $M_{late}=22,56$, $sd=6,1$; $F(2,461)=9,621$, $p<.001$).

In relation to characteristics of resilient profile, descriptive analyses have displayed that participants have reached intermediate scores in all dimensions: sense of humor ($M_{total}=4,72$, $sd=.99$), competence ($M_{total}=4,84$, $sd=.77$), adaptability ($M_{total}=4,32$, $sd=.75$), control ($M_{total}=4,65$, $sd=.79$), and engagement ($M_{total}=4,89$, $sd=.65$). Additionally, significant differences only for sex have emerged: so, boys have displayed higher scores in the dimension of sense of humor than girls ($M_{boys}=4,84$, $sd=.91$; $M_{girls}=4,61$, $sd=1,06$; $t(462)=2,474$, $p=.013$), whereas girls have reached higher scores in the dimensions of control ($M_{boys}=4,57$, $sd=.79$; $M_{girls}=4,73$, $sd=.77$; $t(462)=-2,184$, $p=.03$) and engagement than boys ($M_{boys}=4,77$, $sd=.64$; $M_{girls}=5,00$, $sd=.63$; $t(462)=-3,988$, $p<.001$). No differences for the other dimensions have been noted.

3.2. Influence of positive characteristics on resilience

Consistently with the initial hypotheses, we have carried out separate linear regressions using the dimensions of resilience as dependent variables and optimism, generalized self-efficacy, and life satisfaction as independent variables. For the first hypothesis (H_1), as shown in Table 1, optimism positively predicts the dimensions of competence, sense of humor, adaptability and, poorly, engagement, but not control. These results indicate that the highly optimist adolescents report a more resilient profile compared to the lowly optimist ones.

	RASP	Total sample		
		Beta	t	p-value
Optimism (LOT-r)	Competence	,292	6,565	,000
	Sense of humor	,281	6,302	,000
	Adaptability	,250	5,557	,000
	Engagement	,182	3,976	,000
	Control			

For the second hypothesis (H_2), generalized self-efficacy positively predicts the dimension of adaptability, competence, engagement, sense of humor, and, scarcely, control: so, adolescents with high levels of self-efficacy show a more resilient profile compared to those with low self-efficacy (see Table 2).

	RASP	Total sample		
		Beta	t	p-value
Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE)	Adaptability	,546	14,011	,000
	Competence	,447	10,747	,000
	Engagement	,402	9,446	,000
	Sense of humor	,339	7,756	,000
	Control	,194	4,247	,000

As regards the third hypothesis (H_3), life satisfaction positively predicts the dimensions of competence, adaptability, control, sense of humor, and engagement: so, it means that highly satisfied adolescents display a more resilient profile than the dissatisfied ones.

Life satisfaction (LSS)	RASP	Total sample		
		Beta	t	p-value
	Competence	,315	7,125	,000
	Adaptability	,284	6,359	,000
	Control	,245	5,422	,000
	Sense of humor	,230	5,080	,000
	Engagement	,221	4,865	,000

In relation to corollary (H_4 and H_5), results indicate that optimism positively predicts both generalized self-efficacy beliefs ($\beta=,438$, $t=10,478$, $p<.001$) and life satisfaction ($\beta=,491$, $t=12,102$, $p<.001$): so, the more the adolescents are optimist, the more they consider themselves highly self-efficient and satisfied with their life.

For the last hypothesis (H_6), it has emerged that life satisfaction positively predicts the generalized self-efficacy ($\beta=,410$, $t=9,671$, $p<.001$): so, the more the adolescents are highly satisfied, the more they value themselves as highly self-efficient in various circumstances in everyday life.

4. Discussion

Consistent with initial expectations, this paper has highlighted the importance of protective factors on psychological well-being in adolescence in terms of resilience and attitudes of resistance to unexpected life events. It has emerged that highly optimist adolescents have reported a greater resilience compared to the lowly optimist ones: so, adolescents who believe that their life will be full of good things tend to act in a proactive way, using their personal resources and adapting themselves to difficult situations with humoristic style, and are likely to see "the glass of water as filled by half" rather than "emptied by half". Additionally, it is possible to note that highly self-efficient adolescents show a greater resilience than the lowly efficient ones; so, adolescents who consider themselves able to solve problems and find helpful coping strategies in complex situations tend to engage in the search of good solutions showing their personal strengths in various circumstances of everyday life. Furthermore, this empirical study reveals that highly satisfied adolescents display a greater resilience than the dissatisfied ones; so, adolescents who feel that things are going very well and their life is enjoyable and pleasant in multiple domains (such as school, family, friendship, and personal growth) tend to act proactively, engaging themselves in first person, and controlling each personal goal to achieve. Consequently, the more the adolescents are optimist (that is, they expect a positive outcome even in the face of obstacles), the more they consider themselves as highly self-efficient and satisfied with their life, as well as the more they are highly satisfied with their life, the more they value themselves as highly self-efficient in various situations.

Differences for sex and age-groups reveal that boys are more optimist and perceive themselves as more efficient -as already found in De Caroli & Sagone's previous research (2014a)- and satisfied with their life than girls, and early adolescents are more satisfied with their life than the middle and late ones. Additionally, boys are more resilient than girls by means of their use of humor, while girls have shown to be more resilient than peers using the dimensions of control and their engagement. These last evidences represent a confirmation of results emerged both in our previous study with middle and late adolescents (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2014b) and in Sun and Stewart's research (2007), except for the age-group variable.

Future researches will deepen the role of positive aspects (optimism and life satisfaction) during infancy in order to improve the protective factors and reduce the risk ones; so, it is possible to believe that children with high levels of optimism and satisfaction with life will probably become adolescents and adults with high levels of resilience. Additionally, it could be very important to analyze these dimensions and their relationships in particular samples as the adolescents at risk or the socially disadvantaged children.

5. References

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