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# An Examination of Optimism between Gender, Race, and School Classification of Millennial Students – An Exploratory study

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***An Examination of Optimism between Gender, Race, and School Classification of Millennial Students – An Exploratory study***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
*Health and Kinesiology.*

By

*Abigail Johnson*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Daniel Czech*

ABSTRACT

*Optimism is defined as an individual's approach to the expectation that good things will happen in the future and bad things are a rarity. Along with the general definition of what optimism is, many researchers have found that optimism depends on culturally embedded values and beliefs (Singh & Shukla, 2014; Lee & Mason, 2013). In addition, the relationship between optimism and positive health outcomes and well-being is well established (Coll, J.E. & Draves, P. R., 2008; Bastianello, M. R., Pacico, J. C., & Hutz, C. S., 2014). Although this is the case, little research has been found examining the differences between optimism levels in the millennial generation. The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences between optimism, race, gender, and school classification in the Millennial Generation. The study is designed to be a quantitative, quasi-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive study. A research questionnaire was given to students that contained demographic questions as well as the Life Orientation Test, both of which have been found to be psychometrically valid and reliable. T-tests and ANOVAs were used to determine if significant differences in the demographic characteristic variables were present between gender, race, and school classification. Although there were no significant differences between gender and optimism, there were significant differences in optimism between race and school classification in that African Americans scoring significantly lower than Caucasian Americans and underclassmen scored significantly higher than upperclassmen. Future research on optimism will be discussed.*

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Dr. Steven Engel

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I would also like to thank my mother and sister, Stephanie and Caroline Johnson. Their unconditional love and support through every situation has driven me to continually strive for success. I cannot put into words how much the hugs, encouraging texts, home cooked meals, and endless laughs have meant to me through this journey we call life. Caroline, thank you for being the best little sister anyone could ever ask for! Your reminders to just shake things off have helped more than you know! Mom, thank you for being you! Your unconditional love and life advice is irreplaceable! I hope that one day I can be half of the woman you are. You both mean the world to me and I am so thankful that I get to call you my family. I love you both to the moon and back, always!

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## An Examination of Optimism between Gender, Race, and School Classification of Millennial Students – An Exploratory Study

Optimism is defined as an individual's approach to the expectation that good things will happen in the future and bad things are a rarity. Along with the general definition of what optimism is, many researchers have found that optimism depends on culturally embedded values and beliefs (Singh & Shukla, 2014; Lee & Mason, 2013). Optimism's relationship to positive health outcomes and well-being has been proven to exist. The questions that continue to boggle the minds of researchers include "does optimism vary between individuals of different demographical characteristics?" and "why do they differ?" Numerous studies have been conducted throughout the years but until recently, no research had taken place concerning the relationship that optimism has with race and gender in the millennial generation. The millennial generation has come to be known as the Nexters, generation Y, and the Echo Boomers. To fall into this generational category, individuals were born between the 1980s and early 2000s (Martin, 2005). One major characteristic of this generation is their reliance on technology and its advancements. Since millennials were introduced to technology at such a young age, they tend to understand it more than other generations around them and traditionally use it as the main form of communication. According to Glass's research, this generation was affected by one major event in particular: the first terrorist attack on America. This made generation Y much more confident, socially open, and intensified the need for structure in their lives. Millennials need constant micromanagement along with affirmation that the work they are contributing to this world does in fact hold meaning (Martin, 2005). Along with the responsibility that this generation feels, millennials are said to be one of the most

wanted after individuals. Despite the fact that their parents had access to birth control and other contraceptive, having a family structure was still something to be valued. Events that happened previously, parents tended to be overprotective and the term “helicopter parent” was coined. Parents were unwilling to let go and tended to hover in all aspects of their children’s lives (Glass, 2007). Optimism in this millennial generation is shown to vary between individuals. Optimism has been identified as a construct that promotes widespread positive health affects, protector of psychological well-being, and reducer of stress. Because of the generational upbringing that Millennials have had, risk and resilience framework suggests that the presence of specific individual factors may increase or decrease levels of optimism (Lee, Neblett, & Jackson, 2015). The adolescent stage of development is critical in determining how individuals progress into adulthood as well as the rest of life; the millennial generation is at the prime stages of learning and transitioning (Orejudo, Puvelo, Fernandez-Turrado, & Ramos, 2012). The two factors that have become the most prominent in studies related to differences within the millennial generation are gender and race. Much research has been conducted showcasing gender stereotypes, racial segregation, gender limitations, and racial limitations, but few studies have sought to entirely understand the relationships between optimism and gender as well as optimism and race. Researchers Colby and Shifren (2013) incidentally discovered no correlation between race and optimism levels while studying optimism in breast cancer patients and Researchers Lee, Neblett, and Jackson (2015) found a correlation between race and optimism while studying the role of optimism in stress and anxiety. The same kinds of studies have been duplicated for the gender category. There

are very few studies that solely focus on the exploration of relationships between optimism, race, and gender. The studies that do supply information on these subjects have shown that there is definite relationship between race and optimism and a questionable relationship between gender and optimism. Coll and Draves (2008) discovered that African Americans have the highest optimism scores, with Caucasians and Hispanics close behind. This study was supported by another study that showcased that optimism serves as a buffer for race-related stressors (Lee, Neblett, & Jackson, 2015). Optimism levels vary between races and there has yet to be consistent data collected that supports one race has a higher level of optimism than others. However, it is certain that there is variation from one racial group to another. When looking at studies related to the companionship of optimism and gender, questions about which gender has higher level of optimism tend to arise. There has continually been a variation in results regarding said relationship. Singh and Shukla (2014), Colby and Shifren (2013), Orejudo, Puvuelo, Fernandez-Turrado, and Ramos (2012), and Bastianello, Pacico, and Hutz (2014) found that females tested for a significantly higher level of optimism. In contrast to these findings, Puskar, Bernardo, Ren, Haley, Tark, Switala and Siemon (2010) found that men had a higher level of optimism than females. To add another variation of research results, a study conducted involving adolescents, who are a prominent group included in the millennial generation, showed that there is no correlation between levels of optimism and a difference in gender. Previous studies have investigated how optimism is affected with age. A common conclusion among past researchers' investigations is that optimism has a positive linear pattern (Zou, Zhang, Niu, Xie, Fan, Tian, & Zhou, 2016). In addition to a

positive linear association with optimism and age, another factor that affected the optimism levels is the cultural aspect of the participants. Variances in eastern and western cultures can greatly affect how much optimism does or does not increase with age (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). These variations in results between numerous studies have aided in the continuation of research that include these variables. This study aims to investigate the differences between optimism levels, gender, race, and school classification within the Millennial Generation. More specifically, this study is an attempt to understand if there are significant differences in levels of optimism between males and females as well as optimism levels in different races and school classification. The comparison between race, gender, and optimism has previously received attention but little has been done to further investigate these characteristics in the Millennial Generation in addition to school classification. It is hypothesized that there will be significant differences between gender and race optimism levels and no differences between school classification optimism levels.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

This study included 986 male participants and 1285 female participants. All 2287 participants were college-aged students who attended a midsized southeastern University that were enrolled in required physical activity classes. Although the age of participants varied from 18 to 22 years old, the emphasis of the study was focused on the student school classification: freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior. 961 freshmen, 579 sophomores, 417 juniors, 324 seniors, and 6 graduate students participated in this study. 614 black students, 1445 white students, 57 Hispanic students, 39 Asian students, 70 bi-racial students, and 48 students who self-identified as other participated in this study. The study used required physical activity classes that the aforementioned students were participating in. These classes ranged from aerobics to weight training activities. During the last two weeks of the semester, a voluntary survey was completed, but in order to increase participation, instructors verbally recruited students with an incentive of a bonus grade. It was required of all participants to read the informed consent and therefore gave passive consent by completing the survey.

### Measures

The study is designed to be a quantitative, quasi-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive study. A research questionnaire was given to students that contained demographic questions as well as the Life Orientation Test, both of which have been found to be psychometrically valid and reliable. The questionnaire included gender, age, race, school classification, physical activity class, and satisfaction with the course. In addition, the

Life Orientation Test measured levels of optimism and pessimism. The first portion of the study allowed students to respond with their levels of course satisfaction and rating of the instructor. The second portion measured optimism and pessimism levels with a variety of questions that had positive and negative connotations.

#### Statistical Analysis

T-tests and ANOVAs determined if significant differences existed between groups in the demographic independent variables and Pearson's correlation was used to examine the determined relationships. SPSS was used to conduct data analysis. Descriptive statistics included the means and standard deviation and as a function of race and gender.

## Results

Analysis of the data was conducted and the results showed a significant difference in only one of the three categories. An alpha level of ( $<0.05$ ) was used for all of the statistical tests. Table 1 displays the means (+SD) for males and females on optimism scores. An Independent Samples T-test revealed very minute differences ( $p<0.05$ ) between males and females on their optimism levels. Men had a mean score of 14.5142 while Females had a mean score of 14.6327.

Table 2 displays the means (+SD) for the six races studied, White, African American, Hispanic, Asian, Bi-Racial, and Other, on their optimism scores. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference ( $p<0.05$ ) between races and optimism levels. A Scheffe's Post-Hoc test showed a significant difference between African Americans and Whites on optimism levels. This test revealed a significance level of 0.029, which is substantially lower than the alpha level of 0.05.

Table 3 displays the means (+SD) for school classification on optimism scores. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference ( $p<0.05$ ) between school classification and optimism levels. A Scheffe's Post-Hoc test revealed significant differences between underclassmen and upperclassmen, meaning freshmen and sophomores versus juniors and seniors, on optimism levels. The significance level between freshmen and juniors was 0.281, between freshmen and seniors was 0.003, between sophomores and juniors was 0.079, and between sophomores and seniors was 0.000.

## Discussion

The results of this study disprove the hypothesis that there would be significant differences between gender and race and optimism. To add to the controversy and variation in results regarding gender and optimism, no significant difference was found in this study. Additionally, it was found that there was no significant difference between any races with the exception of African Americans and Caucasian Americans. It was found that underclassmen had significantly higher levels of optimism than upperclassmen,

A potential interpretation of these results would be the generational change in gender roles and stereotypes. The findings from this study could be said to correlate with findings from previous studies and help to validate the trend of the millennial generation breaking stereotypes. Generation Y has experienced advancements and historical moments that have made them much more confident, socially open, and intensified the need for structure in their lives (Martin, 2005). Because this generation is more inept to social acceptance, the development of role modeling has been affected and therefore, optimism and gender relationships have no bounds. Previous studies showed that past generations needed role modeling in a sense of how to act and show emotion pertaining to a certain gender while the millennials have responded to role modeling in relation to a more generalized sense of human interaction, self-esteem, and optimism (Orejudo, S., Puyuelo, M., Fernández-Turrado, T., & Ramos, T., 2012).

Another explanation for there being no significant difference in optimism levels between males and females is the generational change in optimistic disposition in the population as a whole. Through the numerous events that the millennial generation has

experienced in their life times, their outlook on optimism as a whole has been enhanced. They have seen the nation rise from tremendous turmoil and optimism has become a staple in the emotion wheel. It is stated that people who have positive expectations regarding the future understand that what is desired is possible (Bastianello, Pacico, & Hutz, 2014). Since both males and females of Generation Y experienced the same phoenix effect of the nation and gender roles have started to diminish, many believe that they are not vulnerable to bad experiences. Based on the definition of what optimism is, Millennials of both the male and female gender share similar optimism levels (Puskar, Bernardo, Ren, Haley, Tark, Switala, & Siemon, 2010).

Additionally, this study revealed significant differences between race and optimism levels; specifically, it was discovered that African Americans were significantly less optimistic than Caucasian Americans. This could be in part because racial discrimination is said to be a relatively normal experience for African Americans, namely young African American adults (Lee, Neblett, & Jackson, 2015). Optimism typically varies according to different cultural dynamics, expectations, and views. With the African American race, optimism is typically used as a protective factor against racism in regards to stress and the adversity faced. Despite the fact that optimism is typically used as a protective factor for most African Americans, it has also been proven that this protective nature is not fail safe. The harmful effects of racial discrimination can eventually overcome the power of dispositional optimism (Goodin, Kronfli, King, Glover, Sibille, & Fillingim, 2013). This concept helps to explain why African Americans had such lower levels of optimism than Caucasian Americans.

The results of this study also revealed that freshmen and sophomores scored significantly higher optimism scores than juniors and seniors. The previous research that has been conducted regarding age and optimism are not supported by these results. Past findings have shown that optimism and age have a positive linear relationship and these results provide evidence of an inverse relationship (You. Fung, & Isaacoqitz, 2009). A possible explanation for this fluctuation in data could be the academic stress that upperclassmen are experiencing compared with that of the underclassmen. Stress can greatly affect the mindset and dispositional optimism and one of the most common stressors that students experience is that which is related to academics. Typically, during the junior and senior years of undergraduate studies entail a great deal more work and attention than the freshman and sophomore years (Orejudo, Puyuelo, Fernandez-Turrado, & Ramos, 2012; Zou, Zhang, Niu, Xie, Fan, Tian, & Zhou, 2016).

Another possible explanation for these significances is the participant pool this particular study used. The number of participants that fall into the underclassmen category (n=1540) was a little more than double the number of participants that fall into the upperclassmen category (n=741). Since the difference between these two categories is so large, this could have had an impact on the statistical analysis.

This study found some interesting significances between gender, race, and school classification with optimism. Despite the fact that these significances were found, there are some limitations. There is a possibility that participants did not fully understand the questions and did not answer to the best of their ability. There is also a possibility that the participants did not answer the questions truthfully and provided the answers that they

thought would be socially expected. This study was completely voluntary so there is also a possibility that the majority of the participants are ones who have an interest in the topic being studied. Additionally, the participant pool came from a southern undergraduate university, which allows little to no indication regarding other geographical areas. Future research may want to investigate optimism levels specifically on race and school classification to further understand the topic. Research regarding optimism in the millennial generation should continue with different participant pooling to better relate to the general population and increase its external validity.

Mean Optimism Scores for Male and Female Participants within the Millennial  
Generation

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	14.5142	3.88415
Female	14.6327	3.88930

Mean Optimism Scores for Race within the Millennial Generation

Race	Mean	Standard Deviation
White	14.7377*	3.73087
Black	14.1697*	4.05202
Hispanic	14.2807	3.48340
Asian	15.2564	4.07636
Bi-Racial	15.0714	4.90880
Other	14.1875	4.62029

\*Significant differences between these two categories of race ( $p < .05$ )

Mean Optimism Scores for School Classification within the Millennial Generation

School Classification	Mean	Standard Deviation
Freshman	14.7513	3.84891
Sophomore	14.9396	3.83502
Junior	14.3046*	3.71274
Senior	13.8457*	4.13708

\*Significant difference from other unmarked categories of school classification ( $p < .05$ )

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**Appendix A**

Hypothesis, Research Question, Purpose

### Hypotheses

1. There will be significant differences between males and females optimism levels
2. There will be significant differences between races and optimism levels
3. There will be no significant differences between school classifications on optimism levels

### Research Question

1. Are there significant differences between males and females optimism levels?
2. Are there significant differences between races optimism levels?

### Purpose of the Study

1. To investigate the relationship between optimism levels and gender, race, and school classification within the Millennial Generation

**Appendix B**

Limitations, Delimitations, Assumptions

### Limitations

1. Participants may not have answered the questionnaires truthfully and provided wrong information
2. There is a possibility that the majority of the participants are those who have strong opinions about the topic that is being studied. Despite the fact that the study had a bonus grade incentive, it was completely voluntary
3. Participants may have been influenced by peers and answered the questionnaires in a manner that is socially accepted.
4. Participants may have a poor understanding of the questions.

### Delimitations

1. The sample only comes from one southeastern university, which is poor indication of other geographical areas.
2. The participant pool was delimited to only one specific semester during the school year.
3. The research was delimited to physical activity classes that are listed as a graduation requirement.
4. The research used the Life Orientation Test to assess dispositional optimism, which is the individuals' tendency to view the world and future in a positive way. In addition, a demographic questionnaire to assess school classification, gender, race, and age was used.
5. When comparing race, the classifications of white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and other were used.
6. The participant pool was delimited by only using the Millennial Generation

### Assumptions

1. Participants completely understood and followed the written directions on the questionnaire
2. Participants truthfully answered all questions
3. The demographic questionnaire is psychometrically reliable and valid.
4. The Life Orientation Test is psychometrically reliable and valid

**Appendix C**

Review of Literature

**Optimism**

Optimism is defined as an individuals approach to the expectation that good things will happen in the future and bad things are a rarity. Along with the general definition of what optimism is, many researchers have found that optimism depends on culturally embedded values and beliefs (Singh & Shukla, 2014; Lee & Mason, 2013). Optimism's relationship to positive health outcomes and well-being has been proven to exist. The questions that continues to boggle the minds of researchers include "does optimism vary between individuals of different demographical characteristics?" and "why do they differ?" Numerous studies have been conducted throughout the years but until recently, no research had taken place concerning the relationship that optimism has with the millennial generation.

**The Millennial Generation**

The millennial generation has come to be known as the Nexters, generation Y, and the Echo Boomers. To fall into this generational category, individuals were born between the 1980s and early 2000s (Martin, 2005). One major characteristic of this generation is their reliance on technology and its advancements. Since millennials were introduced to technology at such a young age, they tend to understand it more than other generations around them and traditionally use it as the main form of communication. According to Glass's research, this generation was affected by one major event in particular: the first terrorist attack on America. This made generation Y much more confident, socially open, and intensified the need for structure in their lives. Millennials need constant micromanagement along with affirmation that the work they are contributing to this world does in fact hold meaning (Martin, 2005). Along with the

responsibility that this generation feels, millennials are said to be one of the most wanted after individuals. Despite the fact that their parents had access to birth control and other contraceptive, having a family structure was still something to be valued. Events that happened previously, parents tended to be overprotective and the term “helicopter parent” was coined. Parents were unwilling to let go and tended to hover in all aspects of their children’s lives (Glass, 2007).

### **Optimism in the Millennial Generation**

Optimism in this millennial generation is shown to vary between individuals. Optimism has been identified as a construct that promotes widespread positive health affects, protector of psychological well-being, and reducer of stress. Because of the generational upbringing that Millennials have had, risk and resilience framework suggests that the presence of specific individual factors may increase or decrease levels of optimism (Lee, Neblett, & Jackson, 2015). The adolescent stage of development is critical in determining how individuals progress into adulthood as well as the rest of life; the millennial generation is at the prime stages of learning and transitioning (Orejudo, Puvelo, Fernandez-Turrado, & Ramos, 2012). The two factors that have become the most prominent in studies related to differences within the millennial generation are gender and race. Much research has been conducted showcasing gender stereotypes, racial segregation, gender limitations, and racial limitations, but few studies have sought to entirely understand the relationships between optimism and gender as well as optimism and race. Researchers Colby and Shifren (2013) incidentally discovered no correlation between race and optimism levels while studying optimism in breast cancer patients and

Researchers Lee, Neblett, and Jackson (2015) found a correlation between race and optimism while studying the role of optimism in stress and anxiety. The same kinds of studies have been duplicated for the gender category. There are very few studies that solely focus on the exploration of relationships between optimism, race, and gender. The studies that do supply information on these subjects have shown that there is definite relationship between race and optimism and a questionable relationship between gender and optimism.

### **Race, Age and Optimism**

Coll and Draves (2008) discovered that African Americans have the highest optimism scores, with Caucasians and Hispanics close behind. This study was supported by another study that showcased that optimism serves as a buffer for race-related stressors (Lee, Neblett, & Jackson, 2015). Optimism levels vary between races and there has yet to be consistent data collected that supports one race has a higher level of optimism than others. However, it is certain that there is variation from one racial group to another. A common conclusion among past researchers' investigations is that optimism has a positive linear pattern (Zou, Zhang, Niu, Xie, Fan, Tian, & Zhou, 2016). In addition to a positive linear association with optimism and age, another factor that affected the optimism levels is the cultural aspect of the participants. Variances in eastern and western cultures can greatly affect how much optimism does or does not increase with age (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009).

### **Gender and Optimism**

When looking at studies related to the companionship of optimism and gender,

questions about which gender has higher level of optimism tend to arise. There has continually been a variation in results regarding said relationship. Singh and Shukla (2014), Colby and Shifren (2013), Orejudo, Puvuelo, Fernandez-Turrado, and Ramos (2012), and Bastianello, Pacico, and Hutz (2014) found that females tested for a significantly higher level of optimism. In contrast to these findings, Puskar, Bernardo, Ren, Haley, Tark, Switala and Siemon (2010) found that men had a higher level of optimism than females. To add another variation of research results, a study conducted involving adolescents, who are a prominent group included in the millennial generation, showed that there is no correlation between levels of optimism and a difference in gender. These variations in results between numerous studies have aided in the continuation of research that include these variables.

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**Appendix D**

Demographic Questionnaire

Personal Statement Questionnaire

Current School Classification

FRESHMAN

SOPHOMORE

JUNIOR

SENIOR

Gender:      MALE          FEMALE

Race:          CAUCASIAN          AFRICAN AMERICAN      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E**

Life Orientation Test

## Life Orientation Test – Revised

Please be as honest and accurate as you can throughout this questionnaire. Try not to let your response to one statement influence your response to other statements. There are no “correct” or “incorrect” answers. Answer according to your own feelings, rather than how you think people would answer.

---

SA = Strongly Agree

A = Agree

Neither = Neither Agree or Disagree

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly

Disagree

---

	SA	A	Neither	D	SD
1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best	1	2	3	4	5
2. It's easy for me to relax.	1	2	3	4	5
3. If something can go wrong for me, it will.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I'm always optimistic about my future.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I enjoy my friends a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
6. It's important for me to keep busy.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I don't get upset too easily.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I rarely count on good things happening to me.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.	1	2	3	4	5

---

Reverse score: 1, 4, 10 and regular score: 3, 9, 7

DO NOT SCORE: 2, 6, 8, 5