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A Study of Life Orientation Among Individuals Affected by War

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Abstract

The 2008 Russia–Georgia war substantially altered the living conditions, psychological well-being, and future-oriented cognitive-emotional attitudes of the affected population. War-induced trauma may be conceptualized as a mass catastrophe that exerts significant psychological influence not only on individuals but also on society, shaping its subsequent development and life orientations. Optimistic and pessimistic attitudes toward life determine individuals' everyday functioning, decision-making, and long-term adaptation. Life orientation represents a core cognitive-emotional mechanism associated with psychological health and the capacity for social reintegration. Accordingly, its examination is particularly important among groups with experiences of high stress, forced displacement, and loss of safety. Although the post-war psychological consequences have been widely studied at the symptomatic level, the influence of traumatic experience on future-oriented cognitive appraisals and life attitudes in the Georgian population has been insufficiently described. In line with this, the aim of the present study was to assess life orientation among individuals with war experience using a quantitative method, specifically the Life Orientation Test. Based on the data analysis, it was found that life orientation among individuals with war experience was associated with elevated pessimism, indicating that war-related experiences shape not only emotional responses but also long-term cognitive evaluations.

Keywords: Dispositional optimism–pessimism; Generalized expectancies; Trauma

1. Introduction

Life orientation represents a system of generalized expectations regarding the future formed by the individual, which determines the extent to which life events are perceived as predictable, manageable, and potentially positive. This construct is not limited solely to emotional states; rather, it encompasses cognitive appraisals related to the individual's relationship with the social environment, others, and broader societal reality. Thus, life orientation may be conceptualized as an integrated cognitive–emotional framework reflecting the interaction between the self, social context, and future-oriented attitudes.

A central place in the study of life orientation is occupied by the concept of dispositional optimism. According to Scheier and Carver, optimism is defined as an individual's tendency to expect positive rather than negative outcomes across various life situations [11]. The authors link optimism to outcome expectancies and conceptualize it as a relatively stable personality characteristic. In the original model, optimism and pessimism were viewed as opposite poles of a single continuum; however, subsequent theoretical and empirical research has demonstrated that these constructs may function as related yet independent factors [12,7]. Within this approach, life orientation encompasses both positive and negative expectations regarding the future.

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Optimism and pessimism play an important role in the process of psychological adaptation. Research consistently indicates that optimism is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being, effective self-regulation, and adaptive responses to life difficulties, whereas pessimism is linked to negative emotional states and an increased risk of psychological distress [1,13]. These associations suggest that life orientation does not merely represent a manifestation of mood or temperament but functions as a cognitive framework that influences the perception and appraisal of stressful experiences.

In this context, Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of cognitive appraisal and coping [8] is of particular importance. According to this theory, the psychological impact of stress is not determined solely by the objective characteristics of events but depends on how individuals appraise a situation—whether it is perceived as a threat, a loss, or a challenge. Primary and secondary cognitive appraisals shape emotional responses and subsequent coping strategies. Accordingly, life orientation may be considered the cognitive foundation that precedes the appraisal of stressful events and influences their subjective significance.

From an existential perspective, Viktor Frankl emphasizes that under conditions of extreme trauma, psychological survival and subsequent functioning depend on the individual's ability to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose oriented toward the future [2]. According to Frankl, the loss of a future perspective represents one of the most destructive consequences of traumatic experiences, which is directly associated with the development of a pessimistic life orientation.

The collective and transgenerational dimensions of mass trauma are particularly elaborated in Volkan's psychoanalytic concept. According to Volkan, war and large-scale violence give rise to a so-called "chosen trauma," which is preserved in collective memory and influences group members' identity, emotional structure, and expectations regarding the future [14,15]. Under such conditions, a pessimistic life orientation may emerge as a result of the interaction between individual experiences and collective traumatic narratives.

Traumatic experiences, particularly events of a large-scale and prolonged nature, exert a significant influence on these systems of cognitive appraisal. According to Janoff-Bulman [5], trauma disrupts individuals' fundamental assumptions about the safety, fairness, and controllability of the world. Such disruption leads to a restructuring of generalized expectations, which may be reflected in an increased pessimistic orientation toward the future. These changes are especially evident in the context of war, where trauma is not a single event but a complex social and psychological experience.

In the Georgian context, the experience of armed conflicts has left a significant mark on the psychological functioning of the population. Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies focus on the symptomatic aspects of post-war psychological outcomes, while the impact of trauma on future-oriented cognitive appraisals and life orientation remains insufficiently explored. This research gap limits a systematic understanding of the psychological effects of war and does not allow for an adequate assessment of how traumatic experiences influence individuals' generalized expectations and life orientations. The analysis of dispositional optimism and pessimism provides an opportunity to better understand the long-term cognitive consequences of trauma and the psychological mechanisms through which individuals evaluate their future in post-war reality.

1.1. Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine life orientation among individuals with war experience. The study sought to answer the following research question: How does dispositional optimism differ across demographic characteristics among individuals with war experience? Within the framework of the study, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1. On the Life Orientation Scale, the level of dispositional optimism among respondents with war experience will be low.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

A total of 200 respondents participated in the study. Of the participants, 69.5% (n = 139) were female and 30.5% (n = 61) were male. The mean age of the respondents was M = 30.36 years (SD = 5.99). The majority of participants, 85% (n = 170), had completed higher education; 12% (n = 24) had incomplete higher education; 1.5% (n = 3) had secondary

education; and 1.5% (n = 3) had vocational/technical education. Regarding marital status, 56% (n = 112) of respondents were not married, 38% (n = 76) were married, and 6% (n = 12) were divorced.

Participants were recruited using a probabilistic sampling method with random selection. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for psychological research.

2.1.1. Research Instruments

The Life Orientation Scale–Revised (LOT-R) (Scheier & Carver, 1985), adapted for the Georgian population by Sumbadze et al. [10], was used in the study. The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where a score of 0 indicates complete disagreement with a statement and a score of 4 indicates complete agreement.

2.1.2. Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis included univariate analysis, bivariate analysis, crosstabulation analysis, a one-way ANOVA table, as well as the calculation of Pearson's correlation coefficient and the chi-square (χ^2) statistic.

3. Description of Results

On the Life Orientation Scale, 36.7% of the participants have low scores, 61.3% have average scores, and 2.0% have high scores. The mean score of the respondents on the Life Orientation Scale is M = 1.65; SD = 0.52 (see Table N1).

Table 1 Distribution of respondents on the Life Orientation Scale

Life Orientation Level	Low (%)	Average (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	Mean (M)	SD
Respondents	36.7	61.3	2.0	100.0	1.65	0.52

On the Life Orientation Scale, 62.7% of female participants demonstrate average scores, 34.6% low scores, and 2.7% high scores, whereas among male respondents, 65% demonstrate average scores, 29.4% low scores, and 5.6% high scores. The chi-square test indicated no statistically significant difference between genders, $\chi^2 = 0.46$; df = 2 (see Table N2).

Table 2 Distribution of respondents on the Life Orientation Scale by gender

Crosstab			
Life Orientation Level	**Female (%)**	**Male (%)**	**Total (%)**
Low	34.6	29.4	32.0*
Average	62.7	65.0	63.9*
High	2.7	5.6	4.1*
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.553	2	0.46
Likelihood Ratio	1.52	2	0.47
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.11	1	0.29
N of Valid Cases	200	—	—

Differences in life orientation were observed across age groups. Analysis of the results indicated that the average level of life orientation predominated in all age groups, although the distribution structure varied by age. Specifically, in the 25–34 age group, the average level of life orientation was most frequently observed; in the 35–44 age group, the

proportion of low life orientation was comparatively higher; and in the 18–24 age group, high life orientation was relatively more prominent. The chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant association between age groups and levels of life orientation (χ^2 = 17.16, df = 4, p = .002) (see Table N3).

Table 3 Distribution of respondents on the Life Orientation Scale by age group

Crosstab			
Life Orientation Level	**18–24 (%)**	**25–34 (%)**	**35–44 (%)**
Low	18.6	19.7	23.6
Average	76.5	71.5	69.8
High	4.9	8.8	6.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	**df**	**Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	17.16a	4	0.002
Likelihood Ratio	19.04	4	.0001
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.16	1	0.000
N of Valid Cases	200		
a. 3 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .72.			

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences across marital status groups (χ^2 = 31.48, p = .001). On the Life Orientation Scale, 44.6% of married respondents, 60.6% of unmarried respondents, and 33.3% of divorced respondents demonstrated high levels of dispositional optimism, whereas 14.5% of married respondents, 2.8% of unmarried respondents, and 50.0% of divorced respondents demonstrated low levels of dispositional optimism (see Table N4).

Table 4 Distribution of respondents on the Life Orientation Scale by marital status

% within level of Marriage Status		**Life orientation**			**Total**
		Low	**Average**	**High**	
Marriage	Married	14,5%	41,0%	44,6%	100,0%
status	Not married	2,8%	36,6%	60,6%	100,0%
	Divorced	50,0%	16,7%	33,3%	100,0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	**df**	**Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	31.48	4	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	35.02	4	0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.23	1	0.02
N of Valid Cases	200		
a. 3 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .72.			

Analysis of the data indicated that levels of dispositional optimism differed according to employment status. Specifically, among employed respondents, 20.5% demonstrated low, 65.1% medium, and 14.5% high levels of dispositional optimism. Among self-employed respondents, 2.8% demonstrated low, 69.0% medium, and 28.2% high levels of dispositional optimism. Among unemployed respondents, 33.3% demonstrated low, 33.3% medium, and 33.3% high levels of dispositional optimism. Chi-square analysis confirmed that the differences in life orientation across employment groups were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 16.84$, p = .002). (see Table N5).

Table 5 Distribution of Respondents on the Life Orientation Scale by Employment Status

Crosstabulation % within Employment		Life Orientation			Total
		Low	Average	High	
	Employed	20,5%	65,1%	14,5%	100,0%
	Self-employed	2,8%	69,0%	28,2%	100,0%
	Unemployed	33,3%	33,3%	33,3%	100,0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.84	4	0.002
Likelihood Ratio	18.37	4	0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.12	1	0.013
N of Valid Cases	200		

a. 3 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 0.93.

Based on a one-way ANOVA, it was revealed that the level of dispositional optimism was higher among respondents with a status of forcibly displaced (34%), whereas among non-displaced respondents, 42% demonstrated high levels of dispositional optimism (p = .000) (see Table N6).

Table 6 Distribution of respondents on the Life Orientation Scale by forced displacement status

Forced displacement status	Dispositional optimism M
Forcibly Displaced	34%
Non-Displaced	42%
Total	.3973

ANOVA Table							
			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Life Orientation Forced displacement status	Between Groups	(Combined)	0.304	1	0.304	14.754	0.000
	Within Groups		4.177	200	0.021		
	Total		4.480	200			

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to conduct an empirical analysis of life orientation, specifically dispositional optimism and pessimism, among individuals with war experience. The obtained results indicate that, within the sample, average and low levels of life orientation predominated, whereas high levels of dispositional optimism were infrequently observed. This finding aligns closely with the theoretical concept of dispositional optimism, which posits that traumatic experiences—particularly prolonged and large-scale stressors—are associated with a reduction in generalized positive expectations regarding the future [11,13].

Within the framework of Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress [8], war experience can be regarded as a chronic, high-intensity stressor that influences cognitive appraisal processes. Specifically, under such conditions, individuals perceive the environment as less predictable and controllable, which diminishes the expectation of positive outcomes and, consequently, contributes to the formation of a pessimistic life orientation. The study's results support the notion that life orientation functions not merely as a transient mood state but as a relatively stable cognitive framework that structures an individual's attitudes toward the future.

The detection of statistically significant differences across age groups suggests that life orientation is a dynamic construct associated with developmental stages. Relatively higher optimism among younger age groups may reflect as-yet undifferentiated expectations regarding the future and the subjective perception of developmental resources, whereas accumulated life and traumatic experiences in older age groups may contribute to the consolidation of negative generalizations. This interpretation is consistent with Janoff-Bulman's "Shattered Assumptions" model [5], which describes how traumatic experiences disrupt fundamental beliefs about the safety and justice of the world, thereby influencing individuals' cognitive appraisals of the future.

Differences observed based on employment and marital status underscore the significance of social and structural resources in shaping life orientation. Employment and the stability of social roles may serve as sources of perceived meaning and control, thereby partially mitigating the negative cognitive effects of trauma. This interpretation aligns with Frankl's existential approach [2], which posits that a sense of purpose and life significance constitutes a critical condition for psychological resilience following extreme experiences.

It is also important to highlight the differences observed according to forced displacement status, which suggest that traumatic experiences are not homogeneous and that their cognitive consequences significantly depend on the social context and type of loss. Within Volkan's framework of collective and "chosen trauma" [14,15], forced displacement may be considered a point of intersection between individual and collective trauma, where personal loss converges with societal narratives, potentially intensifying pessimistic life orientations.

No statistically significant gender differences were found in levels of life orientation, indicating that the long-term cognitive effects of war experience may be more universal and less contingent upon gender-related factors.

4.1. Limitations of the Study

The findings of the present study should be considered within the scope of its methodological framework. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the research design, the study focuses on identifying associations between war experience and life orientation rather than examining causal relationships. Accordingly, while significant relationships between traumatic exposure and dispositional optimism–pessimism were observed, the data do not allow for conclusions regarding changes in these cognitive orientations over time. Future research employing longitudinal designs could provide valuable insight into the developmental trajectories of life orientation across different post-war phases.

In addition, the study relied solely on self-report measures, namely the Life Orientation Test–Revised (LOT-R). Although this instrument is well established and psychometrically validated, self-report data are inherently vulnerable to response biases, including social desirability and subjective interpretation of questionnaire items. In post-conflict contexts, such biases may be amplified by culturally shaped norms surrounding emotional expression and resilience.

The composition of the sample also presents limitations with regard to the generalizability of the findings. The predominance of relatively young and highly educated participants may not fully reflect the broader population affected by war-related trauma, particularly older individuals, those with lower educational attainment, or populations residing in rural or conflict-proximal regions. Consequently, caution is warranted when extending the results beyond the studied sample.

Furthermore, war experience in the present study was conceptualized at a general level, without differentiation according to the intensity, duration, or specific forms of exposure. While this approach allowed for the examination of life orientation within a broader post-war context, it did not permit a more fine-grained analysis of variations related to distinct traumatic experiences, such as direct combat exposure, loss of close family members, or prolonged forced displacement. Given that the psychological impact of trauma may differ substantially across such experiences, future research could benefit from incorporating more detailed indicators of trauma characteristics and severity.

Finally, the exclusively quantitative design of the present study constrained the depth of interpretation regarding the cognitive content of life orientation. While the LOT-R provides a reliable assessment of generalized future expectations, it does not capture how individuals with war experience interpret, narrate, or justify these expectations in relation to their lived experiences. As a result, the study cannot address the subjective meanings and contextual factors underlying pessimistic or optimistic orientations. Future research incorporating qualitative interviews or mixed-method designs would allow for a more precise examination of how war-related experiences are cognitively integrated into future-oriented beliefs.

5. Conclusion

The present study confirms that life orientation among individuals with war experience is characterized predominantly by average and low levels of dispositional optimism, indicating that generalized expectations regarding the future are modified by traumatic experiences. Statistically significant differences were observed across age groups, employment status, and forced displacement status, suggesting that life orientation is a dynamic construct influenced by developmental stages, social roles, and traumatic experiences. Gender differences were not found to be statistically significant, which may indicate that the long-term cognitive effects of war experience are more universal and less contingent upon sex.

The findings underscore that life orientation constitutes an important cognitive mechanism through which traumatic experiences are transformed into long-term psychological outcomes. From a practical perspective, the data suggest that psychosocial interventions should be directed not only at reducing stress symptoms but also at restoring positive expectations regarding the future and life significance, which serve as critical resources for long-term psychological adaptation.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

Statement of ethical approval

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for psychological research. All participants were informed in advance about the aims of the study, the procedures involved, and the conditions of participation. Participants were provided with detailed information about their rights related to participation, including the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. They were informed that all data collected would be anonymous, confidential, and used solely for scientific purposes. Data processing was carried out in a manner that excluded the possibility of personal identification. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to inclusion in the study. Participation was voluntary, and no financial or material compensation was provided.

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