

Optimism and Psychological Well-Being of Police Officers With Different Work Experiences

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Meera Padhy¹, Kavya Chelli¹, and Ruth Angiel Padiri¹

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between optimism and psychological well-being (PWB) among police officers. Sixty police officers, both male and female, between the age range of 26 to 57 years were categorized into two equal groups consisting of participants below 10 years of work experience (Group 1) and above 10 years of work experience (Group 2). They were administered the Psychological Well-Being Scale and Life Orientation Test. Results show that police officers of these two groups differed significantly on their optimism levels. Significant positive correlations were found between optimism and PWB, for Group 2 and the entire sample of police officers. The findings of this study indicate the need for organization-specific interventions to increase optimism to manage health outcomes, and improve the PWB of these officers.

Keywords

psychological well-being, optimism, police officers, work experience

Introduction

Psychological well-being and optimism have long been considered as central component of good life. Over the last few years, a significant body of research has been carried out on the effectiveness of optimism on well-being of the individual.

The psychological phenomenon of optimism can be understood in different ways. Optimism can be seen as a “disposition” or “attributional style.” Dispositional optimism is a generalized personality trait present across time and situations. It influences the individual to interpret past, present, and future events of life in a positive manner (Carver & Scheier, 2001; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Studies carried out by Peterson and Seligman (1987) conceptualize optimism as an “attributional style,” where the individual possesses an inner strength (Seligman, 2002), that facilitates them to interpret their failures and negative events as inconstant (negative events will not occur again and can be overcome), external (negative events occurring due to temporary external factors or people), and that the event is specific (the event will not influence any other activity in one’s life).

Individuals with an optimistic explanatory style continue to pursue their valued goals and regulate themselves and their personal states using effective coping strategies even in the face of difficulties, so that they are able to achieve their goals (Sharot, 2011). In the research carried out regarding this perspective, positive correlations have been found between optimism and

physical/mental well-being, as individuals with an optimistic explanatory style are less likely to develop physical illness or depression or contemplate suicide (Miller, 2005) when they face major stressful life events than individuals with a pessimistic explanatory style (Giltay, Zitman, & Kromhout, 2006; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001; Seligman, 2002).

Positive well-being has two components: hedonic or *subjective well-being* (SWB), which focuses on happiness, positive affect, and pleasure, and eudemonic or *psychological well-being* (PWB), which focuses on fulfillment of human potential and realizing purpose in life (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; McGregor & Little, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, Singer, & Love, 2004; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). These two aspects of well-being are related yet distinct.

PWB is a state characterized by acceptance, actualization, contribution, coherence, and integration with others (Keyes & Ryff, 1995). Ryff (1989) conceptualized PWB as distinct from SWB and argued that there are six dimensions of PWB, namely, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life

¹University of Hyderabad, India

Corresponding Author:

Ruth Angiel Padiri, Centre for Health Psychology, University of Hyderabad, Central University P.O., Prof. C. R. Rao Road, Hyderabad 500046, India.

Email: ruthangiel@yahoo.com



purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness. Ryff and Singer (1996) showed that the indicators for these six dimensions positively influenced mental and physical health, which SWB did not necessarily contribute to. There is evidence that optimistic people present a higher quality of life compared with those with low levels of optimism or even pessimists (Scheier & Carver, 2003). Apart from Ryff's (1989) PWB model, the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the theory of signature strengths (Seligman, 2002) elucidate PWB. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), when individuals are motivated intrinsically and choose to move toward realistic goals, they have a greater chance of experiencing well-being. This is because they experience a sense of competence, mastery, autonomy, and pleasure in the process of attaining their goals. The theory of signature strengths (Seligman, 2002, 2011) adds few more positive personality characteristics such as curiosity, judgment, fairness, self-control, spirituality, forgiveness, humor, and others, which form a part of our identity, are the individual's strengths, and contribute to genuine happiness and well-being.

Distinction Between Optimism and PWB

Optimism is a generalized *expectancy*, that one will experience good outcomes in life, *attitude or worldview* to interpret past or present events in a positive manner (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009). This expectancy that differs from person to person is a predictor of behavior (Scheier & Carver, 1992) and leads to perseverance and striving toward goal-directed behavior (Carver et al., 2010).

While optimism is an attitude about the past and an expectation of positive future events, PWB is the continuous process of *experiencing* and the *realization* of a person's true potential, personal growth, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998). It is a *proactive* and *intentional aspect* of one's life comprising of autonomy, self-acceptance and mastery, and personality characteristics such as curiosity, integrity, spirituality, and forgiveness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2002, 2011).

The nature of work of police personnel is often demanding and stressful. Their role entails them to protect life and property and prevent crimes (Morash, Haarr, & Kwak, 2006; Rollinson, 2005). They are often engaged in situations involving injustice, crime, public apathy, injuries, and fatalities (Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007; McCarty, Zhao, & Garland, 2007). This exposure to adverse events can have negative impact on their physical and mental health (Bartol & Bartol, 2004). However, they are still expected by their peers, superiors, and members of the public to approach these stressful situations in an objective and professional manner and to be effective decision makers and problem solvers (Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007; He, Zhao, & Archbold, 2002; Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2007). Not just professional hazards but police

personnel have to deal with stress resulting from negative workplace environment and hostile interactions at work (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2007; Waters & Ussey, 2007).

Studies on police officers' PWB have compared the influence of traumatic operational incidents versus frequently occurring minor work demands (i.e., work hassles; Brough, 2002, 2004). These studies have demonstrated that organizational work hassles (e.g., red tape, paper work, missing meals) can have a comparable, if not a greater impact on PWB and job performance, as compared with operational incidents (Brough, 2004; Brough & O'Driscoll, 2005).

In such a scenario, of constant negative impact to one's physical and mental health, optimism does play a significant role in adaptation to stressful conditions (Sharot, 2011). The reason being, while confronting any challenge, an optimistic individual shows more resilience, even if the progress is difficult (Synder & Lopez, 2002). Studies show that there is an interactive relationship between optimism and resilience. Individuals who are optimistic in the face of stress, tend to use effective coping strategies, and this in turn leads to more resilient attitude (Bonanno, 2005; Carver et al., 2010; Tusaie-Mumford, 2001; Yu & Zhang, 2007).

A study by Burke and Mikkelsen (2006), titled "Police Officers Over Career Stages: Satisfaction and Well-Being," compared work experiences, work satisfaction, and PWB in constable jobs across five career stages using age cut offs. Data were collected from 466 police officers in Norway and the five career stage groups (32 years of age or younger, 33-37 years, 38-42 years, 43-47 years, and 48 years or older) differed on personal demographic and work situation characteristics (e.g., shift schedule, police tenure) related to age. The study found substantial career stage differences on measures of PWB. Police officers in early career stages indicated lower levels of emotional exhaustion, less cynicism, fewer health complaints, less medication use, and lower levels of depression than did officers in later career stage groups. The career stage groups were similar on professional efficacy, anxiety, suicidal ideation (low in general), and posttraumatic stress symptoms.

Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) proposed that three major factors contribute to people's levels of well-being: (a) their happiness set point (i.e., the genetically determined stable level of happiness), (b) their life circumstances (e.g., factors such as income, marital status, or religiosity), and (c) their positive cognitive, behavioral, and goal-based activities. Interventions targeting optimistic thinking can enhance well-being and can be applied on the individuals, which will also increase their inner strength to cope and enhance or increase productivity. Research studies which had used "practicing optimistic thinking by visualizing the best future selves" as an intervention to enhance well-being/happiness of individuals had demonstrated positive outcomes (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; King, 2001; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Sheldon

& Lyubomirsky, 2006). A meta-analysis of 51 positive interventions overwhelmingly revealed that positive interventions significantly increase well-being (mean $r = .29$) and alleviate depressive symptoms (mean $r = .31$; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

The Present Study

Majority of studies in the past have focused on occupational stress rather than the wider positive construct of well-being that can be defined as a subjective state that draws on multiple dimensions including physical, material, social, emotional, developmental, and activity-based issues (Waddell & Burton, 2006). A growing number of studies are providing convincing links between the overall well-being of staff and their performance in the workplace (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002; Wright, 2010; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). This has prompted the need for more robust methods to evaluate the well-being of workers so that organizational effectiveness may be better optimized and enhanced. The purpose of the study is to measure the inter-correlation between optimism and PWB in police officers with different work experience and the impact of optimism on PWB of police officers with different work experiences. The study also aims at finding out the difference between police officers with different work experience in respect to their optimism and PWB.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study used a between-subjects design involving two independent groups of police officers. They were placed into two groups with participants below 10 years of work (years of service) experience under Group 1 and participants with above 10 years of work experience under Group 2. The cut-off point of 10 years was chosen because the tenure of 10 years is one of the essential parameter to delegate the duties and responsibilities under a police station and also for promotion. The sample consisted of patrol officers, sub-inspectors, and inspectors (Civil Branch) who are in-charge of different police stations in the same district. Differences by rank were not discussed because (the post of inspector is one post above a sub-inspector) their nature of duties and responsibilities are the same therefore they constitute a homogeneous group. The variables under study are work experience, PWB, and optimism.

Purposive sampling method was employed to recruit the participants. They were recruited from the same district headquarters which are under the control of superintendent of police in Odisha, India. The sample consisted of 60 police officers between the age ranges of 27 and 56 years ($M = 39.87$, $SD = 8.88$). The age range of Group 1 is 27 to 39 ($M = 32.10$, $SD = 3.24$) and Group 2 is 36 to 56 ($M = 47.63$,

$SD = 5.02$). The sample consisted of 30 male and 30 female police officers. Gender has not been taken into consideration as a variable, because irrespective of the gender, they carry out the same duties, and the pilot study did not reveal any gender difference with respect to optimism and well-being. Therefore, both groups differed only on personal demographic and work situation characteristics (e.g., shift schedule, police tenure) related to age and work experience.

Authorities were approached and permission was sought for interacting with the police officers. Once the participants were identified, rapport was established and they were briefed about the nature of the present study. Following which the *Psychological Well-Being Scale* (PWBS) and the *Life Orientation Test* (LOT) were administered. The data gathered from all the participants were analyzed using appropriate statistics.

Measures

PWBS. PWBS by Diener (2009) consists of eight items having a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). PWB was found by adding the scores of all eight items. Higher score reflected higher PWB. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was found to be 0.86 (Diener, 2009). The observed internal consistency Cronbach's alpha value for this scale based on the sample of the present study was found to be 0.75.

LOT. LOT developed by Scheier and Carver (1985) was used to measure optimism. It is a 12 item, 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 4. These points indicate the degree of severity from *strongly disagree* (0) to *strongly agree* (4). Among these statements, four items are known as "filler" items, which were crossed out or ignored at the time of scoring and four were negative items. The total LOT score was the sum of the item numbers (Items 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12) with the lowest score being 0 and the highest being 32. Higher scores represent greater optimism. The internal consistency of LOT was found to be 0.76 and test-retest correlation coefficient was found to be 0.79 over a period of 1 month (Scheier & Carver, 1985). The observed internal consistency Cronbach's alpha value for this scale based on the sample of the present study was found to be 0.73.

Results

The obtained quantitative data were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics, t test, Pearson's r , and simple regression using computer software SPSS 21.

PWB and Optimism Among Police Officers

Table 1 reveals that police officers of the two groups differed significantly on their optimism, $t(58) = 2.62$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.68$. The Group 2 officers were found to have higher

Table 1. Mean (*M*), Standard Deviation (*SD*), and *t* Values (*t*) of Psychological Well-Being and Optimism in Police Officers.

	Group 1 (<i>n</i> = 30)		Group 2 (<i>n</i> = 30)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	95% CI	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				Lower	Upper
PWB	49.80	3.86	48.30	5.51	1.22	<i>ns</i>	0.32	-0.96	3.96
Optimism	18.93	3.30	21.47	4.32	2.62*	<.05	0.68	-4.47	-0.59

Note. *N* = 60. Group 1 = participants (police officers) with below 10 years of experience; Group 2 = participants (police officers) with above 10 years of experience; *t* = *t* values; *p* = significance level; CI = confidence interval. Higher scores indicate a greater magnitude of each variable. All analyses are two-tailed. PWB = psychological well-being.

**p* < .05.

Table 2. Intercorrelation Between Psychological Well-Being and Optimism for Entire Sample (*N* = 60) and Within Each Group (Group 1, *n* = 30 and Group 2, *n* = 30).

	PWB
Optimism	
Total sample (<i>N</i> = 60)	.36**
Group 1 (<i>n</i> = 30)	.35
Group 2 (<i>n</i> = 30)	.48**

Note. Group 1 = participants (police officers) with below 10 years of experience; Group 2 = participants (police officers) with above 10 years of experience. Higher scores indicate a greater magnitude of each variable. All analyses are two-tailed. PWB = psychological well-being.

***p* < .01.

Table 3. Summary of Simple Regression Analyses for Optimism Predicting Psychological Well-Being in Police Officers (*N* = 60).

Criterion	<i>C</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Police officers (60)									
Psychological well-being	40.09	.44	.15	.36	2.97	4.49	.13*	8.84	<.05

Note. Predictor: Optimism; *C* = constant; *B* = unstandardized beta coefficient; *SEB* = standardized error of beta; β = standardized beta coefficient; *t* = *t* values of beta; *SE* = standard error of the estimate; *R*² = coefficient of determination; *F* = *F* value; *p* = significance level.

**p* < .05.

optimism ($M = 21.47$, $SD = 4.32$) compared with the Group 1 officers ($M = 18.93$, $SD = 3.30$), suggesting the medium effect of work experience on optimism. Significant difference was not observed between the two groups in respect to their PWB, $t(58) = 1.22$, Cohen's $d = 0.32$. The mean and standard deviation values of Groups 1 and 2 were $M = 49.80$, $SD = 3.86$ and $M = 48.30$, $SD = 5.51$, respectively, suggesting the low effect of work experience on PWB.

Relationship Among the Measures

The inter-correlation coefficients (*r*) between optimism and PWB of the police officers and of two different categories of officers are presented in Table 2.

Significant positive correlations were found between the two variables, optimism and PWB, $r(58) = .36$, $p < .01$, for the entire sample of police officers and for Group 2, $r(28) = .48$, $p < .01$. This indicated that with increase in optimism, there is an increase in the PWB in the entire sample and in

Group 2. No significant correlation was observed between the two variables in Group 1, $r(28) = .35$.

Impact of Optimism on PWB

Simple linear regression analyses were computed to assess the impact of optimism on PWB among police officers ($N = 60$), and alpha level of .05 was used. The results are presented in Table 3.

It is revealed from Table 3 that optimism explained statistically significant (13%) proportion of the variance in PWB, $R^2 = .13$, adjusted $R^2 = .12$, $F(1, 58) = 8.84$, $p < .05$. The relationship between optimism and PWB was positive, $\beta = .36$, $p < .05$, with increase in optimism being associated with increase in PWB among police officers.

Discussion

This study examined optimism and PWB of police officers with different work experience. Both the groups differed

significantly with respect to optimism but not on PWB. The possible reasons for no differences with respect to PWB might be the kind and quality of work the police officers take up. As mentioned earlier, these officials are immersed in situations involving injustice, crime, and often encounter unexpected and life-threatening situations, yet they are expected by both the public and their peers to approach these situations in an objective and spontaneous manner. Some of the determinants of PWB include income, type and quality of job, and job satisfaction. Previous research studies had described ways in which police officers' beliefs and feelings differ over the course of their career (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Cooper, 1982). Some officers held positive views about policing throughout their careers; many did not, becoming jaded and cynical. The reality for most of them falls in between these two extremes.

A positive relationship was found between optimism and PWB for entire sample. It indicates that with the increase in the levels of one variable, that is, optimism, there is an increase in the PWB of the participants. A significant positive relationship was also found between the two variables among Group 2 participants. But no significant relationship was found between optimism and PWB among Group 1 people. One of the reasons for the discrepancy regarding the significance of correlation in respect to Groups 1 and 2 may be due to the small size of participants in each group. Other reasons may also be due to the quality of exhaustive work, job adjustment, promotions, unexpected and life-threatening situation, hardcore job demands, work expectations, and politics might account for no significant correlation between the variables in Group 1. For Group 2, factors such as higher job security and high income are some of the factors accounting for positive relationship between the variables.

Optimism significantly explained 13% of PWB in the sample. It indicates that there are other factors such as family relationships, income, religion, social support, and age which might contribute to the PWB of the sample. Further research in this area might throw light upon the factors or variables that influence the well-being of the police officers.

Limitations and Implications

The study has smaller sample size and due to this, findings cannot be generalized. The sample collection procedure is purposive in nature; therefore, some bias is inevitable. Using in-depth interviews along with the questionnaires would help in gaining more insight into well-being and optimism levels of the police officers belonging to different work experience. The findings of this study indicate the need for organization-specific interventions and may provide a base for the exploration of the psychological factors such as optimism as an effective psychotherapeutic approach to manage health outcomes, especially well-being of the officers. The knowledge of these factors would be a great asset for psychologists to come up with appropriate intervention processes.

While emphasizing the effectiveness of optimism as an intervention in enhancing the well-being, we also address the dearth of research in this area concerning armed forces/police officers. Hence, we encourage future investigators to consider optimism as a potential construct while developing well-being enhancing interventions and to explore its impact on well-being among this unique population. We also suggest to explore mediating and moderating factors, personal characteristics of participants (motivation, beliefs, effort) and mechanisms/pathways that underlie the success of the interventions and what factors should be taken care of to maximize the effectiveness of intervention. Optimism about the future may be an incentive for people to overcome their present concerns and work for a better tomorrow.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biographies

Meera Padhy is currently working as assistant professor in Centre for Health Psychology, University of Hyderabad. Her areas of interest include Health Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Well-being. She has presented papers both in national and international seminars as well as has publications in various esteemed journals.

Kavya Chelli is a PhD research scholar in Centre for Health Psychology, University of Hyderabad. She has presented papers in various national seminars, and is currently working in the area of illness perception in diabetes patients for her Ph.D. thesis.

Ruth Angiel Padiri is a PhD research scholar in Centre for Health Psychology, University of Hyderabad. She has presented papers in various national seminars and has publications in various esteemed journals. Currently she is working on social support in diabetes patients for her Ph.D. thesis.