Automatic thoughts as a mediator of the relationship between optimism and psychosomatic problems

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Introduction
Optimism and Psychosomatic Problems
Optimism has been found to relate to better psychological and physical health (Carver, 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2009). Psychosomatic problems, which reflects one’s perception of bodily dysfunction arising from psychological distress (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), were considered as one of the important indicators of health because it appropriately reflects one’s physical health influenced by psychological variables. However, the association between optimism and lesser psychosomatic problems are yet clarified (Scheier & Carver, 1992; Carver, 2010). The aim of the present work is to investigate the underlying processes that accounts for the relationship between optimism and psychosomatic problems.

Underlying Processes: Positive and Negative Automatic Thoughts
Since optimism was described as the stable tendency to believe that good rather than bad things will happen (Scheier & Carver, 1985), we hypothesized that optimistic people are more likely to have positive automatic thoughts (PAT), and less likely to have negative automatic thoughts (NAT), which may hence influence psychosomatic problems. The present study investigated whether PAT/NAT mediate the link between optimism and psychosomatic problems.

Method
Participant
One hundred and seventy one undergraduate students from Fu Jen University (72 men, 99 women; 19-38 years of age)

Material
Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) is a measure of dispositional optimism. This instrument consists of six self-report items (plus four filler items) (Scheier et al., 1994).

Symptom checklist-90-R-Revised (SCL-90R) is an assessment of general psychopathology. It includes nine subscales, but only the somatization subscale was used to indicate psychosomatic problems (Derogatis, 1977).

Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire-Negative (ATQ-N) is a 30-item questionnaire used to measure the frequency of occurrence of negative automatic thoughts (NAT) associated with depression (Hollon & Kendall, 1980).

Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire-Positive (ATQ-P) is a 30-item questionnaire used to measure the frequency of occurrence of positive automatic thoughts (PAT) (Ingram & Wisnicki, 1988).

Results
Simple Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Optimism</th>
<th>Frequency of NAT</th>
<th>Frequency of PAT</th>
<th>Somatization</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of NAT</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of PAT</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatization</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
a. NAT = negative automatic thoughts; PAT = positive automatic thoughts.

Mediating effects of NAT and PAT

Results of a mediation analysis showed that the frequency of NAT mediated the relationship between optimism and psychosomatic symptoms. However, the frequency of PAT could not mediate the relationship between them.

Conclusion
The results showed that, in contrast with having more positive automatic thoughts, optimists tend to accompany less psychosomatic problems through having less negative automatic thoughts. Therefore, it is not enough for optimists to think more positively, the key to better psychological and physical health is to think less negatively.

Reference


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