

Academic Optimism in the Context of Social Cognitive Theory

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Abstract: Optimism has positive expectations for future events. An individual's level of optimism is related to his past experiences. On the other hand, academic optimism reflects the level of positive expectations in the individual's future life, depending on the successes, happiness, and joys experienced in his past academic life. In this study, the concept of academic optimism is explained in the context of social cognitive theory. Guiding explanations of the social cognitive theory are included in understanding the concept of academic optimism in schools. How the triple determinism model is adapted to the school environment is explained based on the triple reciprocity model. Studies demonstrating the importance of collective efficacy, confidence, and academic emphasis, which are components of academic optimism, for student success are included. Information was given about the postgraduate theses on academic optimism in Turkey. It has been understood that studies have focused more on the relationship between leadership styles and academic optimism.

Keywords: Social Cognitive Theory, Academic Optimism, Collective Efficacy

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Introduction

Positive psychology focuses on the distinctive features of organizations of which individuals who are happy and have job satisfaction are members. In this sense, it can be said that positive psychology is more interested in individuals' positive views, feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). After World War II, positive psychology was born. After this period, it was observed that studies in the field of psychology focused on reducing and eliminating the adverse effects of war on individuals. In this period, positive psychology aimed to increase the quality of life by enabling individuals to move away from anxieties and evil thoughts. The practices suggested by positive psychology to cure ailments, prevent mental illnesses, and treat existing conditions have been the leading force.

Research in the field of positive psychology has revealed that the emotional traces of individuals from their past lives are related to the emotional states they are experiencing and their expectations for the future. Accordingly, individuals' subjective well-being, past satisfaction and satisfaction, present joy, emotional pleasure and happiness, and their hopes, beliefs, expectations, and optimism for the future are interrelated (Seligman, 1998).

As individuals' well-being increases, their current happiness and positive expectations about the future also increase (Kurz, 2006).

Humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, who argued that research in the field of psychology should focus on human power, argued that individual well-being is more important than social well-being. These researchers suggested alternative methods, stating that current scientific methods are insufficient to investigate the workforce. According to these researchers, the procedures used should help understand how individuals will have a satisfying and fulfilling life (Kurz, 2006). The primary purpose of positive psychology is to try to understand the personal characteristics and application tendencies that positively affect the psychological health of the individual and society. In this way, practices can be developed to increase the happiness levels, optimism, and positive beliefs of both the individual and the society. As a result, studies in the field of positive psychology have shown that the individual's past experiences affect the state of optimism. Therefore, the emotions such as happiness, joy, and satisfaction experienced by the individual in the past and currently determine the level of optimism.

Social Cognitive Theory

Explanations of social-cognitive theory also contributed to the development of the concept of optimism. According to this theory, individuals learn by observing others. Individuals interact with each other in the learning environment. In this process, the learner finds the opportunity to attend to the models in the background and develop their mental functions. The mental capacity of the learner affects the level of realization of the behavior observed from the model (Bandura, 1971).

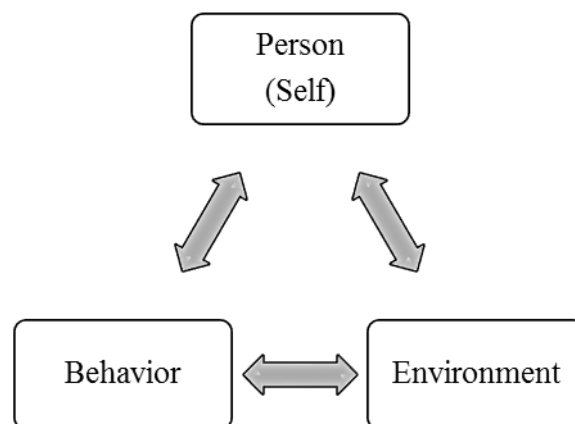


Figure 1. The Triadic Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997)

According to Bandura (1971), individual characteristics, environment, and behavior interact (see Figure 1). Personal characteristics and environmental stimuli determine the following behavior of the individual. The individual's behavior can cause the incentives in the environment to change. For example, the teacher can change some students' behaviors in the classroom environment by operating the classroom rules. Such adaptation of teachers' behavior implies the need for transformation of education (Noroozi & Sahin, 2022a,

2022b). Some unpredictable behaviors of students may also cause new regulations to be added to the classroom rules. In this process, there may be positive developments in the students' characteristics. The tendency of students to obey the rules may increase. As a result, individuals affect and change the environment in specific ways. Various individual characteristics such as level of argumentation (Noroozi et al., 2012; Valero Haro et al., 2019; 2022), gender (Noroozi et al., 2020, 2022), and epistemic beliefs (Noroozi, 2018, 2022; Noroozi & Hatami, 2019) could also play a role in this regard. On the other hand, the setting can determine people's later behavior. An individual's level of optimism can reduce the effect of environmental pressures.

Bandura (1997) does not suggest that the three factors in the triple reciprocal causality model contribute equally to behavior. The relative influence of behavior, environment, and person depends on which aspect is most vital at any given moment. These relationships occur in a complex, multidimensional coexistence in which people control their lives through active actions. This is also true for school staff, which is a social environment. Teachers can regulate and change their behavior as they encounter new situations.

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capacity. As the individual experiences successful experiences in a particular area, he develops his self-efficacy belief in that area. The opposite of this situation is also true. Negative experiences of an individual regarding a particular task cause a weakening of the idea of being successful in that task. When an individual completes a task successfully, it increases their self-efficacy belief for that task. Depending on this situation, he may have positive expectations for problems related to that task. Therefore, the individual's developing self-efficacy belief about a task can make them more optimistic about it.

The social cognitive theory emphasizes that individuals use four primary resources to form their individual or collective efficacy beliefs. These sources are personal experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). Personal experiences are beliefs derived from interpretations of past performances. Successful experiences on a subject increase the individual's self-efficacy belief, while unsuccessful experiences weaken the individual's self-efficacy belief. Indirect experiences are experiences derived from interpretations based on the comparison of one's own ability with another individual. Observing successful experiences by individuals with the same status as one's self can increase self-efficacy belief. Social persuasions refer to encouraging feedback from others. Positive messages from the close circle of the individual, the individuals he values, and the abilities of his peers can support the self-efficacy belief. Emotional states are derived from the interpretation of emotions. Self-efficacy belief may weaken when the individual feels anxiety and stress.

Academic Optimism

Optimism has positive expectations for future events. An individual's level of optimism is related to his past experiences (Seligman, 1998). On the other hand, academic optimism reflects positive expectations in the individual's future life, depending on the successes, happiness, and joys experienced in his past academic life. The basis of optimism is based on positive psychology and social-cognitive theory. Knowing the basic

principles of these theories can facilitate understanding the concept of academic optimism. In this direction, the concept of academic optimism is explained in the context of positive psychology and social-cognitive theory.

Academic optimism as a construct was shaped using Bandura's Triple Reciprocal Structure (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). In order to explain academic optimism, which is considered an organizational variable, the components of collective efficacy, intellectual emphasis, and trust in students and parents were defined. Collective efficacy is shaped by the personal characteristics and perceptions of the employees in a school. The trust of school staff in parents and students affects the expectation of optimism. On the other hand, the academic emphasis is the behaviors elicited by these emotions to focus on student achievement.

Academic optimism can be both a teacher's and a school's characteristics (Kurz, 2006). A teacher with academic optimism believes that her students will succeed. These teachers have strong professional efficacy beliefs and contribute to the success of their students by using their skills. These teachers believe that they can get the support of both the student and the parents in the teaching process. They think every student can succeed (Beard et al., 2010). In schools where academic optimism is dominant, there is a strong sense of trust between teachers, students, and parents (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). In these schools, students are allowed to overcome difficulties. Appropriate classroom environments are created for students to gain feelings of trust and empathy (Hoy et al., 2008). Academic optimism is among the common characteristics of successful schools.

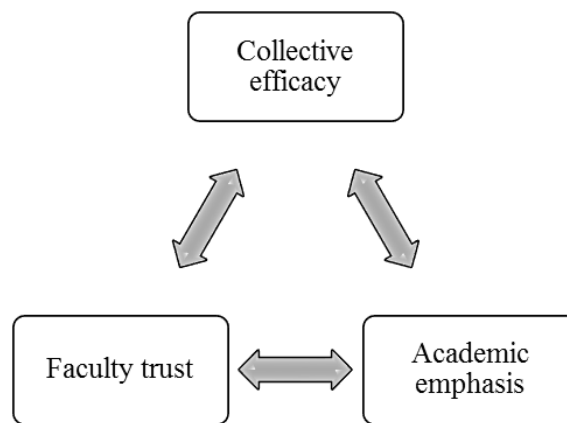


Figure 2. Academic Optimism Conceptual Framework (Hoy et al., 2006)

Social cognitive theory, pioneered by Bandura (1997), provided a theoretical framework for studies on collective efficacy. The social cognitive theory claims that the individual has the power to control his behavior. Self-efficacy is an essential concept in social cognitive theory explanations. This concept refers to the belief in their ability to organize and exhibit the behaviors necessary to achieve a specific goal. Self-efficacy affects the motivations, emotional states, and behaviors of individuals. Depending on this situation, self-efficacy has an essential role in predicting the future behavior of individuals (Bandura, 1997).

People often work together to achieve common goals. To achieve common goals in the working environment, the collective competencies of individuals are also essential, along with their self-efficacy. Collective efficacy is

a group's shared belief in their ability to act in a way that produces predicted levels of attainment (Bandura, 1997). This belief is the product of the interactive dynamics of group members and provides an opportunity to understand how groups or organizations choose to act.

Collective efficacy perceived in schools represents the group's judgments about the performance ability of the social system as a whole (Bandura, 1997). Teachers have efficacy beliefs about themselves and the school. Perceived collective efficacy is teachers' judgment that school staff can organize and carry out the necessary actions to positively impact students (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). Bandura (1997) examined the relationship between the sense of collective efficacy and academic school performance by controlling the socio-economic situation. Schools with a strong sense of collective efficacy have been observed to make significant academic progress.

On the other hand, schools with severe doubts about their collective proficiency did not significantly improve their academic achievement. Some studies have shown that collective efficacy substantially impacts students' academic achievement. Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000) tested the role of collective efficacy in increasing school success in primary schools. It has been determined that perceived collective efficacy increases student achievement in mathematics and reading.

It has been observed that a total of 25 postgraduate theses on academic optimism were prepared between 2010 and 2022 in Turkey. Six of these theses are at the doctoral level. In the studies, academic optimism is constructivist learning, leadership, organizational cynicism, psychological well-being, success, organizational commitment, self-efficacy, professional burnout, stress, resilience, professional self-esteem, job satisfaction, corporate learning level, political competence, and teacher autonomy. They are discussed together with concepts such as emotional intelligence and school culture. In studies conducted in Turkey, the relationship between leadership styles and academic optimism has been further examined.

Conclusion

Positive psychology and social cognitive theory allowed the development of the concept of optimism and the formation of its theoretical background. The triple determinism model of social cognitive theory has been used to explain social relations in education as in many other areas. To understand teacher behaviors in schools and to determine the effect of these behaviors on success, the triple reciprocal determination model was used. In these studies, the concept of academic optimism was mentioned. It consists of academic optimism, collective efficacy, student and parent trust, and academic emphasis. Collective efficacy reflects teachers' belief that they can act together and accomplish tasks to achieve the school's goals. Studies have shown that students are more successful in schools with high academic optimism. Studies can be conducted to explain the relationship between academic optimism and student success, as well as with variables such as motivation, self-regulation, and drop out.

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