

CHAPTER THREE

Optimism

3.1 Introduction

In the introduction to the previous chapter mention was made of the traditional emphasis, within the field of psychology, on pathology and how this manifests in the tendency to focus on people's deficits and problems, as opposed to their personal and other strengths and resources. Strassle, McKee and Plant (1999) note how this attitude frequently results in the healthy aspects of the client's psychological functioning being neglected in the course of traditional psychological assessment. Traditional assessment, therefore, ignores a large part of the client's overall make-up. It is, in fact, biased. This myopic focus clearly has important implications for the decisions that must subsequently be made regarding treatment and intervention (Strassle, McKee & Plant, 1999).

It follows, then, that this traditional neglect of what is healthy in the client also pervades the treatment phase of psychotherapy. Fortunately exceptions do exist, in for example, Solution-Focused Therapy (de Shazer, in Zeig & Gilligan, 1990; Walter & Peller, 1992). Such changes of psychotherapeutic heart, however, represent a relatively recent change in attitude. Not only does a prejudice exist in terms of traditional assessment, but as Handler and Potash (1999) observe, there is an abundance of categories of pathology in psychology (we touched briefly on the DSM (APA) system of classification, in Section 2.2). By comparison, they add, there is notably little emphasis on the roles played by the many psychological health variables. Among these psychological health variables they specifically mention optimism as being an important area of human functioning (Handler & Potash, 1999). These health variables have tended to be ignored by both researchers and practitioners, however, this state of affairs is slowly changing and the current study is

a part of this gradual emerging awareness and change of attitude.

Optimism is an important part of human beings, and being human. In general, people have an overly positive view of the future (Alloy & Abramson; Taylor & Brown; Weinstein; in McKenna, 1993). As we shall see it appears that most people have a tendency to be biased toward the positive, and that the only exceptions tend to be people who are anxious or depressed (Peterson, 2000). To begin with we shall look at what is meant by the term optimism and we shall examine the distinctions between optimism and concepts such as hope, self-efficacy and locus of control. It is to this discussion that we now turn.

3.2 Definition of optimism

Peterson (2000, p. 50) proposes that perhaps “individuals are optimistic unless there is a reason not to be”. What, then, is meant by the term optimism? Much of the earlier section of this chapter dealt with the philosophical issues surrounding the construct meaning in life. Following on in this manner we shall first look at the term optimism from a philosophical perspective. Optimism, and Pessimism (spelled with upper-case first letters) are “philosophical doctrines making judgements about reality purportedly based on reason” (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980, p. 564). It is obvious that in everyday parlance we do not use the terms in this sense. Idiomatically we think more of optimism as reflecting certain characteristics of, for example, an individual with a “cheerful and hopeful temperament who is disposed to put a favourable construction on things”; and of pessimism as being more or less the opposite, for example, people “of gloomy or despairing temperament” and who are “constantly inclined to anticipate harms and evils” (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980, p. 564).

Along these lines optimism has been variously defined as embodying a “hopeful disposition” or, “inclination to take favourable views” (Sykes, 1984, p. 716). It has also been defined in the literature as being a “mood or attitude associated with an

expectation about the social or material future-one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, of for his [or her] pleasure” (Tiger, in Peterson, 2000, p. 44). It is more in this sense of the word that we understand the term in psychology.

Optimism then, is about “generalized expectations that good things will happen“ (Scheier & Carver, 1987, p. 171) or, in other words, “generalized expectancy for positive outcomes” (McKenna, 1993, p. 39). It is clear that the use of this term in psychology approximates more to the everyday usage of the word than the philosophical meaning as provided above.

The definition of the construct optimism does not stop here. Marshall, Wortman, Kusulas, Hervig and Vickers (1992) point out that optimism and pessimism are broad, or general, constructs. However, there are a steadily growing number of even more finely defined constructs being proposed. These include, for example, naïve optimism (Epstein & Meier, in Marshall, et al., 1992) and the distinction between personal and social optimism mentioned by Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999). In spite of these more finely defined constructs the focus of this study will bear on the broader conceptualisations of optimism and pessimism, as for example, in Scheier and Carver (1987) and McKenna (1993), above.

3.3 The nature of optimism

There are currently two views regarding the conceptualization of, and therefore the measurement of, optimism and pessimism (Burke, Joyner, Czech & Wilson, 2000). The commonly held view assumes that optimism and pessimism occupy opposite poles on a single, bi-polar continuum, for instance, Strassle, McKee and Plant’s (1999, p. 192) position is that “optimism runs on a continuous scale (i.e., optimism to pessimism)”. However this view has recently been challenged.

In opposition to the unidimensional view of optimism and pessimism, Marshall et al.

(1992) state that the two constructs are correlated, but somewhat empirically distinguishable, or distinct. This bi-dimensional perspective, suggests then, that optimism and pessimism are not bi-polar indices of a single trait, but represent instead, two correlated but distinct traits which exist separately and concurrently within an individual (Chang & McBride-Chang, in Burke, et al., 2000). The findings of Marshall et al. (1992) indicate support for a multidimensional model of optimism and pessimism, thereby requiring a reconsideration of the more common unidimensional perspective, as described above. Simply put, optimism and pessimism appear to be more than just opposites, they appear to enjoy a partial independence.

As with numerous other human variables it would appear that these different views, and the confusion that is evident in this regard, merely reflect the multidimensionality and consequent complexity of human beings. Also reflected is the progress being made in our understanding of this complexity of human nature. To illustrate the degree of this complexity, it is worth noting that it has been proposed that an individual is capable of both optimism and pessimism concurrently, in respect of different areas of life, and of differing degrees of intensity in respect of these diverse attitudes (Peterson, 2000).

An important consideration in researching optimism and pessimism is the issue as to whether these constructs represent traits or states (Burke, et al., 2000). This will be dealt with in more detail in Section 2.4.7.

As mentioned earlier it is possible to conceptualize optimism, like meaning in life, as occupying one end of a continuum. The other end of this particular continuum would be occupied by pessimism. Pessimism may be defined as a “tendency to look at the worst aspect of things or to expect bad results” (Sykes, 1984, p. 766) or, to modify McKenna’s (1993) definition, generalised expectations for *negative* outcomes. The essential distinction being perhaps, that whereas an optimistic person generally has positive expectations regarding the future, a pessimistic

individual would generally have negative expectations in respect of the future. However, as we shall see later, it is important to appreciate that optimism is more than just simply the absence of pessimism (Peterson, 2000).

For the sake of both clarity and brevity the following commentary will be largely restricted to optimism, as opposed to pessimism. However, the reader is requested to bear in mind that, although not specifically mentioned, the observations made apply implicitly to pessimism too.

We shall now consider how optimism differs from concepts such as hope, self-efficacy and locus of control.

3.4 Optimism and hope

Due to the apparent similarities between the two constructs, optimism must, of necessity, be distinguished from the concept of hope. Hope may be defined as feelings related to “expectations that goals [can] be achieved” (Peterson, 2000, p. 48). Snyder (in Peterson, 2000) says that a person’s goal directed expectations, or hopes, are made up of two parts: agency and pathways. Agency reflects the individual’s determination that his or her goals can be achieved, whereas pathways reflect the person’s conviction that successful plans can be conceived in order to reach the goals. It is evident then that hope concerns goal-directed expectations, whereas optimism “requires only the expectancy that whatever happens will be positive” and is not necessarily related to goals (Sumerlin, 1997, p. 1102). Hope is therefore somewhat more specific than is optimism. It may be helpful to assess how optimism relates to our beliefs regarding how much of a role we believe we play in outcomes. We shall now briefly consider optimism and self-efficacy.

3.5 Optimism and self-efficacy

Optimism, as we have seen, is essentially about generalized expectancies regarding a positive future. One consideration regarding optimism relates to the issue of, “How do our beliefs about our ability to shape our future connect to optimism?” The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) is worth looking at in as much as it is influenced by, or influences, optimism. Scheier and Carver (1987) observe that both self-efficacy and optimism involve expectancies. The primary difference, however, is that Bandura’s (1977) efficacy expectations are quite specific in their focus. The expectations of optimism, on the other hand, extend from the very specific to the exceedingly broad (Peterson, 2000). In situations involving specific tasks and specific expectations there is, therefore, a notable similarity between the two theories (Scheier & Carver, 1987). However, this is not the case in more general expectations. The question arises, “How do our beliefs about our ability to direct and control the future affect our ability to maintain our optimism?” We shall now consider this.



3.6 Optimism and perceived control

We shall see later (in Section 2.4.9) that optimistic bias is the belief that people have that positive events are more likely, and negative events less likely, to happen to oneself, when compared to other people similar to oneself. Darvill and Johnson (1991) report that in their study the subjects who believed that positive events were more likely to happen to them, and negative events less likely to occur, also believed that they had more control over the occurrence of events.

Optimists generally believe that their outcomes are under personal, as opposed to external, control (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999, p. 628) concur, optimists, they state, are “characterised by an internal locus of control which indicates that their expectations are based on the evaluation of their own resources”.

Rotter's (in McKenna, 1993) idea of locus of control is therefore of relevance to this discussion. The question of whether control is located within the person, or is external to the person, refers to the concept of locus of control.

Pearlin and Schooler (in Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994, p. 1064) use the term "self-mastery". Self-mastery is the extent to which an individual mostly feels that he, or she, "manifests personal mastery over life outcomes", or the view that one exercises control over the events of one's life (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994, p. 1065). Beliefs about where control over events is located - within one, or external to one - are of great importance in human functioning. Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) suggest that self-mastery includes a strong component of optimism, but that in the case of optimism this self-mastery is linked to a sense of personal responsibility for the expectancy.

Darvill and Johnson (1991) found that the people in their sample who were more optimistic also believed that they were more able to control both positive and negative events. They go on to say that this is not counter-intuitive; people who feel that they have less control over what occurs are likely to be less confident regarding the anticipated outcome of the event.

McKenna's (1993) research suggests that control may be the critical factor in unrealistic optimism. The debate still rages as to whether optimists or pessimists view things more realistically (Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999). Recent findings appear to indicate that optimists have the upper hand in terms of viewing the world more realistically.

We have looked at several definitions of optimism and examined how optimism differs from other, apparently similar, constructs. It may be helpful to now consider optimism from a personal perspective.

3.7 Optimism as a personal construct

We noted in Section 3.3 that optimism may be seen as being either trait-like, or state-like. The aim in developing the original Life Orientation Test (LOT) was to create an instrument to measure dispositional optimism as a personal construct (Andersson, 1996). Briefly a trait may be defined as “a relatively enduring descriptive characteristic of a person” or, as “predispositions to behaviours that are both enduring and wide-ranging” (Corsini, 1999, p. 1013). Optimism was thus construed by Scheier and Carver (1985) to be a stable personality characteristic, or trait. Burke et al. (2000) propose that the Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R) is probably measuring trait optimism and pessimism, as opposed to state optimism and pessimism. They cite research that suggests that optimism and pessimism may be stable traits that may, however, in some, but not all cases, be influenced by current mood states.

In attempting to clarify the nature of optimism, Lewis and Dember (1995), observe that some of the conceptual confusion may have arisen on account of different instruments measuring different types of optimism. In order to account for seemingly contradictory findings in the literature, they suggest that - in the case of mood induction investigations at least - optimism which appears to be impervious to mood fluctuations is probably dispositional as opposed to more transitory, in other words, state-like. However, in their own study, using the Optimism/Pessimism Scale (Dember & Brooks, in Lewis & Dember, 1995), revealed that certain types of mood induction techniques, for example, music, did have an affect on optimism. Research participants may, they concluded, be bringing to the testing situation the “mood residue of their recent, idiosyncratic experiences” (Lewis & Dember, 1995, p. 35). It is reasonable to assume that the same emotional impact of recent events will apply in real life situations too.

Peterson (2000) observes that two forms of optimism are extant. One of these views, as we have seen, suggests that optimism is an intrinsic part of human nature.

This is the view of Tiger (in Peterson, 2000); he cited optimism in human biology and proposed that it is one of our species most defining characteristics, as it is one of our most adaptive features. As such optimism is not only thought to have an evolutionary origin and function, but is a feature shared by all humans. Peterson (2000, p. 46) notes that “our human nature provides a baseline optimism, of which individual’s show, more versus less...our experiences influence the degree to which we are optimistic or pessimistic”.

If we think of optimism as being trait-like we consider it to be inherent or dispositional. Dispositional optimism, then, refers to a stable dimension of individuals in so far as differences in generalised expectations for favourable - versus unfavourable - outcomes are concerned (Scheier & Carver, 1985; McKenna, 1993). It is these very generalized expectancies that Scheier and Carver (1987) regard as dispositional optimism. Dispositional optimism is therefore a personality variable in the sense that personality is regarded as those relatively stable and enduring characteristics of an individual (Maddi, 1996).

On the other hand, optimism may be viewed as an individual characteristic that people possess to varying degrees at different times, in other words, a state. A state may be defined as “any momentary experience or mental process” (Corsini, 1999, p. 941). These two positions reflect the potential and actual complexity of human functioning.

Burke et al. (2000) offer the following explanation and possible resolution to the trait-state debate. They suggest that optimism and pessimism may have both state and trait components. A person may, for instance, be optimistic most of the time, but then may also, for periods of time, become pessimistic. In this case pessimism becomes the predominant trait; or state. As Burke et al. (2000) observe, if one asks a person how he, or she, feels ‘right now’, his, or her, response may alter markedly within a very short time if asked again. This, they suggest, is consistent with a state approach to a psychological variable. They add, however, that further research and

clarification is required in this matter.

As an aspect of human beings, optimism is, no doubt, related to other areas of the human make-up. Optimism, as such, is also associated - both positively and negatively - with various other dimensions of human personality (Marshall, et al., 1992). For instance, Taylor and Brown (in Darvill & Johnson, 1991) found that, unsurprisingly, depressed people are less optimistic than people who are not depressed. Optimism is also positively associated with extraversion and positive affect, whereas pessimism is principally related to neuroticism and negative affect (Marshall, et al., 1992). More will be said later with regard to the psychological and physical benefits of optimism (see Section 2.4.16). However, it is also necessary to consider the nature of optimism in as far as emotion and cognition are concerned.

3.8 Optimism: Emotion, Cognition, or both?

It was noted above that optimism may be seen as “a mood or attitude associated with an expectation” (Tiger, in Peterson, 2000). The question therefore arises: “Is optimism exclusively a cognition, an emotion, or some sort of hybrid of the two?” In order to understand the concept more clearly it may be helpful to look briefly at the two constituents of Tiger’s definition, beginning with mood.

Firstly, “What is a mood?” A mood may be defined as “a mild, usually transient, emotional state” or a “predisposition or receptivity toward an emotional reaction” (Corsini, 1999, p. 607). If we follow this definition a mood is clearly emotional in nature or disposes one to some sort of emotional state.

The second constituent, attitude, may be defined as “a learned predisposition to react to a given situation, person, or other set of cues in a consistent way”, or alternatively, “a relatively stable predisposition to react in a specific way to something” (Corsini, 1999, p. 76). Here the emphasis is on the tendency to react in a reasonably predictable and stable way to a stimulus, or stimuli. Attitudes are

thought to be made up of three components, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural (Corsini, 1994). These combine to convey a positive, negative, or neutral response. In this case we are concerned with a positive response; optimism being positive.

From Tiger's (in Peterson, 2000) definition above, it appears that optimism is seen as having emotional, cognitive and behavioural components as these relate to expectations.

Expectation may also be seen as being more a cognitive process (Pervin, 1984). In this, Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) suggest that (personal) optimism may be perceived as being a specific style of information processing which gives rise to cognitive bias, and that this cognitive style possibly serves to manage emotions as they are evoked by anticipations of future threats and demands. They see optimism as a form of cognitive bias that "should be regarded as a consequence of the style of thinking about future events" (Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999, p. 629). In other words this positive cognitive style elicits expectations which come to characterise the person's view of the future.

Peterson (2000) observes that optimism is generally regarded as a cognitive characteristic by contemporary approaches. He asserts that regarding optimism as an expectation makes sense as long as we bear in mind that these expectations involve powerful emotions too. He says that if we overlook the emotional content of optimism we will be unable to make sense of the fact that optimism is "both motivated and motivating" (Peterson, 2000, p. 45). His position is that optimism is not only cognitive, it is also inherently emotional and motivational.

Pervin (1984) explores the nature of the relationship between affect and cognition; in particular the debate as to which precedes which. In conclusion, he suggests that agreement appears to exist that "it is possible for cognition or affect to precede the other or to play a more significant role than the other in any single experience, though typically both contribute to and are part of our experiences" (Pervin, 1984, p.

142).

It is evident that there is no final agreement on whether optimism as a form of expectation is a cognition or an emotion. It appears that, as Pervin (1984) suggests, both are inextricably linked and, additionally, it is not explicit as to which precedes which. Future researches will no doubt shed light on this issue. We now turn to optimism and optimistic bias.

3.9 Optimistic bias

Taylor and Brown (in McKenna, 1993, p. 41) make the observation that there is, in society, an assumption that the “normal, well-adjusted individual has an accurate perception of reality and is free of illusory biases”. Peterson (2000, p. 45) points out that most theorists regarded the “*accurate* perception of reality as the epitome of good psychological functioning”, and that, as such “reality testing became the defining feature of the healthy individual”. However, it turns out that the view that people accurately perceive the world is not entirely founded in fact.

Included in the many misperceptions which exist in our thinking, research has indicated that people are prone to what may be referred to as optimistic bias (Darvill & Johnson, 1991).

Optimistic bias may be described as a tendency of people to believe that, in comparison to others like themselves, there is a greater probability of positive events occurring, and a lesser chance of negative events occurring, as far as oneself is concerned (Weinstein, in McKenna, 1993). In other words, there is empirical evidence that people subjectively underestimate the probability, or likelihood, of negative events befalling them. McKenna (1993, p. 39) refers to this kind of thinking as unrealistic optimism, and proposes that it amounts to “perceptions of relative invulnerability”. He states that this is explicable in two ways, either as unrealistic optimism, or as being a consequence of an illusion of control. His study found no evidence for the unrealistic optimism hypothesis, but supported

the illusion of control notion (McKenna, 1993), as we saw in Section 2.4.6, above. Optimistic bias is distinguishable from optimism in that, in the case of optimistic bias, people have an erroneous belief in the likelihood of events happening to themselves, compared to other people. Importantly, the primary distinction is that of interpersonal comparison. Optimism, we have noted, more simply involves general expectations that good things will arise. No interpersonal comparison is implied. Optimistic bias also operates with regard to both positive and negative events, whereas optimism is positive.

Another distinction is that optimism is viewed as a generalized expectancy of positive outcomes “independent of the source of outcomes”, whereas “the illusion of control locates the source of the expected outcome in terms of personal control” (McKenna, 1993. p. 39).

Lipkus, Martz, Panter, Drigotas and Feaganes (1993) observe that a debate is raging in respect of whether optimistic people are really able to assess the environment accurately or realistically, or whether optimism is a form of bias. Their research found no evidence of such distortion for optimism, but did find that a pessimism bias occurred, especially among women.

Taylor (in Peterson, 2000) believes that the propensity of people to view themselves in a favourable manner is a sign of well-being. She distinguishes between optimism as illusion and optimism as delusion. Illusions, she says, are responsive to reality whereas delusions are not. Optimism, as it relates to reality, may be mistaken for hope as we saw earlier.

We have covered in this section some of the personal dimensions of optimism. Before examining the interpersonal nature of optimism we shall look briefly at optimism and gender.

3.10 Optimism and gender

The question arises, “Do gender differences exist between males and females as far as optimism and pessimism is concerned?” In their re-evaluation and modification of the original LOT, Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994, p. 1075) found “differences in correlations between men and women [to be] negligible”. Few other studies have examined this aspect of optimism. It would appear then that there is no significant difference between males and females in respect of optimism.

It may now be helpful to look at optimism from an interpersonal perspective.

3.11 Optimism as an interpersonal construct

We noted earlier that the mood residue of recent experience/s might exert an influence on optimism, or pessimism. In as much as this is a possibility, optimism should then be regarded as an important aspect of individual differences in that it may influence the way others view and react to the individual person (Darvill & Johnson, 1991). Much of our mood is influenced by our involvement with other people. As such optimism thus has a clear interpersonal dimension.

The emphasis regarding optimism in the literature is predominantly personal, as opposed to social. Peterson (2000, p. 50) observes that the focus is largely individualistic; however, this construct, he suggests, “may be as much an interpersonal characteristic as an individual one”. He observes that researchers fail to distinguish between private, and public, socially communicated, optimism. This is a distinction which, he feels, is of some importance. Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) also emphasise the significance of this distinction between personal and social optimism as being quite independent constructs.

Peterson (2000, p. 51) warns that we should not become so engrossed in optimism as a “psychological characteristic that [we] ignore how it is influenced by external situations, including other people”. As social animals we are inevitably influenced by

the views of others. This writer suggests that social expectations with regard to the future must influence, to some degree at least, how individuals perceive the future. It may be helpful to ask, “Just how much influence do social pressures have on optimism?” We shall now turn to this issue.

3.12 Optimism and society

As far as optimism is concerned, Peterson (2000) feels that cultures and historical eras - in respect of big optimism at least (see Section, 2.4.14, below) - probably do not differ in their characteristic optimism. This writer takes this to mean that different cultures do not differ in their degree of trait optimism. There are, however, considerable differences across cultures with respect to the content of optimism (Peterson, 2000).

Related to the issue of culture is the matter of racial group. Darvill and Johnson (1991) suggest that there may be an ethnic component to optimism. When comparing their findings to those reported by Weinstein (in Darvill & Johnson, 1991) they posit that some of the variance may be due to Caucasians being more optimistic than other groups. Burke et al. (2000) in a study which employed the LOT-R, make recommendation that future research investigate racial differences on the scale. It was for this reason that a question was included in the biographical part of the questionnaire that required of the respondents to indicate the ethnic group to which they belong.

Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994, p. 1075) in discussing the revised LOT mention that the instrument had successfully been administered to two very different populations. Although these were not different racial populations, they added that they do not expect difficulties in using the scale “to samples with very different backgrounds”. This writer is fully aware that there are substantial and profound differences between the terms, culture, society and ethnicity and that these terms refer to different things. However, as mentioned, in an attempt to explore this

dimension further, it was decided to ask respondents to report their ethnic group.

We have explored the interpersonal aspects of optimism. It is now perhaps helpful to turn to the content of optimism.

3.13 The content of optimism

“What, specifically, is the focus of optimism?” “What may one be optimistic about?” We have seen that optimism is future directed and that it ranges from the very specific to the very general. In respect of the content of optimism, Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) observe that optimism may relate to different areas of future anticipation. They mention that the original LOT (Scheier & Carver, 1985) is a measure of personal optimism as this concerns one’s personal future. Optimism may also relate to social outcomes, world-wide events and environmental affairs (Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999). Optimism may also, as we saw above, be directed at material outcomes too (Tiger, in Peterson, 2000). Optimism may then be seen as being applicable to virtually any future eventuality.

The propensity for optimism is evident in a great variety of different types of situations (Scheier & Carver, 1987; Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999). For example, with respect to the very specific, “Can I carry my supper through to the living room without spilling my soup on the way?”; the moderately general, “Will I ever find a decent second-hand bicycle that I can afford?”; and the very general, “Good things inevitably happen to me”.

Tiger’s (in Peterson, 2000) position is that there is no, single or objective optimism - at least, in so far as optimism is characterized by it’s content. This, Peterson (2000, p. 44) continues, is because what is considered to be optimism “depends on what the individual regards as desirable”. In other words, optimism involves, to some degree or other, both evaluation and subjectivity. We now turn to the different types of optimism and how optimism may be expressed.

3.14 Types of optimism

Tiger (in Peterson, 2000) proposes two types of optimism: little optimism and big optimism. Little optimism is analogous to the very specific optimism of Scheier and Carver (1987) above and includes specific expectations about positive outcomes. This class of optimism may be “the product of an idiosyncratic learning history; and [it] leads to desirable outcomes because it predisposes specific actions that are adaptive in concrete situations” (Peterson, 2000, p. 49).

According to this view little optimism clearly incorporates an element of agency. There also appears to be a temporal immediacy to little optimism not necessarily shared by big optimism. It is to this temporal component of optimism that we shall turn in the next section. First, we shall look at big optimism.

Big optimism represents “larger and less specific expectations” (Peterson, 2000, p. 49). This type of optimism equates to the very general optimism of Scheier and Carver (1987). Big optimism, Peterson (2000, p. 49) reminds us, may be a “biologically given tendency filled in by culture with a socially acceptable content; it leads to desirable outcomes because it produces a general state of vigour and resilience”. It is this type of optimism that is the focus of this study. Big optimism therefore relates to disposition.

Peterson (2000) observes that although big and little optimism are, no doubt, related to one another, the precise nature of the association between the two is still in need of further research. Potential contradictions exist. As we have noted, people are not solely optimistic or pessimistic. As everyday experience clearly demonstrates, an individual may be, for example, a big optimist and, at the same time, a little pessimist, or vice versa. In the first instance, a person may look favourably on the future of, for example, the human species, whilst not believing that the little things in life go his, or her, way. This situation may also be reversed. Peterson and Bossio (in Burke, et al., 2000) suggest that this is dependent on the situation and that many

people possess both characteristics. We have already touched on the social and mood residue impact on optimism.

Peterson (2000, p. 49) reminds us that this distinction of optimism into little and big reveals that optimism may be “described at different levels of abstraction”. This means that optimism “may function differently depending on the level”. Big optimism, as mentioned above, may reflect biological tendency which culture augments with socially acceptable content. It is proposed that big optimism results in favourable outcomes because it produces an overall state of strength and resilience (Peterson, 2000). Optimism may therefore be conceptually seen as dispositional in nature. Indeed, it is proposed by Peterson (2000) that the LOT (he does not specify whether he is referring to the original or the revised instrument) is, as far as appearances go, a measure of big optimism because the instrument requires the respondents to report on generalisations as these concern the future. We noted earlier that it has been suggested that the LOT – R is a measure of dispositional optimism.

Optimism, we have seen relates to future expectations, as such it is projective into the future. It may be helpful to consider optimism and time. It is to this that we now turn.

3.15 Optimism and the passage of time

“What is the relationship between time and optimism?” Clearly optimism relates to projected favourable expectations, and is, therefore, in essence future-directed. However, these favourable expectations may also apply in the present. Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) note that optimism may be seen to reflect positive evaluations regarding outcomes for future and current events and experiences.

Lipkus et al. (1993) found that in respect of time frame, optimism appeared to reduce the person’s expectations of negative events occurring in the immediate

future and increase one's expectations of negative events occurring in the near future. However, optimism had very little or, no affect, on expectations in respect of the distant future.

Having very briefly considered the relationship between optimism and time we shall now address the question as to whether or not optimism has any impact on human well-being.

3.16 The benefits of optimism

It has been noted that research on dispositional optimism has rapidly expanded during the last few years due, in no small part, to the emerging evidence linking optimism beneficially to psychological and physical well-being (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994; Robinson-Whelan, Kim, MacCullum & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997).

Strassle, McKee and Plant (1999), as noted earlier, emphasise the considerable importance and consequent benefits of using a holistic psychological assessment that includes an appreciation and understanding of the client's strengths and resources in addition to his, or her, difficulties and concerns. Numerous personal and other variables are thought to be beneficial to a person's psychological functioning, amongst these factors, it is proposed by this writer, is optimism.

We saw above that optimism is positively correlated with extraversion and negatively correlated with neuroticism (Lipkus, et al., 1993; Marshall, et al., 1992). In addition to being associated with diverse dimensions of personality, both the constructs under investigation in this study, meaning in life and optimism, have also been empirically shown to positively correlate to physical and psychological health and overall quality of existence (Debats, 1999; Marshall, et al., 1992). A growing body of evidence points to dispositional optimism having an advantageous influence on both physical and psychological well-being (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). Peterson (2000) speculates that it is more likely big optimism that is the greater

influence on well-being, as opposed to little optimism.

In fact, Lipkus et al. (1993) state that generally speaking optimists enjoy better physical and mental health than pessimists. Although the vast majority of studies of the advantages of optimism using the earlier version of the Life Orientation Test (LOT) have been in the form of correlational investigations (Andersson, 1996), and as such do not imply causality, we shall begin by briefly looking at some of the benefits of optimism as far as psychological health goes.

Before we do, it is necessary to note that optimism is not only a harbinger of benefits, but may also potentially facilitate less desirable outcomes. Optimism, particularly illusory positive perception, has also been associated with negative consequences (McKenna, 1993). For example, if a person believes that certain negative events are less likely to occur to him, or her, then he, or she, may attend less to risk-related information and be less inclined to take self-protective measures. Peterson (2000) alludes to the fact that researchers infrequently address these potentially negative consequences.



3.16.1 Psychological health

Optimism has - we have noted - been both positively, and negatively, correlated to numerous dimensions of human functioning (Peterson, 2000). Marshall et al. (1992) found that optimism and pessimism, as measured by the original LOT, to be differentially associated with core dimensions of personality and mood. It is these and other areas of interest that will now be touched upon.

Andersson (1996, p. 719) notes how there is an enduring interest in optimism “as a predictor variable of health and coping”. This interest, as has been argued above, is of even more importance in the light of the emerging awareness of, and emphasis on, a positive psychology.

Strassle, McKee and Plant (1999, p.191) refer to research that indicates that optimism has been positively correlated with “life satisfaction, positive physical and mental health, lower frequencies of mental disorders, and self-esteem”. Moreover, optimists have demonstrated higher levels of motivation, persistence and performance (Carver, Blaney & Scheier; Taylor & Brown; in Burke, et al., 2000).

Marshall et al. (1992) reported that optimism was highly associated with positive affect. Peterson (2000) refers to optimism as having been linked to good mood. Not only are optimistic individuals more extraverted (Darvill & Johnson, 1991), they are also more happy (Argyle, in Darvill & Johnson, 1991). We noted in Section 2.2 that Avia (1997) believed that positive emotions are essential to overall well-being and that good mood, optimism and satisfaction with one’s life are vital aspects of a healthy personality.

Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) refer to research which found that optimistic people adjust better to important life transitions than do more pessimistic people. Lipkus et al. (1993) mention research that indicates that optimist’s beliefs that negative events are less likely to occur in the near future may serve a vital function. It is suggested that by doing so optimists may allow themselves the opportunity to engage in activities which will increase one’s chances of experiencing positive outcomes. Along these lines Scheier and Carver (1987) reported that optimists were more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies, especially those who felt that the stressful situation was potentially controllable. In the event that problem-focused coping was not possible, optimists tended to use more adaptive emotion-focused strategies, for example, acceptance, humour and positive reframing of the situation (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). Optimists then, differ from pessimists “in their stable coping tendencies and in the kinds of coping responses that they spontaneously generate when given hypothetical coping situations” (Scheier, Carver & Weintraub; Scheier, Weintraub & Carver; in Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994, p. 1063).

McKenna (1993, p. 47) says that a “positive orientation to events can result in greater effort and persistence with resulting greater success”. Peterson (2000) mentions how optimism has been linked to perseverance. As we noted in Chapter 2 in the discussion on meaning in life, the attainment of goals frequently results in a sense of achievement and therefore satisfaction and well-being.

Well-being is an essential component of mental health. Well-being “reflects a favourable judgement of the quality of a person’s life” (Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999, p. 630). They observe that optimism can reasonably be expected to influence an individual’s sense of well-being in that it is logical that an intimate relationship would exist between the nature of a person’s expectations of the future and how the person would evaluate his, or her, own life. The findings of their study supported this assumption. This relationship existed for both personal and social optimism, the contributions of each being independent of one another. They concluded that these two types of optimism “include unique sources of well-being” (Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999, p. 634).

In conclusion it would seem that, essentially “positive thinking is helpful” (Scheier & Carver, 1992, p. 201), and that optimism is an intrinsic and vital part of this kind of cognitive attitude. In respect of the psychological or mental benefits, optimism was found to help buffer the effects of daily stressors on self-esteem and burnout (in a sample of woman executives) (Fry, 1995). In the case of resilience in the face of stressors, Park (1998, p. 270) reports, that “probably the most consistent finding in the literature is that people possessing higher levels of the personality characteristics of optimism and hope - those who expect positive outcomes and who believe they have the ability to attain their goals - are more likely to report experiencing growth on response to stress”. She goes on to mention research that supports this finding in various areas of stress, including surgery, pain and bereavement. Although, no doubt, not the only fortigenic factor involved, optimism is evidently of considerable importance in an individual’s ability to deal with stressors in life.

Peterson (2000, p. 51) suggests that there many reasons to believe that optimism is helpful. In addition to the examples mentioned above, he says, primarily because “positive expectations can be self-fulfilling”. Positive expectations regarding the future may, therefore, serve as self-fulfilling prophecies.

However, again there is a down-side to the optimism picture. Perloff (in McKenna, 1993) proposed that those individuals who underestimate risks, as these apply to themselves, may have greater problems adjusting in the event of the aversive event happening. Peterson (2000, p. 50) summarising Nesse and Williams has the following to say, “unrelenting optimism precludes the caution, sobriety, and conservation of resources that accompany sadness as a normal and presumably adaptive response to disappointment and setback”. The patent message here is that, as in all things, optimism requires moderation. Optimism may cost one if it is too unrealistic.



3.16.2 Physical health

Burke et al. (2000) mention that both optimism and pessimism have been attracting more and more interest within the field of health psychology. Furthermore, they add that optimists - as opposed to pessimists - have been shown to display better physical health. Peterson (2000) concurs, citing several studies that have positively correlated optimism with good health. Interestingly, he observes that the distinction of optimism into little optimism and big optimism may assist us in gaining a greater understanding into which routes are involved in the different instances of well-being. These diverse pathways include, for example, immunological robustness, absence of negative mood and health-promoting behaviours (Peterson, 2000).

In terms of physical benefits, for example, optimism - as a personality attribute - was found to be a significant mediator, or moderator, of stress levels in a sample of female executives; optimism appears to serve to “moderate the deleterious effects

of daily hassles on...physical health” (Fry, 1995, p. 213). Smith (in Fry, 1995) found that optimism both moderated, and predicted, coping responses to stressful events. This research was pre-empted by Scheier and Carver (1987) who proposed that the causal link between optimism and physical health or well-being could be due to the use of more effective coping strategies by optimists when dealing with stress, as touched on before.

Other researchers have found that chronically stressed subjects were less optimistic than controls. For instance, both optimism and pessimism appeared to be “influenced by environmental circumstances and life experiences” (Robinson-Whelan, et al., 1997, p. 1351).

In summary, it is evident that empirical research strongly supports the proposition that optimism is positively correlated with physical and psychological well-being; as the numerous studies, above, attest. The empirical evidence is rapidly accumulating and different areas of human functioning are constantly being investigated in as far as the benefits of optimism and other resistance resources are concerned.



3.17 Conclusion

It was argued, in the introduction to Chapter 2, that both optimism and meaning in life may be regarded as being legitimately part of a psychology which focuses more on strengths and resources than on deficits and pathology. Marshall et al. (1992, p. 1067) state that “mounting evidence now attests to the apparent benefits conferred by an optimistic outlook”. As Peterson (2000, p. 48) points out in his commentary on Seligman’s book, *Learned Optimism*, that what is called optimism could, as easily, be called “mastery, effectance or control”. No matter what name we chose to use it is seems apparent that both optimism and meaning in life are of great potential benefit as far as human beings are concerned.

Both constructs appear to reflect the spirit of positive psychology with it’s emphasis

on “positive subjective experience, positive traits” and “strength and virtue” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Both constructs also appear to represent the essence of the salutogenic perspective of Antonovsky (1979, 1987) in that they reflect sources of strength that serve to protect people against the stressors of daily life. Both optimism and meaning in life seem legitimately to warrant inclusion in the list of GRRs.

The next chapter will provide a description of the research methodology used in this study. It is to this that we now turn.

