

# CHAPTER SIX

## Discussion and conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the discussion of the results presented in the previous chapter as these relate to the problem statements, hypotheses and the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. It also includes the conclusion and discusses some of the limitations of the present study and recommendations for future research. The discussion of the results will follow.

### 6.2 Discussion of the results

This study attempted to address two problems: Are the two constructs, optimism and meaning in life, related? and What is the nature of this relationship? In order to investigate these two problem statements, one general hypothesis and several subsidiary, more specific, hypotheses were formulated.

#### 6.2.1 General hypothesis

It was proposed that a positive correlation would be found between meaning in life and optimism.

#### 6.2.2 Specific hypotheses

##### 6.2.2.1 Hypothesis One:

There will be a significant positive correlation between scores on the total Life

Regard Index scale (LRI) (serving as an overall indicator of positive life regard or an individual's belief that he, or she, is fulfilling his, or her, positively valued life-framework or life-goal, i.e. meaning in life) and the LOT – R (indicating the individual's degree of optimism or pessimism).

#### **6.2.2.2 Hypothesis Two:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between scores obtained on the Life Regard Index - Framework (FR) sub -scale (indicating the individual's ability to see his, or her, life within some perspective or context, and having derived a set of life-goals, purpose in life or life -view from this context) and the scores obtained on the Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT – R) (which serves as a measure of optimism or, an individual's positive expectancies for the future or, pessimism).

#### **6.2.2.3 Hypothesis Three:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between scores on the Life Regard Index – Fulfillment (FU) sub-scale (indicating the degree to which an individual views himself, or herself, as having fulfilled-or still in the process of fulfilling his, or her, framework or life goals) and the scores on the LOT – R scale (indicating the individual's degree of optimism or pessimism).

#### **6.2.2.4 Hypothesis Four:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between the variable, age, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub -scales.

#### **6.2.2.5 Hypothesis Five:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between the variable, marital status, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

#### **6.2.2.6 Hypothesis Six:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between the variable, witness to a serious crime, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

#### **6.2.2.7 Hypothesis Seven:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between the variable, diagnosed as clinically depressed, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

#### **6.2.2.8 Hypothesis Eight:**

There will be a significant positive correlation between the variable, commitment to religious belief, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

### **6.2.3 Support for the hypotheses**

The results indicate that the general hypothesis was supported by the data as were the majority of the secondary research hypotheses. The data will be discussed separately as it relates to the different hypotheses under the following headings.

It is necessary to remind the reader that this is not a replication study and that,

to the researcher's knowledge, the relationship between meaning in life and optimism has not been investigated before. As such, the following discussion, and the inferences that are arrived at, is based on literature which deals primarily with optimism and meaning in life as these relate to other constructs.

### **6.2.3.1 Hypothesis One:**

The primary hypothesis of this study was that a significant positive correlation would be found between optimism, as operationalized by high scores on the Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT – R), and meaning in life, as operationalized by high scores on the total Life Regard Index (LRI).

The research data support this hypothesis. We saw in Chapter 5 that optimism (high or low) is not independent of meaning in life (high or low). We saw that the Pearson *r* correlation coefficient of the LOT – R and the total LRI was .579 ( $p$  – value = .000, ( $< .001$ , 2-tailed)). This moderately positive correlation indicates that the two variables are not only not independent of one another, but are quite strongly associated with one another. Table 5.6 in Chapter 5 indicates clearly that the respondents who fell within the low optimism group also predominantly fell into the low meaning in life group. Those participants who fell into the high optimism group also tended to fall into the high meaning in life group. The coefficient of determination (.34) allows for the determination of a person's score on a second variable if the score of the first variable is already known (Mitchell & Jolley, 2001). We can see that as far as the total scores are concerned knowing a persons optimism score only allows us to make a moderately accurate (33.5%) determination of his, or her, score for meaning in life. This clearly indicates that other factors could also be involved.

We saw in Chapter 2 that well-being – the subjective, favourable judgement of the quality of the individual's life – is a fundamental part of overall mental health (Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer & Schneider, 1999). These authors note that

research findings (Chang, et al., 1997) have reported substantial correlations using several measures of personal optimism and pessimism and satisfaction with life. Writers such as Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) and Strassle, McKee and Plant (1999) have noted that optimism almost certainly influences a person's sense of well-being. Taylor (in Peterson, 2000) believes that the tendency of people to view themselves in a favourable light is a sign of well-being. It stands to reason that an intimate relationship would exist between the nature of a person's expectations of the future and how the person evaluates his, or her, current life and the meaning one currently finds in one's own life. It is suggested that the association found in the current study between meaning in life and optimism is due, in part, to a reciprocal interaction between optimism, life satisfaction, self-esteem, well-being and meaning in life (and in all probability other factors too), particularly in as much as meaning in life mutually influences well-being and optimism. Perhaps future researchers may look at this relationship more closely.

Fry (1995) noted that high levels of optimism correlated with greater self-esteem. Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) note that self-esteem is conceptually and empirically linked to optimism although in a somewhat diffuse manner. Amongst other things, they say, higher self-esteem suggests that one is not a failure in one's life. If we recall that Battista and Almond (1973) emphasise that part of meaning in life is the individual's perception that he, or she, is fulfilling – or has already fulfilled – his, or her goal or purpose in life the connection between meaning in life and self-esteem and therefore optimism becomes more apparent.

If we take meaningfulness to mean “the feeling that one can make sense of or find order or coherence in one's existence” (Debats, 1996, p. 504) then it seems reasonable to assume that the factors mentioned above would augment such feelings of order and coherence in life.

### 6.2.3.2 Hypothesis Two:

Hypothesis two stated that there will be a significant positive correlation between scores obtained on the Life Regard Index - Framework (FR) sub-scale (indicating the individual's ability to see his, or her, life within some perspective or context, and having derived a set of life-goals, purpose in life or life-view from this context (Battista & Almond, 1973)) and the scores on the Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT – R) (which serves as a measure of optimism, or an individual's positive expectancies for the future (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994); or pessimism).

The data also supported this hypothesis. Participants who scored low on the LRI (FR) also tended to score low on the LOT – R. The reverse was also found. We saw in the last chapter that the correlation coefficient for the LOT – R and the LRI (FR) sub-scale was found to be .514 ( $p$  – value < .001, 2-tailed). It is thus clear that optimism, conceptualised as being expectancies for positive outcomes in the future, is associated with the degree to which an individual has the ability to see his, or her, life within some context, and to have derived a set of life-goals, purpose in life, or life-view from that context (Battista & Almond, 1973). However, the strength of this association is not as strong as it is with the other dimensions of the study.

The positive correlation found to exist between FR and optimism indicates that the two variables are not only not independent of one another, but are moderately associated with one another. The coefficient of determination (.26) allows us to see that as far as these scores are concerned knowing a persons optimism score only allows us to make a very moderately accurate (26%) determination of his, or her, score for meaning in life in as much as an individual's ability to see his, or her, life-context is concerned. As mentioned above other variables could also be involved.

Darvill and Johnson (1991) report that people who feel that they have less

(perceived) control over events are less optimistic in respect of the expected occurrence of these events. If one takes the position that FR provides the individual with a context from which he, or she, derives a set of life-goals or purpose – as do Battista and Almond (1973) – then it is conceivable that FR also provides a degree of implicit or explicit order and therefore control in one's life and, therefore, optimism. It also follows that FR, or context, would play a central role in meaningfulness in the sense of the feeling that one can make sense of or find coherence in one's life (Debats, 1996). Optimism may stem from having goals, purpose or a perspective for life. Although the association between the two variables is not strong, the data supports this position.

### **6.2.3.3 Hypothesis Three:**

Hypothesis three stated that there will be a significant positive correlation between scores on the Life Regard Index – Fulfillment (FU) sub-scale (indicating the degree to which an individual views himself, or herself, as having fulfilled - or still in the process of fulfilling – his, or her, framework or life goals (Battista & Almond, 1973)) and the scores on the LOT – R scale (indicating the individual's degree of optimism or pessimism).

Again the hypothesis was supported by the data. The correlation coefficient of the LOT – R and the LRI (FU) sub-scale was found to be .580 ( $p$  – value < 0.001, 2-tailed). This value indicates that the degree to which an individual perceives himself, or herself, as being in the process of fulfilling – or having fulfilled – his, or her, life goals or framework is moderately associated with the degree to which he, or she, has positive expectations regarding the future. This supports the common-sense view that optimism about achievement frequently follows success in that area.

This moderately positive correlation is very similar to that found for the two

total scores (LOT – R and LRI) and again indicates that the two variables are not only dependent on one another, but are also that the association is quite strong. The coefficient of determination which helps one to know a person's score on a second variable if the score of the first variable is already known (Mitchell & Jolley, 2001) is .34. We can see that as far as these scales are concerned knowing a persons optimism score allows us to make a moderately accurate (34%) determination of his, or her, score as far as being in the process of fulfilling – or having fulfilled – his, or her, life goals or framework goes. It is interesting to note that the FR and FU sub-scales correlate as they do with optimism, with FR being, marginally, the lower of the two. It would seem logical that the correlations would be reversed, with FR being the higher of the two, partly because FR serves to allow for FU and not the other way around. After all, the realization of one's meaning in life is dependent on the initial conceptualization of a meaning.

The remaining hypotheses (numbers Four to Eight) concerned the other variables that the study explored, namely: age, marital status, witness to a serious crime, clinically depressed and commitment to one's religion. The following discussion will address these under separate headings in as far as this is possible given that there is a degree of theoretical and empirical overlap in some cases.

#### **6.2.3.4 Hypothesis Four:**

This hypothesis proposed that there would be a significant positive correlation between the variable, age, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

In this case the hypothesis was only supported in respect of optimism and only in terms of the age groups 19 and 21 and older.

The only statistically significant difference was found between the means of



the age groups 19 and 21 and older in as far as the LOT – R was concerned (significant at the 0.05 level). This, of course, means that there is a 95% chance that the difference is as a result of the variable LOT – R) and not because of chance factors. As these two groups were almost identical in size, it would thus appear that the more heterogeneous nature of the 21 and older group might well have played a role in this difference. It is noteworthy that the difference in the mean scores between the groups 19 and 20 did approach significance ( $p$  – value = .055). The older group, 21 and older, was found to be more optimistic than the other two groups. This finding is difficult to explain. It is possible that older students need to be more optimistic because of the personal investment and sacrifice required to be a student in later life. Alternatively, perhaps older students are simply dispositionally more optimistic than their peers who are not students.

No difference was found in respect of meaning in life as measured by the LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales (the between-groups mean difference did approach significance in respect of FU ( $p$  – value = .084)).

van Ranst and Marcoen (1997) reported age differences in their study using the LRI. However, Debats et al. (1993) did not. Bar-Tur and Savaya (2001) also found no age differences with regard to the total amount of meaning in life reported by the respondents in their study. They did, however, report age differences in respect of sources of meaning in life with younger adults (20-40 years old) valuing materialistic concerns and older adults (60+ years) holding family and communal values as being more important. This finding, especially as it relates to older adults, appears to offer support for Erikson's (in Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1999) notion that later adulthood may represent a period of nurturance and re-involvement with matters external to the self. Research findings thus appear to predominantly support the position that meaning in life is not influenced by age. However, the failure to find statistically significant differences between the different age-groups may have been a result of the nature of the groups arbitrarily formed for the analyses. Future researchers

may consider exploring this age - meaning relationship further.

### **6.2.3.5 Hypothesis Five:**

This hypothesis proposed that a significant positive correlation exists between the variable, marital status, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

Two groups were formed for the purposes of the statistical analyses, Single and Other. Statistically significant differences were found with respect to the total LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales only. It is noteworthy that in all three of these measures the Other group's mean scores were higher. The hypothesis that a significant correlation exists between marital status and optimism was not supported.

In Section 2.3.5 it was noted that personal relationships are consistently found to be a vital source of meaning for people. The question in the biographical questionnaire that asked the respondent to indicate his or her marital status, indirectly addressed this dimension of meaning in life. The findings of this study add further support to the assertion that interpersonal relationships are of considerable importance as a source of meaning in life (Ebersole & De Paola, Hedlund, in Debats, 1999). Indeed Debats (1999) reports that relationships are one of the frequent sources of meaning in life. Specifically, she found that females reported significantly more personal meaning derived from relationships than did males. These findings are quite understandable if one considers the gregarious nature of most human beings and the gender roles and gender-typed behaviour which cultures instil on people (Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1999).

No statistical difference was found between the two groups in respect of optimism, however, the mean score of the Other group was higher than that of

the Single group. The Other group included all participants who are married, living with a partner, divorced and other (respondents were required to provide a description of this, other status). It is clear that the category Other, does not only include married people, nonetheless it would be interesting to research optimism as one of the numerous factors which constitute marriage. It must be born in mind that optimism, as measured by the LOT – R, is a general construct and does not relate directly to marriage or any of the other variables explored by the biographical questionnaire.

#### **6.2.3.6 Hypothesis Six:**

This hypothesis proposed that there would be a significant positive correlation between the variable, witness to a serious crime, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

In this case two groups were again formed in order to do the statistical analyses, those who responded Yes, and those participants who responded No. Statistical significance was found only in respect of the LOT – R ( $p$  – value = .044).

It is noteworthy that this difference was obtained even with the two groups being markedly disproportionate in terms of size (Yes,  $n = 30$ ; and No,  $n = 264$ ). The mean score of the participants who reported No was higher than those who reported Yes. This would seem to indicate that those respondents who had witnessed a serious crime during 2001 were indeed less likely to harbour “generalized expectations that good things will happen” (Scheier & Carver, 1987, p. 171). Trauma thus appears to have a negative impact on the level of optimism expressed by an individual, however, it is critical to remember that traumas come in a wide variety of guises and affect people very differently (Gilliland & James, 1997). Given the relative recency of these respondent’s experience of a serious crime this diminished optimism response

seems perfectly understandable. What is less understandable is the finding that the difference between the respondents who reported Yes to having personally been the victim of a serious crime during 2001, and those who reported No, only approached significance ( $p$ -value = .088, for the LOT – R). It is conceivable that victims of crime make more effort to deal with the experience, for example, through psychotherapy and support-groups, than do witnesses of crime. The focus of attention and sympathy tends to be directed towards the victims – as opposed to the witnesses – of traumatic events, at least for a longer duration.

The hypothesis was not supported in respect of meaning in life. The differences between the means of the two groups were not found to be statistically significant. The respondents who answered No had higher mean scores in the case of the LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales. This study did not ascertain when during 2001 the respondents had witnessed a serious crime, nor was the term, serious crime, defined. These factors may have had an impact on the findings. It seems likely that witnessing a serious crime may serve to make one reconsider one's priorities in life, and perhaps one's sense of what is valuable and therefore meaningful in life. Future studies may consider investigating this further.

#### **6.2.3.7 Hypothesis Seven:**

This hypothesis proposed that there would be a significant positive correlation between the variable, diagnosed as clinically depressed, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

Again two groups were formed, those who answered Yes, and those who answered No, to being diagnosed as being clinically depressed at any time during 2001. Significant differences were found only in terms of the LOT – R, the LRI and the FU sub-scale. In respect of the FR items the hypothesis was not supported.

It stands to reason that people who are depressed would be less optimistic of the future than non-depressed people. Darvill and Johnson (1991) found depressed people to be less optimistic than people who are not depressed. This is reflected in the higher mean score obtained for the respondents who answered No as far as the LOT – R is concerned. We noted in Section 3.16.1 that optimism has been found to be highly associated to positive affect (Marshall, et al., 1992), and to good mood (Peterson, 2000) and happiness (Argyle, in Darvill & Johnson, 1991). Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny and Fahey (1998) also reported that optimism was associated with better mood. However, they found situational optimism to be a stronger predictor of mood than personal optimism. They add that, “situation-specific cognitions predict in that situation better than trait constructs” (Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny and Fahey, 1998, p. 1652). These states represent the opposite of depression. However, Burke et al. (2000) refer to a study by Schwab who found that mildly depressed participants, may at times, answer some of the optimism items in much the same way as more optimistic people. The conclusion reached was that optimism and pessimism can coexist in an individual at the same time. The concurrent nature of optimism and pessimism was noted in Chapter 3.

Significant differences were also evident in terms of the LRI and the FU sub-scale. It is interesting to note that, in as far as the total LRI is concerned, this difference was  $p - \text{value} = .035$ , whilst for FU the difference was highly significant at  $p - \text{value} < .000$  (both 2-tailed). No doubt some of the differences found in respect of depression and these scales is due to the far smaller number of participants who reported Yes as opposed to No.

With respect to the FR items it is interesting to note that the difference between the two groups was not significant. This may be a consequence of the much smaller Yes group compared to the No group. It is counter-intuitive that the association between recent or current depression and FR would not be statistically significant as FR provides the foundation for meaning in life

which must then be realized. It appears likely that depression either gives rise to a kind of framework that fails to provide a sense of purpose or worth, or somehow alters the individual's ability to maintain the type of framework which gives rise to goals and purpose. Beck's (in Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979) proposal that depression interferes with the individual's ability to set and attain goals is pertinent in this regard. The inertia that frequently accompanies clinical depression (DSM-IV; APA, 1994) would thus appear to hinder the person's expression (FU) of his or her meaning-giving framework (FR). In terms of Battista and Almond's (1973) definition of meaningfulness depression would certainly interfere with an individual's ability to be committed to, value or believe in something – except perhaps the depression itself.

#### **6.2.3.8 Hypothesis Eight:**

Hypothesis eight stated that a significant positive correlation would exist between the variable, commitment to religious belief, and the scores obtained on the LOT – R, LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales.

In the case of this variable three groups were formed, those who Always, Sometimes and Never practice their religion.

ANOVA revealed significant differences only in terms of the LRI and the FR and FU sub-scales. No statistically significant difference was found in respect of the LOT – R. The hypothesis was not supported in this respect.

It thus appears that no definable difference exists in as far as the relationship between optimism and religious commitment goes. It is interesting to note that the descriptive statistics reveal that the means of the Never and Sometimes groups were almost the same whereas the mean score of the Always group was somewhat higher. Once again it is difficult to ascertain the impact of the

very small number of respondents in the Never group as opposed to the larger Sometimes and Always groups in as far as optimism is concerned.

Post hoc tests found statistically significant differences in respect of the Always and Sometimes and Always and Never groups in respect of FR. Statistically significant differences were also found in respect of FU, but only for between the Always and Sometimes groups, as was the case with the total LRI.

The higher mean obtained by the Always group – as far as the FR items go – indicates that these respondents measured higher, on average, than did those in the Sometimes and Never groups. Being Always committed to one's religious belief appears to be more strongly associated with the presence of a framework or context from which to find meaning in life than is the case in the Sometimes and Never groups. A similar situation also appears to exist in the case of the FU items. Religious belief in youths has been found to result in the tendency to see their own futures and that of humanity as a whole as being more predictable and certain. Religious belief has also been associated with feelings of greater security and less anxiety than in the case of non-religious youths (Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1999). These findings appear to support the view that religious belief is positively associated with both FR and FU, as the results of this study imply.

As far as the overall meaning in life (LRI) score is concerned a significant difference was found only between the Always and Sometimes groups. The fact that the same difference was not found in terms of the Never groups is very likely attributable to the very small number of respondents in this group (the same may be said of the FU items as well). This difference would seem to imply that the respondents who are Always committed to their religious beliefs derive greater meaning in life from those beliefs. As noted above, religious belief appears to offer both a meaning-giving framework within which to live and meaningful goals to pursue in one's life.

It is also interesting to note the relatively high number of participants in the sample who reported that they Always practised their belief as compared to those who Sometimes practice their belief. Other studies have found that religion to be a less frequent source of meaning for younger adults (Debats, 1999). Although this study was not attempting to ascertain the individual participant's sources of meaning in life, it is remarkable that such a notable majority should express that they Always practice their religion. Perhaps the fact that this was a self-report questionnaire permitted a degree of social desirability to creep in. It is also possible that the student population from which this sample was drawn may have played a role. Future research may profitably explore this question further.

#### **6.2.4 Other biographical variables**

The biographical information requested of the participants also included: gender, ethnic group, current year of study, faculty registered in, victim of a serious crime and religious affiliation.

##### **6.2.4.1 Gender**

As noted in the previous chapter *t*-tests revealed no significant differences between genders in as far as the mean scores regarding optimism and meaning in life are concerned. The male/female ratio of about 1:4 appeared to make no difference to the findings. With respect to optimism this finding is similar to that of Darvill and Johnson (1991) who reported that mean scores in respect of sex differences and optimism were not statistically significant. Lipkus et al. (1993) found no gender differences in their study involving optimistic bias.

It may be a case that gender does not play any role in optimism as Tiger (in Peterson, 2000) suggests. The current findings do appear to support his



proposition that optimism is indeed an intrinsic part of human biology. However, the position is far from clear and further research is necessary to resolve the issue. Alternatively, it could be that the different socialization of males and females does result in gender differences in respect of optimism, but that the LOT – R does not reveal these differences – because it is not designed to do so. We must recall that people are not solely optimistic or pessimistic as the discussion on the uni-, or bi-dimensionality debate in Chapter 3 indicated.

No significant differences were found in respect of meaning in life either. It is more difficult to comment on this aspect of the study because, as Chamberlain and Zika (1988) point out, there is not a great deal of evidence on sex differences in meaning in life. They report that several studies have found no gender differences – although these studies used a different instrument to measure meaning in life. Bar-Tur and Savaya (2001) concluded that there were few differences in terms of gender as far as the total amount of meaning in life is concerned, what differences there are relate to sources of meaning not overall meaning in life.



#### **6.2.4.2 Ethnic group**

It is possible that membership of an ethnic group may play a role in one's degree of optimism. Darvill and Johnson (1991) in comparing their results to those of Weinstein (in Darvill & Johnson, 1991) suggested that the lower optimism found in their study may have been due, in part, to the smaller number of respondents. They add, however, that there may be differences in the baseline optimism of Caucasians versus that of other groups. In the current study no significant difference was detected between the two groups, White and Other in respect of any of the instruments. However, the small number of respondents in the Other group was perhaps too few to assess group differences, if indeed these exist at all.

Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) found that both personal and social optimism were related to social desirability. Personal optimism, as we noted in Chapter 3, is inevitably influenced by the opinions of others. It is counter-intuitive to think that cultural influence arising from ethnic group would not impact on optimism to some degree given the influence of others on personal optimism. Alternatively, if as Tiger (in Peterson, 2000) proposed, optimism is part of human biology then it stands to reason that no significant differences exist. Further research may fruitfully address this issue of optimism and ethnicity; as it may race and meaning in life.

Burke et al. (2000) made recommendation that researchers further investigate racial differences in respect of the LOT – R but with larger samples. The current study fell short of this ambition, partly due to the racial imbalance in the sample.

There is a dearth of information in the literature in respect of meaning in life and racial group. Bar-Tur and Savaya (2001, p. 253) explored this dimension in a sample of Israeli Jews and Arabs. They found that ethnicity affected most of the 10 sources of meaning investigated, but that “breadth of meaning” as reflected in the “overall amount of meaning in life” was similar in all the groups tested. However, their study used a different instrument and was primarily attempting to explore sources of meaning. Again future research might profitably explore the association between meaning in life and ethnicity and culture.

#### **6.2.4.3 Year of study**

It was not possible to draw any conclusions based on the data as there were too few respondents in years other than second and as such the distribution was heavily skewed.

#### **6.2.4.4 Faculty**

As was the case with year of study, too few respondents fell into the faculties other than Arts to allow for conclusions to be made.

#### **6.2.4.5 Victim of serious crime**

Dispositional optimism has been beneficially associated with both psychological and physical well-being (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). Aspinwall and Taylor (in Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994, p. 1063), for instance, have shown that optimists adjust more favourably to major life transitions than do pessimists. It may be argued that the trauma of being the victim of a serious crime is analogous to a major life transition. Peterson (2000) states that trauma and stress take a toll on optimism. Being the victim of a serious crime may be considered to be stressful life event. It may be expected that optimists would cope better with this kind of experience than pessimists.



Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) provide several examples of how optimists cope better with serious health threats and disease. They add that, according to their model, "people are seen as remaining engaged in efforts to overcome adversity to reach goals as long as their expectations of eventual success are sufficiently favourable" (Scheier, Carver and Bridges, 1994, p. 1063). Although they are talking about goal-achievement, it is conceivable that how a person strives to overcome the trauma of being the victim of a serious crime will depend, to some degree, on how optimistic that person is – recovery too, may be seen as a goal. Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) mention that optimistic people tend to use more problem-focused coping strategies first, and then resort to more adaptive emotion-focused strategies such as acceptance, humour and positive reframing.

Fry (1995, p. 216) reports that Reker and Wong found that optimists “appraised situations of stress...in a more positive light and made more extensive use of a variety of coping strategies, including self-reliance, acceptance, and self-improvement” than did pessimists. People lacking in optimism “experienced greater negative stress and used a more restricted pattern of active withdrawal to cope with anticipated stressful events” (Fry, 1995, p. 216). Being the victim of a serious crime is an example of just such an event – as is potentially witnessing a serious crime and being diagnosed as clinically depressed. Fry (1995) refers to Smith who found that optimism serves to both moderate and predict coping responses to stressful encounters. Optimism may be seen to stand as a buffer between the impact of negative life events and various aspects of the individual.

Peterson (2000) suggests that all humans have a baseline optimism and that our experiences influence the degree to which we are optimistic or otherwise. We also saw, in Chapter 3, that optimism may, to some extent, be situationally determined, especially as far as the influence of other people are concerned. If we consider optimism to be dispositional, or trait-like, then it appears likely that if one is the victim of a serious crime then one’s level of optimism may drop temporarily and then restore itself to its baseline level. This may depend on numerous factors, both internal and external. The current study did not directly examine this, but future researchers may find this to be an interesting area to explore.

We also noted in Chapter 3 that optimism may be thought of as being an attitude. Attitudes, partially, and importantly, involve mood or, mild, temporary emotional states. In addition to an emotional component attitudes have cognitive and behavioural constituents too. Peterson (2000) notes that current thinking frequently regards optimism as being a primarily cognitive characteristic of people.

Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer and Schneider (1999) state that optimism may be thought of “as a specific style of information processing”. This style of thinking, they continue, may serve to manage emotions stimulated by the expectation of threats and demands of future events. In the light of this it may be helpful to consider the impact of certain events which may be thought of as being sufficient to affect, positively or negatively, one’s style of information processing. Being the victim of a serious crime may be one of just such an event (as may being a witness to a serious crime, being diagnosed as being clinically depressed, believing in a religion and the degree of commitment to one’s religious beliefs).

Lewis and Dember (1995, p. 35) found that the “mood residue of recent, idiosyncratic experiences” may be brought to the testing situation. This writer suggests that the same may well apply in real life too. This study did not attempt to ascertain the precise nature, or recency of, the trauma. As these are factors likely to have an impact on one’s degree of optimism and on one’s degree of meaning in life too, future studies may consider addressing this.

We noted above that being the witness to a serious crime may influence the manner in which one continues to view one’s life and may lead to a re-evaluation of the priorities one has and the goals one plans on realising. It is suggested that being the victim of a serious crime may well have a similar consequence. The literature is largely silent on the impact of being a victim of crime on one’s meaning in life. This is quite likely to be a result of the lower profile of serious crime in the countries that tend to generate the lion’s share of empirical research. Perhaps future researchers may probe this untapped area profitably.

#### **6.2.4.6 Religious belief**

Two groups were formed for the purposes of statistical analysis, Christian and

Other. No statistical differences were found in respect of either group in as far as the LOT – R, LRI and FR and FU are concerned. The hypotheses were not supported.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the data in terms of the Other group, which included agnostics, atheists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and any other religions not specified in the questionnaire. This group was somewhat smaller than the Christian group.

Showalter and Wagener (2000) suggest that the respondent's degree of religiosity is an important source of meaning in life. Bar-Tur and Savaya (2001) state that religion or belief has consistently been found to be a major source of meaning for all age groups. Future studies may chose to examine this contribution to meaning in life more closely.

### **6.3 Global conclusion**

It was noted in Chapters 2 and 3 that various writers have identified and explored factors which appear to buffer the individual from stressors in life (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987; Strümpfer, 1995 and Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, amongst others). Amongst these generalized resistance resources (GRRs) or psychological resources (PRs) mention has been made of personality hardiness, locus of control, and self-efficacy, to name a few. Antonovsky (1987), for instance, suggests that an abundance of GRRs result in positive consequences – physical and psychological – for the individual. Lightsey (1996) included optimism in his list of PRs, as did Handler and Potash (1999) in their list of psychological health variables.

It has been argued in this study that meaning in life too is just such a GRR, or PR, and that as such, both constructs - optimism and meaning in life - fall within the ambit of the positive psychology of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi

(2000).

Optimism, conceptualised as a global generalized tendency to believe that one will predominantly experience favourable versus unfavourable outcomes in life has been explored in numerous studies and has been associated with both psychological and physical well-being (Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992). Optimism “as a predictor variable of health and coping” is a construct that attracts considerable interest (Andersson, 1996, p. 719).

Pervin and John (1999) observe that optimism played a critical role in Scheier and Carver's (1985) model of goal-directed activity. This model stressed the value and importance of goals in human behaviour and in making life meaningful. According to their model, “people are seen as remaining engaged in efforts to overcome adversity to reach goals as long as their expectations of eventual success are sufficiently favourable” (Scheier, Carver and Bridges, 1994, p. 1063). They add, “with enough movement toward desired goals, affect is positive. If movement toward desired goals is sufficiently impeded, affect is negative”. It is notable that Battista and Almond (1973) included as a part of their definition of meaningfulness the idea that the individual must believe that he, or she, is fulfilling – or has already fulfilled – his, or her, valued life-framework or goal.

Optimism has also been positively related to extraversion and perhaps, because of the extraversion/happiness association, to happiness too (Darvill & Johnson, 1991). Other variables mentioned in the literature include adaptive coping style, attribution style, psychological well-being (Natali-Aleman, Peterson, Seligman & Vaillant, in Lewis & Dember, 1995), greater effort and persistence in aspiring to valued goals resulting in greater success (Scheier & Carver, in McKenna, 1993) and life satisfaction (Chang, Maydeu-Olivares & D'Zurilla, 1997).

We also noted that a considerable amount of research (refer Schweizer, Beck-

Seyffer & Schneider, 1999) supports the thinking that optimism is associated with promoting and maintaining physical health - particularly through pathways that promote health-related behaviours (Pervin & John, 1999). Optimism also appears to be associated with immune system change during stressful circumstances. For example, Segerstrom, et al. (1998) found that optimism was associated with higher numbers of helper T cells and higher natural killer cell cytotoxicity.

Marshall et al. (1992) observe that considerable evidence now points to the patent benefits of an optimistic view of life. Optimism has been empirically linked to numerous physical and psychological health benefits (Scheier & Carver, 1987). Optimism is, without doubt, a characteristic of people that serves to not only protect the individual against the effects of life's stressors, but also serves to add to one's overall appreciation and quality of life. Future research will reveal additional benefits of possessing and expanding an optimistic outlook in life. Essentially, it would appear that "positive thinking is helpful" (Scheier & Carver, 1992, p. 201). Peterson (2000) suggests that optimism promises to be one of the important topics of the emerging positive social science.



It is apparent that if positive thinking is advantageous so is having meaning in one's life. Moomal (1999, p. 42) states that "having meaning and purpose in life is a defining characteristic of being human". He adds that, from an existential perspective, "a sense of meaning in life is a vital element in providing coherence to an individual's worldview and hence his/her well-being". This sentiment is – as we have seen – is shared by others, for example Debats (1996). The need to make sense of and find order in our worlds appears to be an essential facet of what it means to be human.

We saw in Chapter 2 that the meaning an individual arrives at or derives from life is both subjective and unique. Frankl (1988, p. 54) stated that "meaning is relative in that it is related to a specific person who is entangled in a specific



situation". Meaning conceptualised thus, he says, differs from individual to individual and from moment to moment. Battista and Almond (1973) proposed that meaning in life rests upon a conscious framework. The unique conceptualisation of meaning provides the framework from which to view life. The fulfillment of that framework serves to result in feelings of "integration, relatedness or significance" (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 410).

We noted in Chapter 2 that there appears to be a crisis of meaning in Western society (Titus, 1964; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). The pervasive questioning and searching for meaning seems to reflect the predominant emptiness and superficiality of life in the West today. We explored the spiritual, scientific and philosophical implications of this crisis of meaninglessness and we touched on the absence of meaning-giving rituals and institutions in contemporary Western culture.

Humans are creatures who appear to need to find, or create, answers to the bigger questions. If we believe that these answers are not provided and absolute, as does Schlick (1987), then we are left with deciding for ourselves what the answers could be. We saw that few people have tried harder and invested more in attempting to find these answers than existential thinkers. We saw that the central concern of existential thinking is the description and understanding of the human predicament (Titus, 1964) and, consequentially, the search for meaning in life. Frankl (1992, p. 132) believed that it is the individual's responsibility to create meaning in life, because, he says, "man is ultimately self-determining".

Humans derive meaning from numerous sources. In section 2.3.5 we explored, briefly, some of the sources of meaning identified in the literature. Bar-Tur and Savaya (2001) note that as far as sources of meaning are concerned differences exist between different age and ethnic groups, however, as far as the overall amount of meaning is concerned, little difference is evident.

It appears that to have meaning in one's life provides one with a foundation and purpose in one's life. Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980) state that the meaningful life is happy, rich, harmonious and has variety and balance. It is clear that meaning in life, understood thus, epitomises that which is positive and valuable. That which is represented and promulgated by positive psychology.

## **6.4 Limitations of the study**

A few of the limitations of the study will be touched upon. One of the more obvious relates to the recent findings that the validity of the LOT/LOT – R is not as sound as was first thought. Olason and Roger (2001) report that Scheier and Carver's model of optimism/pessimism may be disguising the broader construct of neuroticism. Chang, (in Olason & Roger, 2001) suggested that research findings linking optimism to physical and psychological well-being are contaminated by neuroticism. In other words, the previously reported benefits of optimism may be better explained by its covariation with neuroticism.

A second area of concern is that Scheier and Carver's (1985) unidimensional conceptualisation of optimism/pessimism has been challenged by a number of independent studies, for example, Marshall et al. (1992) and Chang, Maydeu-Olivares and D'Zurilla (1997). Olason and Roger (2001) summarise these findings as indicating that optimism, extroversion and positive affect, and their approximate opposites, pessimism, neuroticism and negative affect form part of the broader personality constructs of E (extraversion) and N (neuroticism). They point out that the division of the LOT into distinct measures of optimism and pessimism (with only 4 items each) is psychometrically untenable. It therefore appears that optimism and pessimism are quite possibly independent constructs and are therefore independent predictors of

psychological well-being and should thus be defined as distinct but related constructs (Olason & Roger, 2001). Burke et al. (2000) refer to Lightsey who recommends that when using the LOT – R researchers should analyse an overall score and two sub-scale scores. This was not done in the present study. Perhaps a replication study might be well advised to follow Lightsey's recommendation.

Burke et al. (2000) propose that one defect of the LOT – R is that it does not clarify whether what the respondent is reporting is how he, or she, feels generally or only in the present moment. It does appear that the LOT – R is measuring trait optimism, however, they say that this needs to be clarified.

Both the instruments used in this study are self-report inventories. The possibility therefore exists that some respondents may deliberately distort their answers for some purpose or another. Some individuals misrepresent themselves as being optimistic when they are clearly not. According to Peterson (2000) this may merely be a style of self-presentation.

The current study is not a population-based investigation. As a consequence of the highly specific nature of the sample, generalizability of the findings are limited (Showalter & Wagener, 2000). Nonetheless, the results should add to the body of knowledge of psychological resources.

One of the aims of the present descriptive study is to stimulate future research which may investigate the issue of causality using experimental research designs.

Due to the correlational nature of this study the third variable problem is of concern (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996). Although it is not the intention of this study to establish causation it is important to consider the possibility of the presence of an unseen third variable. The question as to whether or not another variable correlates with meaning in life and optimism and could

potentially cause both is worth bearing in mind (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996).

In terms of practical applications, this writer feels that we need to emphasise the client as a whole person, particularly in as much as this involves identifying and nurturing the healthy aspects of our client's psychological functioning and their psychological strengths, as opposed to their difficulties. Clearly optimism and meaning in life are just such strengths. Failure to emphasise strengths represents a distortion of who our client really is and leaves us with an incomplete understanding of the person (Strassle, McKee & Plant, 1999).

## **6.5 Recommendations for future research**

Numerous recommendations for further studies regarding different aspects of the two constructs have been made in this chapter. In this section some of these recommendations will be expanded upon.

In light of the emerging evidence that optimism and pessimism are separate but related constructs it is necessary that more refinement of the measuring instruments be undertaken. This has already been undertaken by Olason and Roger's (2001) Positive and Negative Expectancy Questionnaire (PANEQ).

There is a dearth of literature dealing specifically with optimism and meaning in life as these two variables relate to biographical and demographical factors. Much value and insight into human beings could be obtained if future research were to explore these areas further.

It would also be of potential benefit for future researchers to consider and explore the role played by optimistic bias as described by Darvill and Johnson (1991) in relation to other variables.

Robinson-Whelen, et al. (1997) mention that the emerging debate is about whether, or not, it is more important to be optimistic, or not to be pessimistic, or if it is preferable to be both. They cite research that suggests that optimism may be of special importance when an individual is confronted with stressful events, threatening events or situations in which there is little personal control.

Handler and Potash (1999) believe that it is viably possible to use psychological tests to assist the practitioner to identify psychologically healthy traits, thus swinging the emphasis away from pathology to health and adaptation. Such an emphasis would help the psychotherapist to exploit the client's strengths and resources and would also facilitate in the establishment of the therapeutic relationship. We need, as they observe, to focus both on what is right as well as what is wrong with people.

One of the more general aims of this study was to broaden the knowledge base of salutogenic variables. It is thought that this aim has indeed been accomplished. Meaning and life and optimism may be regarded as health-related variables falling within the purview of positive psychology and as such deserve to be explored further in future research.