Strategic Optimism versus Defensive Pessimism: Religion as a Factor

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Abstract

This research investigated strategic optimism, defensive pessimism, and anxiety levels between religious and non-religious participants, hypothesizing that 1) Religious people have less daily anxiety than non-religious people; 2) Religious people are more likely to be strategic optimists than non-religious people; 3) Non-Religious people are more likely to be defensive pessimists than religious people; 4) Defensive pessimists have more daily anxiety than strategic optimists. To test these hypotheses a survey was distributed to sixty-six participants. A Likert Scale was used to determine participants’ overall scores for each hypothesis being tested. Hypotheses one, two, and four were not supported. Hypothesis three was supported.
Strategic Optimism Versus Defensive Pessimism:
Religion as a Factor

Every day one encounters optimists: those people who have a cheery outlook on life. Just as noticeable are pessimists: those who tend to start each day with more than a touch of negativity. Refining the differences between these two common types of individuals has, in the past few decades, become the goal of researchers. Optimism and pessimism can be thought of as stemming from one’s opinion about how one’s life is playing out. Diener, Suh, and Oishi (1997) found that one’s evaluation of one’s own life is studied as subjective well-being. This well-being is greatly influenced by both the cognitions and affect that a person experiences. More interesting is the assertion that key variables predict the degrees of happiness and sadness that vary among people. Furthermore, the barely positive people are clearly separated from those who are significantly positive, and even more so from those who are extremely positive in their life outlooks (Diener et al., 1997). So, an assumption can be made that varying degrees of sadness, happiness, and other emotions are distributed among people. From this spectrum of emotions, then, one can conclude that most people lie somewhere on an optimism/pessimism spectrum, with regard to how they approach their lives.

Specific studies have investigated many variables that lead people to direct their lives in either optimistic or pessimistic ways. Jackson, Weiss, Lundquist, and Soderlind (2002) found that optimists think of their goals as causing less anxiety than do pessimists. In addition, they found that optimists are more likely to feel more general control over attaining these goals. Some studies have investigated the relationship
between optimism versus pessimism and age, gender, and even ethnicity. One such study (Lee & Seligman, 1997) compared the levels of optimism versus pessimism among Americans and Chinese. Burke, Joyner, Czech, & Wilson (2000) looked specifically into the validity of two systems for measuring optimism and pessimism. This study examined optimism and pessimism, from both “trait and “state” perspectives. Thus, research on optimism and pessimism has grown from very basic topics, to detailed, specific types and categories of research.

A recent refinement of the optimist versus pessimist categorization defines people as strategic optimists or defensive pessimists, and has started to distinguish such individuals from “everyday” optimists and pessimists. Strategic optimism is defined as the opposite of defensive pessimism. Defensive pessimism is a strategy “which involves setting unrealistically low expectations in a risky situation in an attempt to harness anxiety so that performance is unimpaired” (Norem & Cantor, 1986). In contrast, strategic optimism is the setting of high expectations, wherein one does not think much about what might happen (Norem, 2001). This approach leads to little or no anxiety with regard to the outcome.

As the specific titles of “strategic” optimist and “defensive” pessimist have grown to be accepted, new branches of research have developed. Often, either strategic optimism or defensive pessimism is selected to be studied in comparison to, or along with, other topics. For example, Martin, Marsh, Williamson, and Debus (2003) measured defensive pessimism among university students, in conjunction with self-handicapping and goal orientation. Their study took a qualitative approach in order to gain a better understanding of information that would normally have lain below the surface in a more
quantitative study. Furthermore, their research demonstrated how intricate the issue of defensive pessimism truly is. In yet another study, Martin teamed up with Marsh and Debus (2002) to investigate how students respond to fears of failing, and the part that defensive pessimism and self-handicapping play in such fears.

Norem and Cantor (1986) used two unique experiments to demonstrate that some people specifically prepare themselves for risky situations by using defensive pessimism. These people are not consciously aware of the fact that they are being defensively pessimistic; it is simply their way of handling situations. (This unconscious strategizing applies to strategic optimists as well). For the defensive pessimists, anxiety can become overwhelming. Thus, low-expectations are set as a strategy for relieving the anxiety. Surprising, though, is the finding that defensive pessimists do not necessarily have worse results in their obtaining of goals than do strategic optimists. It is when defensive pessimists’ “strategy” of low expectation setting is interfered with that their performance is hindered (Norem & Cantor, 1986). This study demonstrated that defensive pessimism can be a successful way of coping with life’s stressful situations, just like that of strategic optimism, even though pessimism is generally thought of as a negative trait.

In all of the studies on optimism and pessimism, anxiety stands out as a key factor, in that it plays a different role for optimists than for pessimists. Norem and Illingworth (1993) performed two studies that addressed the way in which anxiety levels increase in optimists when they are made to think through their approach to obtaining goals. This increase in anxiety is thought to occur because optimists are generally people who engage in little reflection with regard to their decision making, and
consequently they experience little anxiety. Yet, when required to consciously reflect on their goals, anxiety increases. In the same, but opposite way, defensive pessimists are much more at ease when allowed to reflect on their goal-achieving methods. Conversely, defensive pessimists encounter the most anxiety when they can not carefully think things through and set lowered standards for themselves. In general, Norem and Illingworth (1993) noted that optimists, more often than defensive pessimists, seem to consider their performances as being well done. However, performances of optimists and pessimists (of equal backgrounds) are often equally successful. When optimists and defensive pessimists are forced to take on challenges and deal with those challenges in ways that do not fit their typical styles, optimists often feel more positive than do defensive pessimists (Norem & Illingworth, 2003). It is also important to note that “the reflectivity of the defensive pessimist is anticipatory” (p. 832), so it should be seen as being different from that of non-pessimistic individuals who reflect after their attempts to reach goals have failed. Furthermore, “not all anxious individuals use defensive pessimism” (p. 834), so one can assume that not all non-anxious people are strategic optimists either.

Clearly, there has been abundant research in regards to optimism and pessimism, but notably fewer studies have addressed what might be an additional indicator as to who is more likely to end up being a strategic optimist or defensive pessimist. As anxiety plays a role in both types of characteristics, it is important to consider what types of people are likely to experience the least anxiety in everyday life, and as such, may be more apt to become strategic optimists. One factor that may contribute to decreased anxiety levels is religion. Conventional wisdom suggests that, in
so far as religion provides personal comfort, religious people may be less anxious in their everyday outlook on life. Indeed, the calming effect of prayer and other forms of meditation is well documented. A search of the World Wide Web yields numerous anecdotal accounts of prayer helping to reduce anxiety. Indeed, whole web sites are devoted to the benefits of prayer. Easterbrook (2005) contends that research shows beneficial health effects for the individual who prays. Indeed, Byrd (1988) and Harris, Gowda, Kolb, Strychacz, Vacek, Jones, Forker, O'Keefe, and McCallister (1999) found that test groups of ill patients, who were being prayed for by volunteers, had better medical outcomes than those in the control groups who were not the beneficiaries of prayer. Easterbrook (2005) notes that Martin Seligman saw prayer as a way to focus one's mind on the positive aspects of life, and thus reduce anxiety. In yet another study (Koenig, George, Cohen, Hays, Larson, & Blazer, 1998) Duke University researchers found that participants who prayed and attended worship services on a regular basis had lowered blood pressure. Peterson and Roy (1985) found that anxiety seems to be reduced for many religious people, and they contend that this benefit derives from the social component of religion when practiced among others. Their study further noted that a church community may be a source of emotional support for individuals. So religion, in all of its manifestations, may result in lowered anxiety levels when facing life's challenges.

The current research investigates the relationship between religion, anxiety, and strategic optimism versus defensive pessimism. To test the idea that religious people are more likely to have less everyday anxiety in their lives, and as such, are more often
strategic optimists than defensive pessimists in comparison to non-religious people, the following hypotheses will be tested:

1. Religious people have less daily anxiety than non-religious people.

2. Religious people are more likely to be strategic optimists than non-religious people.

3. Non-religious people are more likely to be defensive pessimists than religious people.

4. Defensive pessimists have more daily anxiety than strategic optimists.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted using a convenience sample of participants from within Berrien County, MI. Twenty-two attendees at Lakeshore Christian Church, along with forty-four people encountered within Berien County contributed to this research. The participants ranged from eighteen to eighty-two years of age. Incomplete and/or inaccurate surveys were discarded on an as-needed basis. All of the persons who were approached agreed to participate.

Apparatus

The data in this study was obtained through completion of a survey. The questions on the survey were designed to quantify the degree to which the participants experienced anxiety, possessed strategically optimistic traits or defensively pessimistic traits, and what religion, if any, they practiced. Included in the survey was information about age and gender (see appendix A).
Procedure

Surveys were distributed to a convenience sample of people, contacted in person, within Berrien County. Participants were told that the surveys were being used for a research class at ***** College, and were unaware of the hypotheses being tested. Participants returned surveys upon completion. A member of Lakeshore Christian Church assisted the researcher by administering the survey to those in attendance at the church. All other participants were approached at random throughout Berrien County.

Results

Surveys were analyzed based on pre-determined possible scores in order to quantify the questions pertaining to anxiety, strategic optimism, and defensive pessimism. Based on the scores, participants were categorized as strategically optimistic, defensively pessimistic, or neither. Scores pertaining to anxiety levels were used to distinguish anxious participants from those who were non-anxious.

Eleven percent of all religious participants were specifically categorized as being anxious individuals. In comparison, none of the non-religious individuals could be specifically categorized as being anxious. Hypothesis number one was not supported in that religious participants had a mean anxiety score of 8.267, which was slightly higher than that of the non-religious score of 8.143. (See Graph One). Both religious and non-religious participant scores resulted in median ratings of eight. (See Graph Two). A Mann-Whitney Rank Sum Test revealed that there is not a statistically significant difference between the religious and non-religious anxiety levels (T=705; P=0.989).
By comparing the total percentage of strategic optimists in the religious versus non-religious groups of participants, hypothesis number two was not supported. Only twenty percent of religious people could be defined as strategic optimists. On the other hand, thirty-eight percent of non-religious people were found to be strategic optimists. The mean score for strategically optimistic tendencies among religious participants was 2.633, with the non-religious mean slightly higher, at 2.690. (See Graph Three). Both religious and non-religious participants had median strategic optimism scores of three, and after a Mann-Whitney Rank Sum Test, were found not to be of a statistically significant difference (T=11409; P=0.630). (See Graph Four).

Only two percent of religious people were specifically categorized as being defensive pessimists. In comparison, ten percent of non-religious people were distinguished as defensive pessimists. Religious participants received a mean score of 2.294 in regards to their levels of defensive pessimism. Non-religious people had a slightly higher mean score of 2.524. (See Graph Five). A Mann-Whitney Rank Sum Test indicated that there is a greater difference between the religious and non-religious scores than would be expected by chance (T=12303; P=0.042). With the religious median having been a score of two, and the non-religious having been a score of two and a half, hypothesis number three was supported. (See Graph Six).

None of the strategic optimists or defensive pessimists could be defined as anxious. However, seventy-one percent of the strategic optimists were categorized as being slightly anxious people. In comparison, sixty-seven percent of the defensive pessimists were slightly anxious. A mean anxiety score of eight for the strategic optimists was only slightly lower than the mean defensive pessimist score of 8.471.
Strategic Optimism

(See Graph Seven). With the mean scores being so close, a T-Test was performed, and indicated that there is not statistical significance to support hypothesis number four

(t = -0.315 with 18 degrees of freedom. P = 0.756).

**GRAPH ONE**

**Mean Anxiety Scores**

- 8.3
- 8.2
- 8.1

Religious: 8.267
Non-Religious: 8.143

**GRAPH TWO**

**Median Anxiety Scores**

- 10
- 5
- 0

Religious: 8.000
Non-Religious: 8.000
Graph Three

Mean Strategic Optimism Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Non-Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph Four

Median Strategic Optimism Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Non-Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Graph Five**

Mean Defensive Pessimism Scores

- Religious: 2.294
- Non-Religious: 2.524

**Graph Six**

Median Defensive Pessimism Scores

- Religious: 2.000
- Non-Religious: 2.500
Hypothesis number one, “that religious people have less daily anxiety than non-religious people,” was not supported. None of the non-religious participants was found to be “anxious” on a daily basis, whereas the religious mean score for anxiety, although not significantly different, was greater than that of the non-religious participants.

Religious people may have more anxiety in their lives than non-religious people because certain religions inadvertently encourage their adherents to be excessively scrupulous. The idea that religion in-and-of-itself provokes anxiety among its followers, may contribute to the heightened anxiety among the religious participants in this study. Thus, more factors should have been considered in the original assumption that religion relieves anxiety.

Hypothesis number four, “that defensive pessimists have more daily anxiety than strategic optimists,” was not supported. As mentioned above in regards to non-religious participants, no defensive pessimists were found to be “anxious” on a daily basis. These results parallel Norem and Cantor’s (1986) findings in that they predict that defensive
pessimism may be a successful anxiety-relieving coping style. As such, one explanation of these findings may be that the defensively pessimistic coping method is in fact working. While one would think that pessimism itself would cause heightened anxiety levels, the coping method of defensive pessimism may actually be used by these people to keep their anxiety levels at bay.

Hypothesis number two stated that, “religious people are more likely to be strategic optimists than non-religious people.” This hypothesis was not supported. In fact, the results though non-significant, were in the opposite direction.

Additionally, hypothesis number three stated that “non-religious people are more likely to be defensive-pessimists” than religious people. This hypothesis was supported. Non-religious people appear to have more occurrences of strategically optimistic and defensively pessimistic coping styles. This may be due in part to the idea that religious people believe they have a “higher power” controlling and guiding their lives. As such, they may not feel the need to create a strong coping style. Perhaps religious people draw upon the idea of a “higher power” as a source of peace and serenity. Whereas, non-religious people may have a greater drive to develop more defined coping strategies to handle the anxiety-provoking situations they encounter.

Much research has been done on optimism and pessimism. Nevertheless, very little research has been done on strategic optimism and defensive pessimism as they pertain to various groups of people, such as those who are religious and non-religious. This research was based on a convenience sample of participants from a rural area. This research was also limited to participants who were followers of the Christian faith.

Further research should focus on more participants, and participants from various
religious backgrounds. In addition, focus on non-religious participants should be done in order to tease out factors that may contribute to their stronger tendencies to adopt strategically optimistic and defensively pessimistic coping styles.
References


### Appendix A

What is your age? __________________________ ____________________________

What is your Gender? □ Male □ Female_________________

On Each Scale, Check the Choice that Corresponds Best with Your Opinion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a member of an organized religion?</td>
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<td>□ Yes □ No_________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>If yes, which one?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I always consider the worst possible outcome when making a decision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>I don’t think my weekly tasks are too stressful.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t usually expect things to go wrong.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I always have a back-up in case things don’t go as planned.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have problems with feeling too much anxiety each week.</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I only take time to make back-up plans if something actually becomes a problem.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>When something goes wrong, I am always prepared for it ahead of time.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I often feel relaxed when I’m in-between doing daily tasks.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I often make decisions without wasting time to think about their outcomes.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I make sure my future expectations are low enough to be achievable.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel really stressed on a daily basis because I have so much to think about.</td>
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<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>I expect a lot of myself because I know I can do well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Strongly Agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly Disagree</td>
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</table>

Your Time and Honesty is Greatly Appreciated! Thank You for Filling Out this Survey.