

Role of Optimism on Employee Performance and Job Satisfaction

* *Uma Sankar Mishra*
** *Subhendu Patnaik*
*** *Bibhuti Bhusan Mishra*

Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the role of optimism in employee performance and job satisfaction. Optimism is a positive psychological construct popularized by Martin Seligman. An optimist person has positive expectations and follows a positive attribution style. An individual possessing the psychological resource of optimism tends to face life with a positive view. But on the other hand, those persons who are pessimistic in nature view life events negatively. This study was conducted on a sample of 346 employees from three large public sector banks situated in the Eastern part of India. Correlation, regression, and structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques were used to test the hypotheses. Results depicted that optimism is positively related to employee performance and job satisfaction. This study also supported the external validity of optimism construct with relation to performance and job satisfaction in the Indian cultural context.

Keywords : optimism, performance, job satisfaction, structural equation modeling

JEL Classification: C310, M120, M530

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I ncreasing and sustaining employee performance and job satisfaction are the chief concerns of any organization. Yadav and Rokade's (2013) study at HDFC Standard Life in India found that 58% of the workers were dissatisfied with their jobs and were poor performers. What accounts for employee performance and job satisfaction are debatable issues. Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, and Sager (1993) argued that there are many factors that promote human performance at work. Financial remuneration is not the sole driver of performance and job satisfaction. Campbell et al. (1993) emphasized that quantum of effort is an important factor that leads to higher performance. But what drives an individual to put in greater effort as compared to his/her peers? Literature on positive psychology suggests that psychological resources play a crucial role in nurturing human motivation. Optimism is one such psychological resource that plays a vital role in work motivation. Optimism refers to a generalized expectancy in people that favorable things will occur in the future, and

* *Associate Professor*, Institute of Business and Computer Studies (IBCS), Faculty of Management Sciences, Siksha'O'Anusandhan University, Kalinga Nagar, Ghatikia, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
Email: umasankarmishra@soauniversity.ac.in

** *Research Scholar (Corresponding Author)*, Institute of Business and Computer Studies (IBCS), Faculty of Management Sciences, Siksha'O'Anusandhan University, Kalinga Nagar, Ghatikia, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
Email: mail.subhendupatnaik@gmail.com

*** *Assistant Professor*, Institute of Business and Computer Studies (IBCS), Faculty of Management Sciences, Siksha'O'Anusandhan University, Kalinga Nagar, Ghatikia, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
Email: bibhutibhusanmishra@soauniversity.ac.in

unfavorable things will be at minimum (Carver & Scheier, 2014). An optimistic individual views life on a positive note. But on the other hand, a pessimistic individual views life events negatively. Optimism resources have the motivational potential that encourages effort and satisfaction in a given task (Carver & Scheier, 2014). The main purpose of this research is to examine the relationship of optimism in employee performance and job satisfaction. This study is also expected to determine the external validity of the optimism construct with relation to performance and job satisfaction in the Indian cultural context.

Although studies on optimism have been undertaken in the Western cultural contexts, but its reassessment in India is imperative. Under the ambit of generalizability theory, Cronbach, Gleser, Nanda, and Rajaratnam (1972) argued that to obtain generalizability of a construct, multiple studies should be conducted across countries and cultures. Considering the cultural diversity of India, this study is expected to contribute towards external validity of the optimism construct.

Influence of Culture

To begin with, it would be appropriate to briefly discuss how specific cultural contexts may influence behavior, attitudes, and performance. A country's specific culture and contextual surroundings play an important role in shaping attitudes, performance, and behavior (Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002; Miller, 2003). Several studies have found that attitudes, behaviors, and performance of individuals are influenced through society's social structures, historical background, political system, economic conditions, and its religious systems (Chang & Birtch, 2007 ; Chong, 2008; Peterson, Dibrell, & Pett, 2002). Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) argued that optimism is likely to be influenced by situational factors, task complexity, and cultural differences.

Taking insights from Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, Gupta, Surie, Javidan, and Chhokar (2002) in their Southern Asian cluster study related Indian culture as having higher performance and future orientation. These values are growingly becoming important for managerial practices in India, and may have a positive influence on nurturing optimism, and hence, it is pertinent to assess the role of optimism in employee performance and job satisfaction. Given the fact that the Indian subcontinent is unique in terms of its cultural plurality and diversity, it would be appropriate to examine the role of optimism in employee performance and job satisfaction in the Indian cultural context.

Literature Review

(1) Optimism : Psychological resource of optimism has a very specific meaning in positive psychology literature. Optimism is defined as positive "generalized outcome expectancies" (Scheier & Carver, 1985, p. 219). Contemporary researchers generally consider optimism as a positive cognitive psychological resource (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Seligman, 2006). Carver and Scheier (2014) strongly argued that the optimism construct has cognitive, emotional, and motivational components. Optimism is based on "positive expectancy," and therefore, this involves cognition (Carver & Scheier, 2014). As optimism is based on "positive expectancy," it accompanies emotional attributes (Carver & Scheier, 2014). Further, Carver and Scheier (2014) also emphasized that expectancy component of optimism has motivational implications.

Seligman (1998) defined optimism as an "attributional style" or an "explanatory style" that explains positive events in terms of personal, permanent, pervasive causes and negative events in terms of external, temporary, and situation specific ones. This definition conveys that optimism is an expressive style that interprets favorable events to personal causes and an optimist attributes failures to external, temporary, and situation-specific factors. Optimists interpret negative events to be the cause of external factors. On the other hand, a pessimist interprets and explains positive events to be the cause of some external factor (Seligman, 1998). Further, a pessimist

attributes failure to personal causes and feels responsible for negative events (e.g., Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1995; Peterson, 2000; Seligman, 1998).

The notion of “explanatory style” emerged from the “attributional reformulation” concept of the learned helplessness model (Peterson et al., 1995; Seligman, 2006). The original helplessness model posited that people develop helplessness after experiencing uncontrollable and prolonged adverse situations (Peterson et al., 1995; Seligman, 2006). Peterson et al. (1995) explained individual differences in the helplessness syndrome by adding an explanatory style notion to the learned helplessness model. Peterson et al. (1995) raised an important question. What is learned helplessness in general? They were of the opinion that an individual's inner explanation determines how they respond to the adversity and perceive helplessness. Peterson et al. (1995) pointed out that when adverse situations continue for long, helplessness becomes chronic. When helplessness is due to a global cause, it is widely felt by many in the society. When people attribute failure to their own fault, it adversely affects their self-esteem (Peterson et al., 1995; Seligman, 2006). Optimism as a construct is measurable and has displayed adequate psychometric validity and reliability (e.g., Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Shifren & Hooker, 1995; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994; Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992).

Proponents of positive organizational behavior (POB) have given due importance to realistic optimism, they claimed that realistic optimism is based on assessment of a given situation as per availability of resources (Luthans, 2002; Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008; Schneider, 2001).

(2) Theoretical Foundation of Optimism : Optimism as a psychological construct is predominantly grounded on the theoretical proposition of behavioral self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1982; Scheier & Carver, 1982, 1983). Outcome expectancy is an important cognitive appraisal mechanism that influences behavior of individuals (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimism construct is based on the premises of behavioral self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1982; Scheier & Carver, 1982, 1983). Klinger (1975) and Kukla (1972) argued that when people expect favorable outcome, such favorable expectancies result in renewed and continuous effort. On the contrary, when people expect unfavorable outcomes, it results in reduction of effort or in such circumstances, individuals may completely abstain from making any attempts to initiate any given task. Therefore, Klinger (1975) and Kukla (1972) claimed that expectancy is an important cognitive mechanism that determines whether an individual would be optimistic or pessimistic in nature. Peterson and Seligman (1984) were of the view that individual's expectancies are also dependent on past experience. If the past event is negative and is permanent, under such situations, individuals will have negative expectancy; whereas, if the past experience is positive, it will foster positive expectancy.

Further, optimism and pessimism roots can be linked to expectancy-value theory of motivation (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Expectancy value theories claim that an individual's behavior is mostly dependent on the goal an individual sets (Carver et al., 2010). When the identified goal is significant, then under such a situation, individuals give more value to the goal concerned and continuously exert effort (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 2006). Moreover, when individuals expect favorable events, they tend to be confident. However, if an individual expects an unfavorable event, then there is probability that under such circumstances, individuals may withdraw from the goal pursuit. When individuals expect positive outcomes, they are likely to develop confidence, and they keep on pursuing their goals in spite of adversities (Scheier & Carver, 1992). But pessimistic individuals live with a sense of negative expectations on probable future events. Pessimistic individuals are very doubtful and hesitant to take up challenging tasks (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Channelization of goal directed energy is contingent on optimistic and pessimistic approach that an individual follows (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Carver et al., 2010).

Generalized expectancy is measured through Scheier and Carver's (1992) Life Orientation Test (LOT) in which people are asked whether they expect favorable or unfavorable life events. Original Life Orientation Test (LOT) scale was revised by Scheier et al., (1994) and is termed as Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R).

(3) Developmental Potential of Optimism : In their initial work, Scheier and Carver (1985) described optimism as a dispositional trait, but later on, Seligman (1998) argued that it is developable (state-like) and termed it as “learned optimism”. More recently, in line with Seligman's (1998) argument, Carver and Scheier (2002) acknowledged that optimism can be developed through training interventions. Optimism is an attribution style concerned with interpretation of events depending on situation. This very nature of optimism construct provides scope for learning optimism. Thus, optimism is open to development and can be learned (e.g., Luthans, 2002 ; Meevissen, Peters, & Alberts , 2011; Peterson, 2000; Seligman, 1998, 2006). Schneider (2001) claimed that optimism is developable by means of proven pathways such as by giving minimal importance to past events, appreciating the present circumstances, and by developing positive expectations for future opportunities. Using these pathways, researchers developed optimism through training interventions (e.g., Dello Russo & Stoykova, 2015; Luthans, Avey, Avolio, & Peterson, 2010 ; Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006 ; Luthans, Norman, Avolio, & Avey, 2008 ; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio , 2015).

(4) Optimism and Work Outcomes : Researchers have argued that optimism resource serves as a pool of motivational energy to withstand work pressure in a competitive environment (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2014; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). Research undertaken by Seligman and Schulman (1986) found that those life insurance agents who scored high on optimism reported higher sales performance than those with a low optimism score. Further studies conducted by a number of investigators (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000 ; Schulman, 1999; Wunderley, Reddy, & Dember, 1998) found that higher performance in sales is associated with high levels of optimism. Jobin, Wrosch, and Scheier (2014) found that those individuals who have high optimism scores reported less stress. Cross-sectional research also shows that optimism is developable with training interventions and indicated a positive relation with work achievements (Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Li, 2005 ; Luthans et al., 2007 ; Luthans et al., 2008 ; Luthans et al., 2010 ; Seligman, 1998, 2006). Research on optimism also found that optimism is positively linked with desirable workplace attitudes like organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and work happiness (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013; Luthans et al., 2007 ; Luthans et al., 2008; Larson & Luthans, 2006).

The role of optimism in employee performance is positively linked to work motivation and life satisfaction (Alarcon et al., 2013; Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011). Campbell et al. (1993) argued that effort is one of the key factors of human performance. According to the expectancy-value theory, an optimistic employee expects positive outcomes, and is therefore, likely to put in constant efforts, and thereby, his performance may get enhanced (Bandura, 1995; Larson & Luthans, 2006; Luthans et al., 2007; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Optimism involves positive appraisal of circumstances and it includes positive emotions (Luthans et al., 2015; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Such positive emotions are expected to nurture job satisfaction. Fredrickson's (2001, 2003) broaden-and-build theory argues that one positive emotion triggers the other. Those employees who are endowed with positive-based emotions are likely to have high job satisfaction and achieve higher work performance (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Luthans et al., 2015; Wright, 2003, 2005 ; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). A study conducted by Singh and Jha (2013) on Indian students showed that optimism was positively related to academic performance and was negatively related to anxiety. Another study conducted by Gupta and Singh (2014) in Indian sample found that optimism was positively related to creative behaviors and leadership. Further, Shekhawat (2012) argued that those individuals who are optimistic in nature are likely to be good in soft skills and they display a sense of responsibility.

Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) acknowledged that an optimistic explanatory style results in upward spirals of performance, and optimistic individuals are likely to express job satisfaction and well-being at work. Optimistic explanatory style increases job satisfaction, well-being, and organizational commitment at work because optimistic individuals attribute failure to external causes and assume that adverse situations are beyond their

personal control (Seligman, 1998 ; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Optimistic individuals believe that adversities are temporary in nature and they do not give importance to negative circumstances (Seligman, 1998; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Those individuals who possess the psychological resource of optimism are most likely to pursue their desired goals and remain satisfied with their work (Seligman, 1998; Youssef & Luthans,2007).Based on the above literature review, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

- ↪ **H1** : Optimism has a positive relationship with performance.
- ↪ **H2** : Optimism has a positive relationship with job satisfaction.

Methodology

(1) Design and Procedure : This study was conducted on a sample of 346 respondents (277 men and 69 women) from three large public sector banks situated in the Eastern part of India. This research was undertaken from September - December 2015. This study has a 62% response rate. Participants had an average age of 36.7 years with ($SD=7.2$). Respondents had an average tenure of 3.8 years ($SD=4.6$) in the organization. All the respondents were Indian nationals. Respondents were distributed the questionnaires by hand and were asked to fill-out the questionnaires using paper and pencil. We were not physically present while the respondents participated in the study and answered the questionnaires. This was done to avoid the problem of expectancy effect.

Guidelines of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003) were followed while collecting data. According to Podsakoff et al. (2003), the “common method variance bias” is a typical problem in an questionnaire survey. To keep away from “common method variance bias” predictor variable (optimism) instrument was administered at Time 1 and criterion variables (performance & job satisfaction) were administered at Time 2. Further, to avoid any bias in reporting of performance, the supervisors were not disclosed the optimism scores of their respective employees.

(2) Measures

(i) Optimism : Optimism was measured using Scheier and Carver's (1985) optimism scale. This optimism instrument is a six-item scale and responses were recorded on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 2=*disagree*, 3=*somewhat disagree*, 4=*somewhat agree*, 5=*agree*, 6=*strongly agree*).This scale had sufficient reliability (Cronbach's alpha =.84) in this study. Recommendations of Beaton, Bombardier, Guillemin, and Ferraz (2000) were followed to undertake cross-cultural adaptation of the optimism scale in the Indian cultural context. This optimism scale is a well established scale and has been validated across multiple settings (e.g., Luthans et al., 2007; Luthans et al., 2010; Scheier, & Carver, 1985). “I derive some benefit from every bad thing that happens to me” is an example item of the scale. Further, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to determine the construct validity of optimism construct in the Indian context. CFA was undertaken using maximum likelihood method and it was observed that items loaded very high on the latent factor optimism. Item loading ranged from .70 to .82 $p<.01$. We observed satisfactory indices, Chi-square = 33.793, $DF = 9$ $p<.01$; ($CFI=0.993$); ($RMSEA=0.089$); ($NFI=0.990$).These fit indices support a good fit with the data.

(ii) Job Satisfaction : Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job satisfaction instrument was employed to measure job satisfaction. This job satisfaction scale is a part of Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS). It is a 3-item, 6-point Likert-type scale having a response pattern ranging from (*strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=6*). This job satisfaction instrument is a widely used scale in organizational behavior research (e.g., Judge & Bono, 2001; Judge & Hulin,1993; Judge & Watanabe,1993). As per the recommendations of Beaton et al. (2000), we conducted cross-

cultural adaptation of the said job satisfaction instrument in the Indian context. “Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with this job” is an example of an item of the said scale. The scale displayed adequate reliability (Cronbach's alpha=.82) in this study.

(iii) Performance : To measure performance, a scale was developed. Supervisors were asked to rate performance of their respective employees using a 3 item, 6-point Likert-type scale. Participating employees (respondents) were evaluated by their supervisors in terms of quality of work, quantum of work, and performance accomplished as per the target. The response pattern for this scale included the following (*1=very low, 2 = low, 3= somewhat low, 4= somewhat high, 5=high, 6=very high*). Before using the scale, face validity was ascertained by taking opinion from five doctorate holders. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .86 in this study.

Analysis, Results, and Discussion

The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the relationship of optimism in employee performance and job satisfaction in the Indian cultural context. To test the formulated hypotheses, data analysis was carried out with the help of Pearson correlation, linear regression, and structural equation modeling (SEM). As seen in Table 1, there is a significant positive correlation between optimism and performance ($r = 0.534, p < .01$). In Table 2, the regression analysis shows that optimism as a predictor variable successfully predicts performance ($\beta = 0.597, p < .01; F = 140.593, p < .01; r^2 = 0.285$). Therefore, H1 is strongly supported. Similarly, it is observed from th Table 1 that there is a significant positive correlation between optimism and job satisfaction ($r = 0.532, p < .01$). Further, in Table 2, it is observed that the predictor variable (optimism) significantly predicts job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.635, p < .01; F = 132.728, p < .01; r^2 = 0.283$). Hence, H2 is also supported.

Further, to test the conceptual model, structural equation modeling (SEM) (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993) using AMOS (v.4) software was employed. The Tables 3 depicts the following model fit indices: (chi-square = 77.449, $DF = 33, p < .01$), ($CFI = 0.988$), ($RMSEA = 0.074$), ($NFI = 0.979$). As per the guidelines of Hu and Bentler (1999), the obtained model fit indices indicate a good fit with the data. A diagrammatic representation of the empirical model is depicted in the Figure 1. It is seen in the Figure 1 that the model is a good fit to the data.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Avey et al., 2011; Larson & Luthans, 2006; Luthans et al., 2007), and therefore, the results of this study support external validity of optimism in the Indian cultural context with relation to employee performance and job satisfaction.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1.Optimism	4.19	1.26	1	0.534**	
2.Performance	4.10	1.386	0.534**	1	
3.Job Satisfaction	4.34	1.505	0.532**	0.584**	1

Notes: $N = 346$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Regression Analysis Results

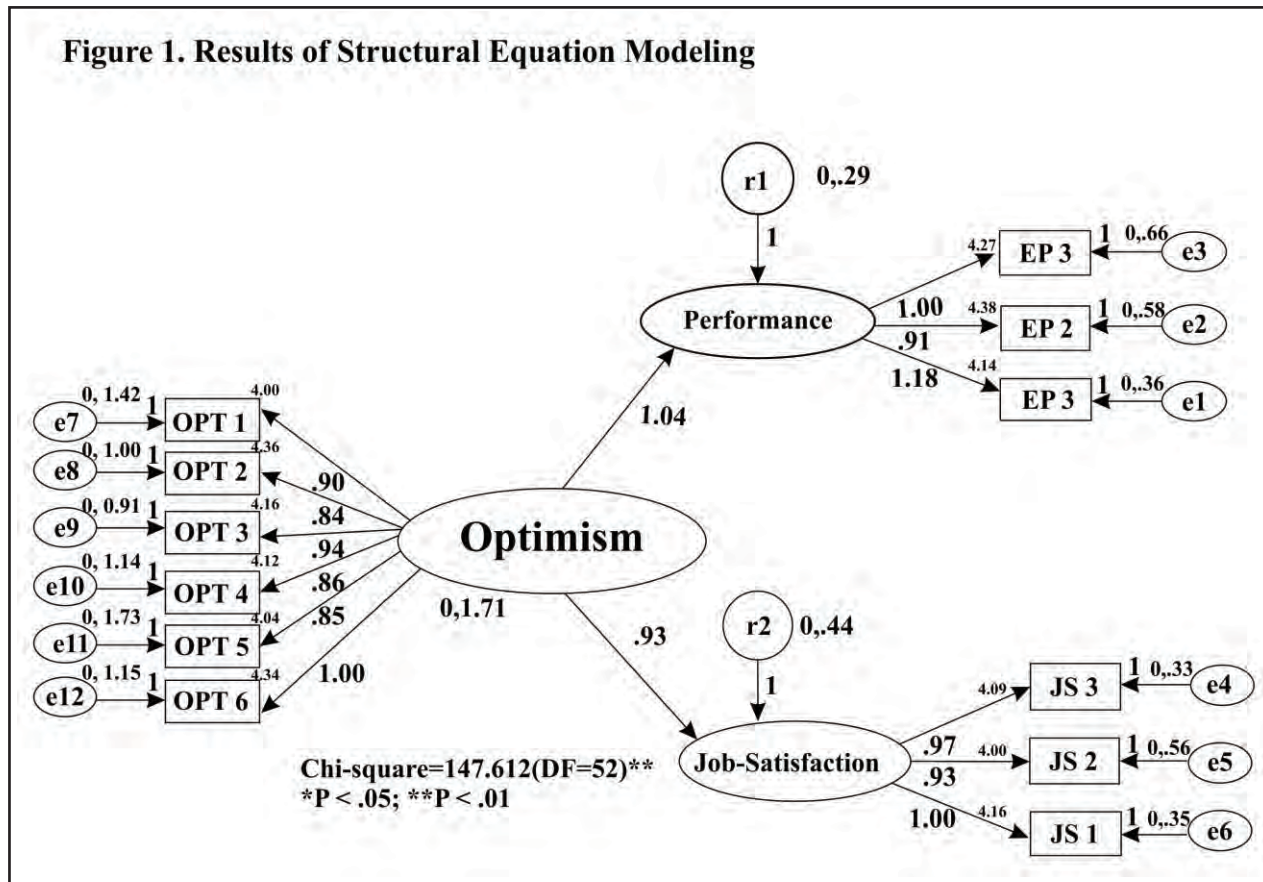
Predictor	Predictant	β	F	R^2
Optimism	Performance	0.597**	140.593**	0.285
Optimism	Job Satisfaction	0.635**	132.728**	0.283

Notes: $N = 346$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Fit Indices: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

	Fit Value
Chi-square	147.616(DF = 52)**
CFI	0.988
RMSEA	0.073
NFI	0.981

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$



Managerial Implications and Conclusion

This study has both managerial and theoretical implications. Literature survey depicts that optimism is developable through training interventions (Luthans et al., 2010; Meevissen et al., 2011). Taking insights from this study in terms of positive relationship of optimism with performance and job satisfaction in the Indian context, further experimental studies with the help of training programs can be undertaken to increase optimism resources in employees. Increase in optimism in employees can enhance their performance, commitment, and can increase the overall well-being of employees. Moreover, increase in optimism can facilitate job satisfaction and thereby, help in employee retention. As optimism is significantly and positively linked with performance and job satisfaction, practitioners can take this insight and can select candidates based on optimism scores. Therefore,

psychometric assessment of optimism can be a tool for employee selection. Optimism being a valuable psychological resource cannot be easily copied by the rival organizations (competitors) hence, assessing and developing optimism in employees will add to the competitive advantage of the concerned organization. Optimism assessment and development will be an important subject matter both for the practitioners and organizational researchers for times to come.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

There are certain limitations of this study. However, the strength of the study is in terms of procedure adopted to control the “common method variance bias”. To do away with the “common method variance bias,” predictor variable (optimism) and criterion variables (performance & job satisfaction) were administered at two separate time periods (Time 1 & Time 2) , respectively. Further, this study is free from the “instrumentation threat” problem because optimism has a strong theoretical foundation and is a psychometrically valid construct. Limitations of the study could be because of a smaller sampling frame. This study was only limited to a sample of 346 respondents from only three public sector banks. For better generalization of the findings, further studies can be conducted with a larger sampling frame involving respondents across sectors (manufacturing & service). Finally, this being a correlational study, absolute causality cannot be inferred.

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