

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **An Exploration of Defensive Pessimism, Hope and Subjective Wellbeing**

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**Abstract:**

*Defensive pessimism is a cognitive strategy in which an individual in wake of a situation that demands performance sets low expectations for the outcomes despite a history of good performance. He anticipates all possible potential problems, strategizes and invest efforts and hard work. This strategizing helps him to harness his anxiety as motivation that finally leads to successful performance. It is usually contrasted with strategic optimism. The present study explores whether adopting such a style by anxious individuals would lead to positive, upward functioning of the person by relating defensive pessimism with hope and subjective well-being. Pearson's product moment correlation and regression analysis have been executed. The statistical analysis revealed that defensive pessimism scores could predict hope while a correlation analysis showed a non significant relation between defensive pessimism and subjective well-being. Further, the implications of the research have been discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Defensive pessimism, Hope, and Subjective wellbeing*

### **1. Introduction**

Optimism and pessimism are seen as traits, expectations, and styles of explaining the outcomes of a situation. Explanatory style is a person's tendency to offer explanation for different outcomes in his life (Peterson et al., 1995). It is described in terms of three dimensions i.e., internal/external ("It's me"/"It's someone else"), global/specific ("It's going to affect everything"/ "It's only going to influence this") and, stable/unstable("It's going to last forever"/ "It's short lived"). A pessimistic explanatory style is one in which the events are explained as external, specific, and temporary whereas negative events are explained as internal, global, and stable. Defensive pessimism is a cognitive style in which low expectations are set for performance despite of history of good performance in a specific domain. A person using this strategy plays out all scenarios that may happen and work hard to prepare the upcoming situation. This strategy leads to utilization of anxiety as motivation and subsequently results in good performance (Norem, 2001). Therefore, it appears to be positive, adaptive and effective subset of pessimism as it does not deter a person's performance. It is a type of coping, where contemplating about the possible negative outcomes and increasing one's level of anxiety motivates the person to work hard. The individual adopts "approach" rather than "avoiding" strategy, keeps their anxiety from interfering the performance, takes the needed steps to achieve the goal and hence has more possibility to achieve success instead of meeting failure or emotional implications of failure.

Hope has long been recognized as an important component of psychological growth and change. C.R. Synder (1994) conceptualized hope as a cognitive construct which reflects people's motivation and capacity to strive toward personally-relevant goals. It depends upon: agency thinking and pathways thinking. Agency thinking refers to people's perceived ability to pursue goals despite obstacles and is evident in statements like, "I can do this" and "I am not going to be stopped". Pathway thinking refers to people's perceived ability to generate plausible routes towards goals and is evident in statements like, "I can find a way to get this done". Herth (2010) view hope as a "motivational and cognitive attribute that is theoretically necessary to initiate and sustain action towards goal attainment".

Subjective wellbeing is defined as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his life (Diener et al., 2002). The cognitive element refers to what one thinks about his life satisfaction in global terms (life as a whole) and in domain terms (in specific areas of life such as work, relationships etc....). The affective elements refers to emotion, moods and feelings which is positive when pleasant emotions like joy, elation etc.... are experienced while, negative for unpleasant emotions like guilt, anger, shame etc.... A greater positive affect would result in higher and subjective wellbeing and vice versa. The construct of subjective wellbeing is primarily based on 'hedonic perspective' that defines well-being as maximizing pleasure and avoiding or minimizing pain.

The current study explores whether an anxious person's employing defensive pessimism will help him move upwards toward positive psychological functioning. It attempts to establish relation between defensive pessimism, hope, and subjective well-being.

## 2. Review of Literature

Defensive pessimism as a strategy involves individual's mentally rehearsing and reflecting about potential outcomes especially the negative ones. Thinking through these mental rehearsals and anticipating all potential problems is then followed by hard work and preparation. Those using this strategy go from a starting point of feeling anxious and out of control and harness their anxiety as motivation (Norem, 2001). In a series of both laboratory and academic situation, defensive pessimism has been found to perform quite well despite their negative expectations, perhaps due to their motivational aspects of their preferred strategy (Norem & Cantor, 1986). When defensive pessimists are forced to abandon their negative expectations and think optimistically, their performance declines. (Norem & Hollingworth, 1993).

According to Norem and Illingworth (1993) defensive pessimists acknowledge apprehensions and work through them cognitively. The strategy can "cushion" the individuals against debilitating anxiety prior to stress-provoking tasks and motivate continued persistence in the face of stress (Cantor and Norem, 1989). Martin et al. (2001) construed that defensive pessimists projecting lowered expectations help them set standards that are less difficult to achieve.

Norem and Cantor (1986) observed that many individuals are dispositional pessimists and these individuals use pessimism as a buffer against potentially debilitating performance anxiety. Studies on prefactual thinking (i.e., considerations of what may happen) by Sanna (1996) showed that defensive pessimists performed better when asked to think of upward prefactuals (e.g., "If only I was more prepared for this task") instead of downward prefactuals (e.g., "There are number of people who will do worse than me on this task"). Thus, pessimism may aid in the management of expectations. Perry, S.P. and Skitka, L.J. (2009) found that women high in defensive pessimism performed better on the math test under conditions of high than low stereotype threat. Participants showed a decreased anxiety on psycho-physiological measures when they were allowed to prepare for the worst compared to when they were distracted and were hence unable to ruminate.

Hope is defined as the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move towards those goals (agency), and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways). (Synder, 1995). Hope is not an emotion but a dynamic cognitive motivational system (Synder et al., 1991). Hope theories suggest that it is not the goal by itself but instead people's perception as being agents capable of initiating (agency) and implementing (pathway) actions to pursue the goals that results into the helpless or mastery-oriented responses. High-hope and specifically high-pathway thinkers are able to conceive many strategies to reach goals and plan contingencies in the event that they are faced with impediments along the way. High-hope individuals are less likely to become distracted by self-deprecatory thinking and counterproductive negative emotions like avoidance and disengagement thinking. Bryant (2004) found that pessimism was strongly correlated with the "agency" component of hope.

Defensive pessimism has also been studied in relation to wellbeing. Two meta-analysis (Joiner & Wagner, 1995; Sweeny et al., 1986) conclude that pessimistic explanatory style is correlated with depression. The first analysis focused on college students, psychiatric depressives, and non-psychiatric adults, whereas the second focused on children and adolescents.

Andrade et al. (2001) observed that several measures of negative affectivity (including anxiety measures) was tied to overall personality trait of neuroticism. Studies have indicated that neuroticism is significantly associated with measures of illness (Costa & McCrae, 1987; Watson & Pennebaker, 1989). Individuals high in neuroticism tend to report feeling less well in general, and report very few health-enhancing and maintenance behaviour (Costa & McCrae, 1987). Watson and Clark (1984) proposed that neurotics are predisposed to experience negative affect as they are more sensitive to the signs of punishment and non-reward. In other words, they function more on Behavioural Inhibition System (BIS).

Subjective wellbeing too has been very strongly and consistently correlated with personality factors. The dynamic equilibrium model (Headey & Waring, 1992) propose that although an event in one's life can influence an individual's subjective wellbeing, the individual will eventually adapt to the change experience and return to his biologically determined 'set point' or level of adaptation. The hedonistic treadmill theory (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) propose that individuals adapt quickly to changes in their lifestyle and return to their baseline levels of happiness (death of a loved one being an exception).

### 2.1. Hypotheses

- There exists a significant positive correlation between defensive pessimism and hope
- There exists a significant positive correlation between defensive pessimism and subjective wellbeing

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sample

N= 97 (F=70, M=27, mean age= 19 yrs.)

### 3.2. Tools

- Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire –Revised (DPQ\_R) (Norem, 2001). It has a test –retest reliability of 0.708 and a correlation coefficient of 0.65 when validated with Optimism- pessimism pre-screening Questionnaire
- Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (ADHS) (Synder, 2001). It has an internal consistency of 0.80. Evidence of convergent validity of the scale was found through the relation of the instrument with optimism, self-esteem and cognitive hope.
- Subjective wellbeing scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1985). Test- retest reliability  $r = 0.82$ . For construct validity, SWLS has been shown to negatively and strongly correlate ( $r = -0.72$ ) with Beck Depression Inventory

### 3.3. Procedure

Survey method was adopted. Participants were given a packet of informed consent form, DPQ-R, ADHS, and SWLS. They were urged to give one rating to each item and not to omit any item.

### 4. Results

The means and standard deviations were computed. Data was checked for normal distribution. A Pearson's product-moment correlation was executed for both the hypotheses using SPSS version 20. An additional regression analysis was done for the first hypothesis as Pearson correlation was found to be significant. t tests were done for ancillary observations.

### 5. Discussion

Hypothesis 1 states that there exists a significant positive correlation between defensive pessimism and hope (Null hypothesis being that there exist no significant positive correlation between defensive pessimism and hope).

Table 1: Mean, SD and the r value for defensive pessimism and hope

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	r	sig
HOPE	97	34.31	5.096	0.516	.000
DEFPESS	97	79.15	15.732		

Table 1  
 $r=0.516, p<0.05$

As can be seen from the Table 1, the mean and SD of hope were 34.31 and 5.09 respectively, and mean and SD of defensive pessimism were 79.15 and 15.73 respectively. The Pearson's product-moment correlation value was found to be 0.516 which was found to be significant, with probability as 0.000. This implied that the null hypothesis was rejected. It can be concluded that there certainly exists a significant positive correlation between defensive pessimism and hope. A further regression analysis suggest that defensive pessimism could predict hope scores. The adjusted R square value being 0.259, it states that 25% of variance in hope can be explained by variance in defensive pessimism.

Defensive pessimism as a cognitive strategy enables an anxious individual to remain motivated to achieve the goal by reducing the expectations of outcomes and, by preparing for all possible potential negative consequences. An individual does not feel deterred in the face of stressful situation as he does not set unrealistic expectations and at the same time does not avoid the situation. Instead the person relentlessly continues to work to avoid failure despite past history showing that the person has always succeeded and has effectively performed. A defensive pessimist imagines the possibility of not doing well and hence works diligently to increase the possibility of success. His prior restructuring of the problem helps him to brace against the impact of possible failure. An anxious person who uses defensive pessimism harnesses his anxiety by using his negative affect (that results from his reflecting about the negative possibilities of the outcome) as an optimal cognitive strategy that equips him to face the challenging situation. His desire for success is much higher than the need to withdraw efforts to protect himself from the impending failure. The propensity to reflect, or plan counteracts the detrimental effects of pessimism by encouraging not only planning but also pursuit of those plans by raising the significance of the goal and promoting efforts. A defensive pessimist hence utilizes his anxiety as a motivational strategy that subsequently results in good performance. Hope too has been viewed as a motivational and cognitive attribute that is theoretically necessary to initiate and sustain action towards goal attainment (Herth, 2010). Synder (1994) conceptualized hope as a cognitive construct which reflects people's motivation and capacity to strive toward personally- relevant goals. Bryant (2004) found that pessimism was strongly correlated with "Agency" thinking of hope. Hence, a defensive pessimist perceives himself as a "capable" individual who can initiate actions to pursue his goals.

Hypothesis 2 states that there exists a positive correlation between defensive pessimism and subjective wellbeing. (Null hypothesis being that there exist no positive correlation between defensive pessimism and subjective wellbeing). To test the hypothesis, a Pearson's product-moment correlation was computed.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	r	sig
DEFPESS	97	79.15	15.732	0.023	0.825
SUBWLBG	97	21.16	6.01		

Table 2: Mean, SD and r value for defensive pessimism and subjective wellbeing  
 $r=0.023, n.s.$

As can be seen from the table, the mean and SD of defensive pessimism was 79.15 and SD was 15.73 respectively while that of subjective wellbeing was 21.16 and 6.01 respectively. A Pearson's correlation of 0.023 with probability of 0.825 implied that the r was not significant. Hence, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. There exists no significant positive relation between defensive pessimism and subjective wellbeing.

According to Diener et al.(2002) subjective wellbeing not only involves a cognitive component but also an affective evaluation of one's life. A person with high subjective wellbeing not only have "thinks" that he is satisfied with his life, but also experiences positive affect like joy, elation etc.... A person would be deemed to have low subjective wellbeing if he experiences negative moods, emotions, and feelings. The hedonistic perspective defines subjective wellbeing as being fundamentally about maximizing pleasure

and avoiding or minimizing pain. A defensive pessimist is primarily predisposed to experience negative affect owing to his tendency to be anxious. Despite having a history of good performance, the fact that defensive pessimists brood over the negative possibilities of the outcome in face of a stressful situation shows that he has a propensity to reflect negatively and feel anxious in a given situation. Studies have shown that defensive pessimists have higher anxiety levels than those low on defensive pessimism (Norem & Cantor, 1986). Norem and Illingworth (1993) found that if defensive pessimists are forced to abandon their negative expectations and think optimistically, their performance suffers. Defensive pessimist though may harness their anxiety and use it as a motivational strategy but they may not be satisfied completely with their life conditions as negative affect of apprehensions, doubts about success and, rumination may predominate over positive affect.

Group Statistics					
	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
HOPE	1 (Female)	70	34.21	3.764	0.29
	2(Male)	27	34.56	7.628	

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and t calculation for gender and hope

$$t_{(95)} = 0.29, n.s.$$

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
SUBWLBNG	1(female)	70	21.27	5.851	0.28
	2(male)	27	20.89	6.518	

Table 4: Descriptive statistics and t calculation for gender and subjective wellbeing

$$t_{(95)} = 0.28, n.s.$$

The additional two t tests indicated that there was no significant difference between females and males for both hope and subjective wellbeing. However, it should be noted that the mean differences of the two genders for both hope and subjective wellbeing is very less. The present sample had less number of male participants as compared to females. Having more male participants in the sample may result in a significant difference in two genders, males being more in hope and subjective wellbeing.

## 6. Limitations

- Small sample size and restricted to only Mumbai.
- Less representation of male participants in the sample.

## 7. Suggestions

The present study suggests that “feeling good” or “feeling happy” may not be a desirable criterion to measure optimal positive functioning of anxious people who use defensive pessimism. One may use other indicators of wellbeing like “flourish”, “purpose in life” etc.... to understand the life satisfaction of defensive pessimists. The current study has investigated subjective wellbeing of the participants at a particular point of time. However, subjective wellbeing may change over time with defensive pessimists collecting more positive experiences in life. Hence, one needs to undertake a longitudinal study to understand the relation between defensive pessimism and subjective wellbeing. Further studies can employ equal number of male and female participants to make a better estimate of constructs like hope and subjective wellbeing among males and females. Lastly, anxious people must be encouraged to use more of defensive pessimism as defensive pessimists can harness their anxiety as a motivational strategy. Defensive pessimism can be an effective tool by anxious people to deal with their debilitating emotions and “out of control” feelings and, for subsequent low performance.

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