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Optimistic Personality, Work Performance, and Interpersonal Relationships at Work: A Field Study

Fung Ming Chan
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Fung Ming Chan entitled "Optimistic Personality, Work Performance, and Interpersonal Relationships at Work: A Field Study." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

Eric Sundstrom, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

John Lounsbury, Richard Saudargas

Accepted for the Council:
Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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recommend its acceptance:

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Richard Saudargas

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Accepted for the Council:

Dr. Anne Mayhew

_____

Interim Vice Provost and
Dean of The Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file in the Graduate Student Services Office.)

Optimistic Personality, Work Performance, and Interpersonal Relationships at Work: A Field Study

A Thesis submitted for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Fung Ming Chan

May 2002

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my parents, Shu Hsian Chan and Yih Chi Chan. Starting off with nothing in a rural area in Taiwan, they worked and suffered through excruciatingly long hours and hard work to provide me with everything that I wanted. Not once would they complain, their only concern was for their children and to see them be the best they could be. Through their example, I have learned to not ask for more than I need, and to be humble for the things that I have. They also taught me that dreams don't just happen; you must work hard for the things that you want. Most importantly, believe in and think for yourself. I am very grateful for all the sacrifices they have made to give me the opportunity to become the person I am today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

A field study examines the personality trait optimism, defined as an enduring personal tendency to expect favorable outcomes, in relation to work performance and interpersonal relationships at work. Based on prior research and theory, the hypothesis predicts that optimism will correlate positively with job performance and positively with the quality of interpersonal relationships with co-workers and supervisors. 282 employees at a large manufacturing plant in the southeastern United States completed a work-based measure of personality, the Personal Style Inventory (PSI). Participants' immediate supervisors rated the employee's job performance and the quality of their interpersonal relationships with peers and supervisors. Statistical analyses tested correlational relationships of optimism with job performance and the quality of interpersonal relationships with co-workers and supervisors.

Results indicated a positive relationship of individual optimism with work performance and quality of peer and supervisor relationships. Implications are discussed.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Researchers have recently shown increased interest in the relationship between personality and performance at work (e.g. Barrick & Mount, 1991; Tett, Jackson, and Rothstein, 1991). In the last decade, the concepts of optimism and pessimism have generated a great deal of research interest in various fields in psychology. The current study looks at the personality trait optimism in relation to work performance and interpersonal relationships at work. Trait optimism is defined as an enduring personal tendency to expect positive outcomes (Scheier and Carver, 1985).

Optimism as an Individual Difference

The concept of optimism as part of human nature can be found as far back as the early 17th century with the philosophical writings of Rene Descartes (Domino & Conway, 2001). However, it wasn't until the latter part of the 20th century that optimism was treated as a personality trait. Julian Rotter's social learning theory, and especially his generalized expectations (locus of control and trust), legitimized a link to personality in terms of individual behaviors and expectancies about the future. Rotter (1966) argued that if a person perceives reinforcement as contingent upon his own behavior, then the occurrence of either a positive or negative reinforcement would either strengthen or weaken the potential for that behavior to recur. The Internal-External locus of control scale (Rotter, 1966) was one of the first scales to measure individual generalized expectations.

Seligman and colleagues viewed optimism as a person's "explanatory sty (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979). Seligman (1991) claimed that each person has a style seeing causes, and will usually apply it to their current situation. An optimistic person will explain bad events in a circumscribed way, with external, unstable, and specific causes, whereas pessimistic persons will explain unfavorable events as internal, stable, and global. This idea emerged from the theory of learned helplessness (Abramson, et. al., 1978). Learned helplessness,

or extreme pessimism, is a learned behavior that leads a person to think that present actions will have no effect on future results. Optimism implies the opposite. While pessimism is associated with and leads to incurring of negative outcomes, optimism is associated with and leads to securing of positive outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992).

Recently, Peterson (2000) introduced a distinction between two types of optimism. Peterson (2000) differentiates between big optimism, large and less specific expectations, and little optimism, specific expectations about positive outcomes. The big versus little distinction formulates a model of optimism that has several levels of distinction. Big optimism may be a biological tendency that produces a general state of vigor and resilience. On the other hand, little optimism may be the product of idiosyncratic learning that predisposes specific actions that are adaptive in concrete situations (Peterson, 2000). The two types of optimism are no doubt correlated, but it is important to distinguish the difference between the two. The reason being that the determinants of the two many be different, and ways of encouraging them may therefore require different strategies (Peterson, 2000).

Research on Optimism

Several empirical studies have examined the personality trait optimism as a predictor for performance. Seligman & Schulman (1986) examined the relationship of optimism and wok performance in a study of 104 insurance sales agents. Optimism was operationalized as a person's explanatory style: how he or she explained the causes of bad events. Those who explained bad events with external, unstable, and specific causes are described as optimistic, whereas those who favored internal, stable, and global causes are describe as pessimistic. Results showed that sales agents with low levels of optimism made fewer sales attempts, less persistence, and quitting. Salesmen with high levels of optimism sold more insurance than those less optimistic and remained in their job at

twice the rate. The better performance by optimists may reflect their ability to cope with stressors (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986).

Chemers, Hu, & Garcia (2001) assessed 256 first year university students to examine optimism and academic performance. Using the Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985) as a measure of generalized optimism, they found that optimism was strongly related to academic performance (r = .43, p<.001).

In a study of military cadets (n = 96), Chemers, Watson, and May (2000) examined optimism as a predictor of leadership efficacy. Chemers (1997) argued earlier that a major aspect of effective leadership is the ability to project a positive image (also Lord & Maher, 1991). All Cadets participated in an evaluated group task, the Squad Tactical Reaction Assessment Course (STRAC). Each person in an 8 to 12 person squad acted as the squad leader for two separate missions. Cadets were evaluated using the Army's Leadership Assessment Program. Optimism was measured via Scheier & Carver's (1987) Life Orientation Test (LOT). Results showed optimism to be strongly positively correlated with ratings of leadership efficacy by instructors, peers, and trained observers.

The variable of optimism has also been used in the field of sports. Grove and Heard (1997) focused on optimism in relation to athletes' coping with performance slumps. Athletes (n = 213) from a variety of teams and individual sports were approached by trained research assistants and asked to participate in the study. Optimism was positively related to the use of problem-focused strategies (e.g. seeking of social support, positive interpretation, acceptance, etc.) and negatively related to the use of emotion-focus strategies (e.g. denial, distancing, alcohol/drug use, and goal disengagement) (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, 1989).

Strutton and Lumpkin (1993), in a study of optimism in relation to coping strategies, surveyed 101 salespeople from three firms in the textile (n =41) and communication technology (n = 60) industries using Scheier & Carver's (1987) LOT scale. Results showed optimists more likely to use problem-focusing coping tactics, while pessimists used more emotion-focused coping. The research speculated that

optimistic sales persons were more likely to perceive a given goal as attainable, and when faced with sales stressors, optimists were more likely to engage in careful analysis and to strengthen their efforts aimed at removing the stressor. Results were interpreted as suggesting that pessimistic salespeople are more likely to pull back from the stressful situation and shut down in a manner that would be harmful to their performance and the organization.

In summary, the concept of optimism as an individual difference has slowly begun to emerge in the field of psychology. Optimism, construed as a stable personality characteristic, has important implications for the manner in which people regulate their actions (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Using this implication, the current study will seek to explore the relationship between optimism with work performance and interpersonal relationships.

The Present Study

The first goal of the current study seeks to investigate the relationship between optimism and job performance. Using correlational analysis, measures of optimism and performance will be examined. The present study will attempt to support results by Seligman & Schulman (1986) with a blue-collar manufacturing population.

A second goal of this study is to expand the knowledge on optimism and determine if there is a relationship between individual optimism level and the quality of interpersonal relationship one has with his/her co-workers and supervisors.

Hypothesis

Personality trait scores on optimism a) correlate positively with work performance, and b) correlate positively with the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers and supervisors at work.

CHAPTER II
METHOD

Research Design

The data for this study comes with permission from an archival data set. The original data set was collected as part of a test validation study by Resource Associates, Inc., an industrial/organizational psychology consulting firm. The study was conducted at a large manufacturing plant in the southeastern United States. Optimism scores were collected using a self-report questionnaire. Job performance ratings (productivity), and interpersonal relationship scores (relationships with associates, relationships with managers and supervisors), and overall rating were evaluated by supervisors. All measures were developed and validated by Resource Associates, Inc. (Lounsbury & Gibson, 2000).

Participants

Participants in this study consist of employees (N=282) from a production facility in the southeastern United States. The participants are line production associates from various departments who are directly involved in handling machinery responsible for the manufacturing of automobile parts. Each department is responsible for producing various automobile parts depending on what is needed. The majority of the population consisted of Caucasian (96.8%) males (75.5%) with an average age of 31 years.

Setting

The participants were administered the questionnaire in a group-testing environment at the automobile parts manufacturing plant. This U.S.-based Japanese company is an international subsidiary of a major automotive parts manufacturer. Worldwide, the company employs more than 60,000 workers. This production facility is the company's largest in North America, with more than 2,500 employees. Participants were grouped in 25-40 participants per testing sessions. Each group was placed in a large

room that accommodated all the participants where they were then be asked to fill out the questionnaires.

Procedures

Researchers administer the *Personal Style Inventory* (PSI) (Lounsbury & Gibson, 2000) to the employees after their respective work line's shift ended. Groups of roughly 15 to 20 employees were given the measure at one time, with two to three groups taking the test throughout the day over a period of two weeks.

Test administrators were present to conduct the testing. An identical procedure was used for all groups and participants. The procedure included instructing and making sure all participants understand how to answer the questions on the questionnaire. Test administrators were present during the test to answer any questions. Finally, test administrators gave a verbal debriefing of the test after everyone has finished.

Supervisor rating questionnaires were gathered at another time. Supervisors were asked to fill out a standardized performance appraisal form that asked them to rate each participant. This form included ratings on each participant's job performance, relationship with peers, relationship with managers and supervisor, and overall rating. Each participant's performance appraisal was then matched with his/her PSI scores.

Measures

The *Personal Style Inventory* (Lounsbury & Gibson, 2000) scale for Optimism (Appendix 1) was used to measure individual optimism. The 11-item scale is in a five-point response format between two opposing statements.

Confidential ratings from the employees' supervisors will be obtained at a separate time. The supervisors rated their employees on several dimensions: productivity, relationships with peers, relationships with managers and supervisors, and overall work performance. Ratings on each dimension has a range in response from 1 to 8, with 8 representing the highest, or "best," rating possible (Appendix 2).

<u>Variables</u>

Optimism. This scale assesses a person's generalized outcome expectancies and general expectancies towards everyday life events. This measure consisted of 11 items. The measure was scored by averaging the 11 scale items. A minimum of 10 out of 11 scale items must be completed in order to be used in the analysis. All other data were treated as incomplete and was not used in the overall analysis. The scale has a maximum score of 5 with a minimum score of 1. The average range fell between 2.0 and 4.5.

Productivity Ratings. Confidential ratings from the employee's supervisors were obtained at a separate time. The supervisor rated their perception of the participant's productivity. Ratings on the productivity dimension is a one question statement that has a range in response from 1 to 8, with 8 representing the highest, or "best," rating possible. The average rating is 4.83 with a standard deviation of 1.20 and a range of 6.

Relationship with Peers/Supervisors. Ratings were obtained from the employee's supervisors concerning their perception of the participant's relationship with his/her peers and supervisors. One statement was asked about the participant's relationship with peers, and one statement was asked about the participant's relationship with his/her supervisors. Ratings on the relationship with peers and supervisors dimension has a range in response from 1 to 8, with 8 representing the highest, or "best," rating possible. The average rating is 4.89 for relationships with peers with a standard deviation of 1.29 and a range of 6. The average rating for relationships with managers and supervisors is 5.04 with a standard deviation of 1.26 and a range of 6.

Overall Work Performance. The overall work performance rating is not an average rating of other performance measures, but rather an independent rating representing an employee's "general" work performance tendencies. As with other performance ratings, this dimension has range in response from 1 to 8, with 8 representing the highest, or "best", rating possible. The average range for overall work performance is 4.91 with a standard deviation of 1.35 and a range of 7.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Data Analysis

The number of participants included in the study was (N = 282). However, due to some missing supervisor ratings and/or missing test data, the actual number of participants included in the data analysis was 252 employees. The population of the participants consisted of 96.8 % caucasian and 75.5% males.

Scatters plots with linear regression fit lines was drawn to check for linearity of the data (Figure 1-4, all figures are located in the appendix section). All four plots showed a linear relationship among each variable that was examined in the study with optimism(productivity, relationship with peers, relationship with managers and supervisors, and overall performance).

Tests for normality were performed on each variable to ensure that there were no violations of normality or linearity. In addition, histograms, box plots, and normal probability plots also revealed normal distributions with no evidence of outliers. Normality test for the productivity variable showed a Chi-Square score of 4.835, p = 0.0641. This result indicates that there is no violation of normality in the sample for the productivity variable. Tests for normality for relationship with peers (Chi-Square = 1.711, p = 0.4251), relationship with managers and supervisors (Chi-Square = 3.216, p = 0.2003), and overall performance (Chi-Square= 0.864, p = 0.6494) also showed no violation of normality.

Individual optimism scores were correlated with individual performance ratings, ratings of relationship with peers, relationship with managers, and overall performance ratings using the Pearson correlation method. Coefficient alpha for the optimism scale was $\alpha = .84$. Correlations and descriptive statistics between optimism and the four variables are shown in Table 1. As the table shows, all correlations were significant at $p<.01$ with the exception of optimism and relationship with peers which was significant at $p<.05$.

Optimism, correlated with productivity ratings at $r = .24$, $p <.01$. The predicted positive correlation between optimism and interpersonal relationships at work was confirmed. Optimism correlated with interpersonal relationships with peers at $r = .15$, $p < .05$ and with managers at $r = .19$, $p < .01$. A significant correlation of $r = .23$, $p < .01$ was found between optimism and overall performance ratings from supervisors. The data supports the hypothesis of a relationship between optimism and performance ratings as well as between optimism and interpersonal relationships at work.

Table 1

Pearson correlations, means and standard deviations for all study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Optimism Score	3.82	0.59	1.00				
2. Productivity Rating	4.91	1.35	0.24**	1.00			
3. Rating of Quality of Relationship with Associates and Peers	4.87	1.29	0.15*	0.63**	1.00		
4. Rating of Quality of Relationships with Managers and Supervisors	5.04	1.26	0.19**	0.66**	0.82**	1.00	
5. Overall Rating	4.83	1.20	0.23**	0.82**	0.72**	0.78**	1.00

N = 252

*p<.05

**p<.01

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The present study addressed the question regarding the relationship of trait optimism in relation to work performance and work relationships. Individual optimism scores, rating of work performance and work relationship with peer and supervisors were collected from a group of production workers at a U.S.-based Japanese manufacturing company. Based on the results of the correlational analysis, the present study finds that there is a significant positive relationship` between individual optimism and work performance and work relationships.

Contribution to Current Knowledge

The present findings of a positive relationship between optimism and work variables are consistent with previous research that has found optimism to correlate with psychological and physical adjustment (Scheier and Carver, 1985). For example, Seligman & Schulman (1986) found that insurance salesmen who scored in the top percentile on individual optimism performed better than those in the bottom percentile. Consistent with expectations, individual optimism was found to correlate with productivity and overall performance ratings. The present study was able to provide further support in suggesting that individuals with higher levels of optimism are more likely to have higher performance ratings than those with low levels of optimism, or that good performance at work can increase optimism levels in individuals.

In addition, the present study looked at the relationship between optimism and interpersonal relationships at work. The result shows that there is a relationship between individual optimism and the relationship with peers and supervisors. This suggests that individuals who have a high level of optimism may have better interpersonal relationships or skills that allow them to have better relationships with his/her peers and supervisors.

The results of the current study extend the literature on the effects of optimism and work variables. Individuals high in optimism tend to have higher work performance scores and better relationships with his/her peers and supervisors. This points to the need to further explore optimism as a variable when looking at various work variables. The present study also looked at a population that has not been examined by the optimism literature. Several studies (e.g. Strutton and Lumpkin, 1993 and Seligman & Schulman, 1986) have looked at the effects of optimism in salespeople. The present study looks at a blue-collar worker population and found similar results to suggest that the link between optimism and performance can be generalized across various occupations.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. Data were obtained from a relatively homogenous population(96.8 % white, 75.5% males). The majority of the population was comprised of white male workers in blue-collar positions. Many manufacturing jobs have a high percentage of male workers, and a large white population surrounds the location of the manufacturing plant. A more heterogeneous population is needed to generalize the results. Research should focus on gender and cultural differences to see how optimism affects each group. With the face of the work force becoming more diverse, it is important to look at how the selection variables differentiate across gender and cultures.

Another limitation in the present study is the lack of control for the self-report measures of optimism. Whenever self-reports are used, several questions about the validity and reliability of the data collected come into question (e.g. faking). This may be unlikely in this case, because the population consisted of job incumbents rather than applicants. Therefore, there are no advantages to faking. However, this remains a problem for all researchers attempting field research with self-report measures (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998). Ones, Viswesvaran, and Korbin's (1995) meta-analysis of this literature reported that faking can increase scores nearly one-half standard deviations.

Finally, the supervisory rating of productivity and performance is a limitation to the present study. Since the study was a company sponsored validation study using incumbents, there was a great deal of concern about the length of time need for this process. The supervisory rating forms used were very limited and consisted of short general questions. These measures may be criticized as being too subjective and contains potential biases.

Future Research and Implications

The present study expands the current literature on the relationship between optimism and job performance. The findings from past studies as well as the present study indicate that the trait optimism may have a role in predicting job success (e.g. productivity, performance, interpersonal relationships, etc.). Future research should expand and examine the use of trait optimism to other job variables such as job stress coping styles, organizational citizenship behavior, and conflicts.

Due to the emerging success in showing strong relationships between optimism and various work variables, future research should compare optimism with personality variables such as openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability of the five-factor model. Perhaps optimism can help account for a greater amount of variance when trying to use personality to predict job variables.

Research should also further the study done by Seligman & Schulman (1986) by looking to see if optimism plays a role as a moderating or mediating variable between cognitive ability and performance. Seligman & Schulman (1986) showed that cognitive ability is not always the best predictor of success in insurance salespeople. Future research should expand on this study to determine the role optimism may play in predicting success in the work place.

The present study looked at the effects of optimism on a blue-collar worker manufacturing population. Future research should explore other fields of work to determine the generalizability of optimism. It would be interesting to see which fields and type of work are most affected by high levels of optimism, and those that do not.

Future research should strongly look to expand demographic factors that may influence the effect of optimism on job performance variables. There is little research controlling for gender, age, race, tenure, and organizational structure. These demographic backgrounds could greatly influence the level of optimism each person has.

One major implication comes in that if research can show causation between optimism levels and job productivity, organizations should consider measuring optimism in their selection process. Studies have repeatedly shown a relationship between optimism and job performance variables (e.g. Seligman & Schulman, 1986). The benefits of hiring an employee with high levels of optimism and screening out pessimistic employees far exceed the cost of adding one selection variable.

The results also lead to important implications in the areas of training and training effectiveness. Seligman (1990) suggests that it is possible for a pessimist to learn how to be more optimistic. Considering there is already a great deal of pessimism in the present society and organizations, the implication that one can learn how to be more optimistic is profound. Productivity and performance could possibly be enhanced if organizations could find a way to incorporate and manifest more optimism in their employees. Using techniques suggested by Seligman's (1990) learned optimism, organizations would be able to help their employees become optimistic and possibly increase their organization's productivity and performance.

Conclusion

A field study consisted of 282 manufacturing employees found that there is a positive relationship between optimism, job performance, and interpersonal relationships at work. The results are consistent with previous research on optimism and job performance variables.

In summary, the present study contributed supportive information on the topic of optimism and its relationship concerning job variables. The present study also expanded the current literature by exploring optimism with a blue-collar worker population as well as looking at the relationship between optimism and interpersonal relationship at work.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: *Personal Style Inventory* (Optimism scale)

by: Lounsbury, J. W., & Gibson, L. W. (2000).

1. I do not have expectations for success outstanding success in my future.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I have expectations for outstanding in my future.

2. I have really high hopes for myself.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I do not have really high hopes for myself.

3. I am basically a pessimistic person.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I am basically an optimistic person.

4. I tend to agree more with the saying "The glass is half empty."

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I tend to agree more with the saying "The glass is half full."

5. When things aren't going my way, tend to I tend to feel down.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

When things aren't going my way, I stay positive.

6. I do not have very high expectations for how my work will go next year.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I have very high expectations for how my work will go next year.

7. When the future is uncertain, I tend to anticipate positive outcomes.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

When the future is uncertain, I tend to anticipate problems.

8. When bad things happen, I tend to dwell on look on the bright side.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

When bad things happen, I tend to them.

9. I do not expect to be recognized as an outstanding performer in my occupational field.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I expect to be recognized as an outstanding performer in my occupational field.

10. I really believe in the saying "Every cloud has a silver lining."

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

I don't really believe in the saying "Every cloud has a silver lining."

11. When something significant but unexpected happens in my life, it's usually something bad.

☐☐☐☐☐
1 2 3 4 5

When something significant but unexpected happens in my life, it's usually something good.

Appendix 2:

Rating Scale used for Relationship with Peers, Relationship with Supervisors, and Overall Performance Rating

1 = Performance <u>does not meet, or rarely meets</u>, minimum job standards.

2 = Performance is <u>less than satisfactory</u> in many aspects.

3 = Performance is <u>satisfactory in most respects</u> but not all.

4 = Performance is <u>satisfactory in all</u> respects.

5 = Performance is <u>above average performance</u> but not superior.

6 = Performance is <u>superior in almost all respects</u>.

7 = Performance is <u>definitely superior</u> in all respects.

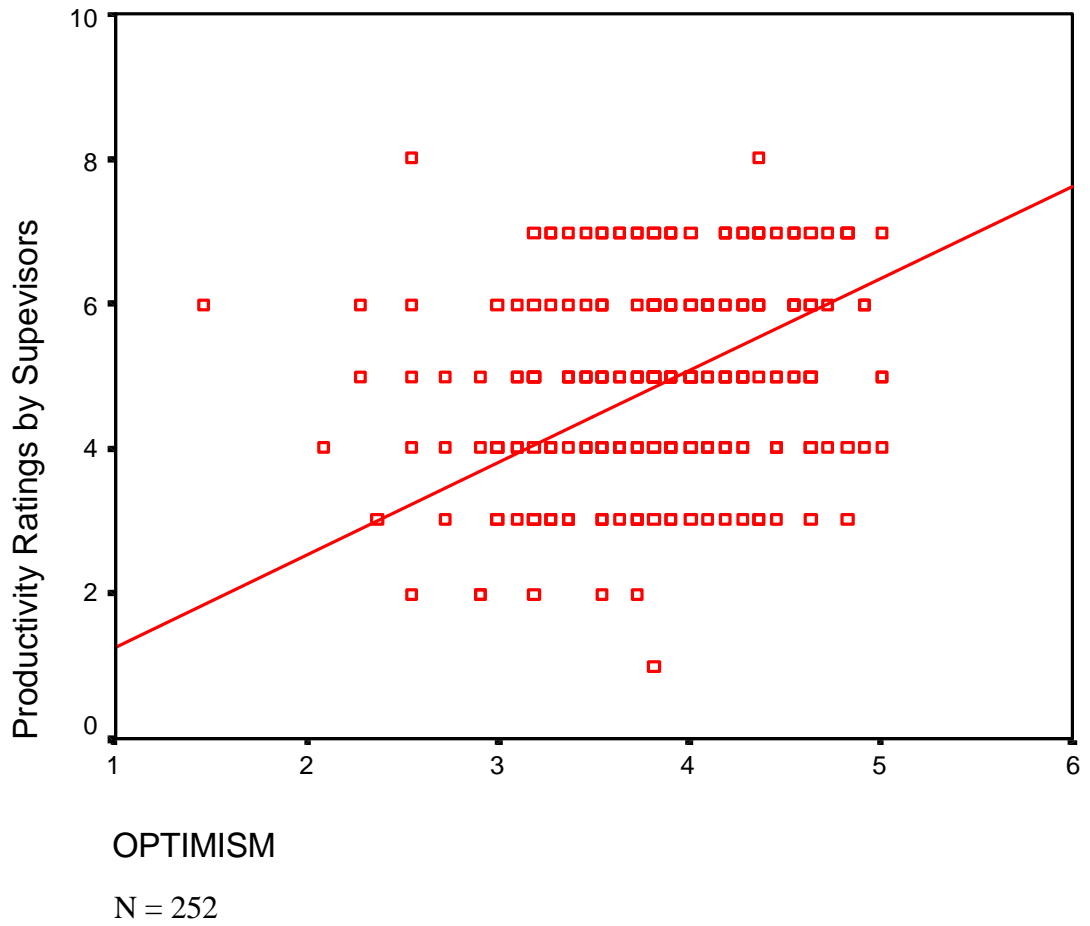8 = <u>Single best</u> performance I have ever observed or even hope to observe.

Figure 1: Scatter plot of Supervisor's Ratings of Productivity and Individual Optimism Scores
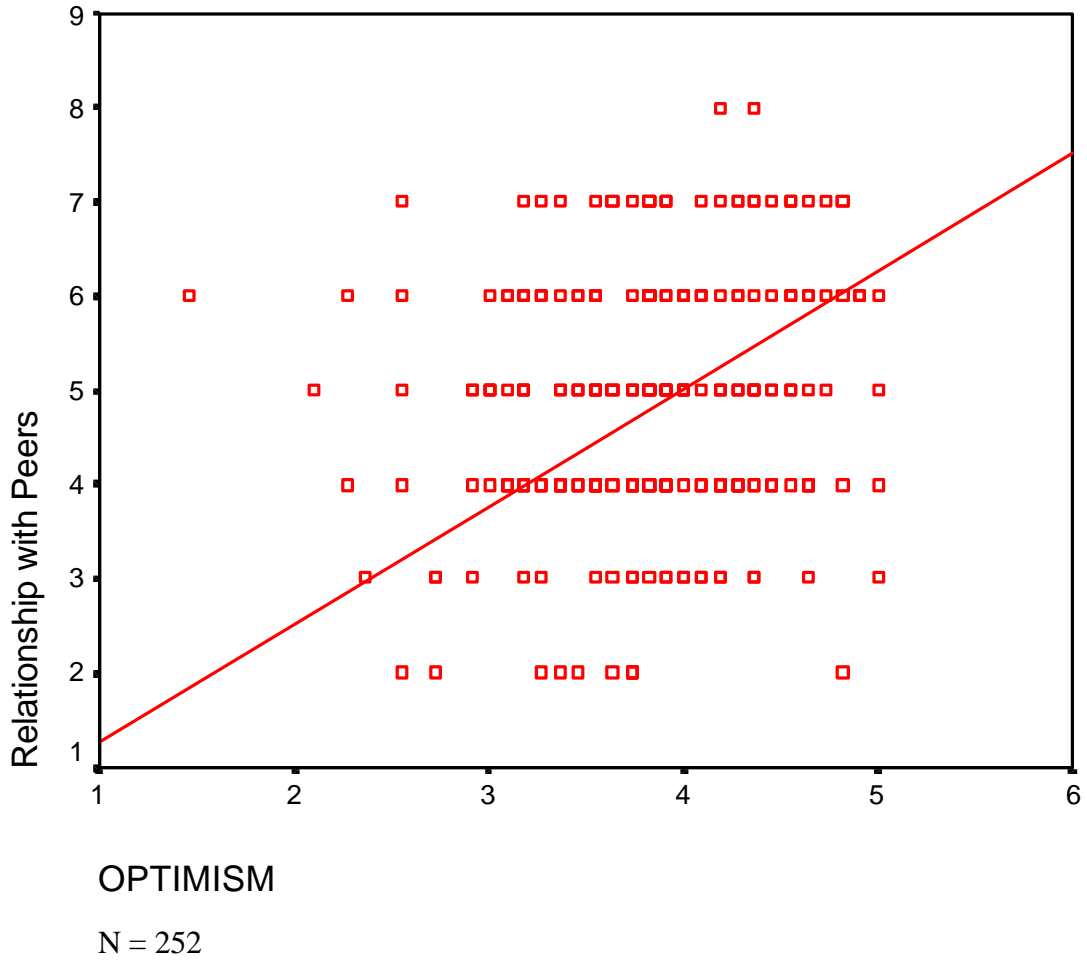
**Figure 2: Scatter plot of Relationship with Peers and
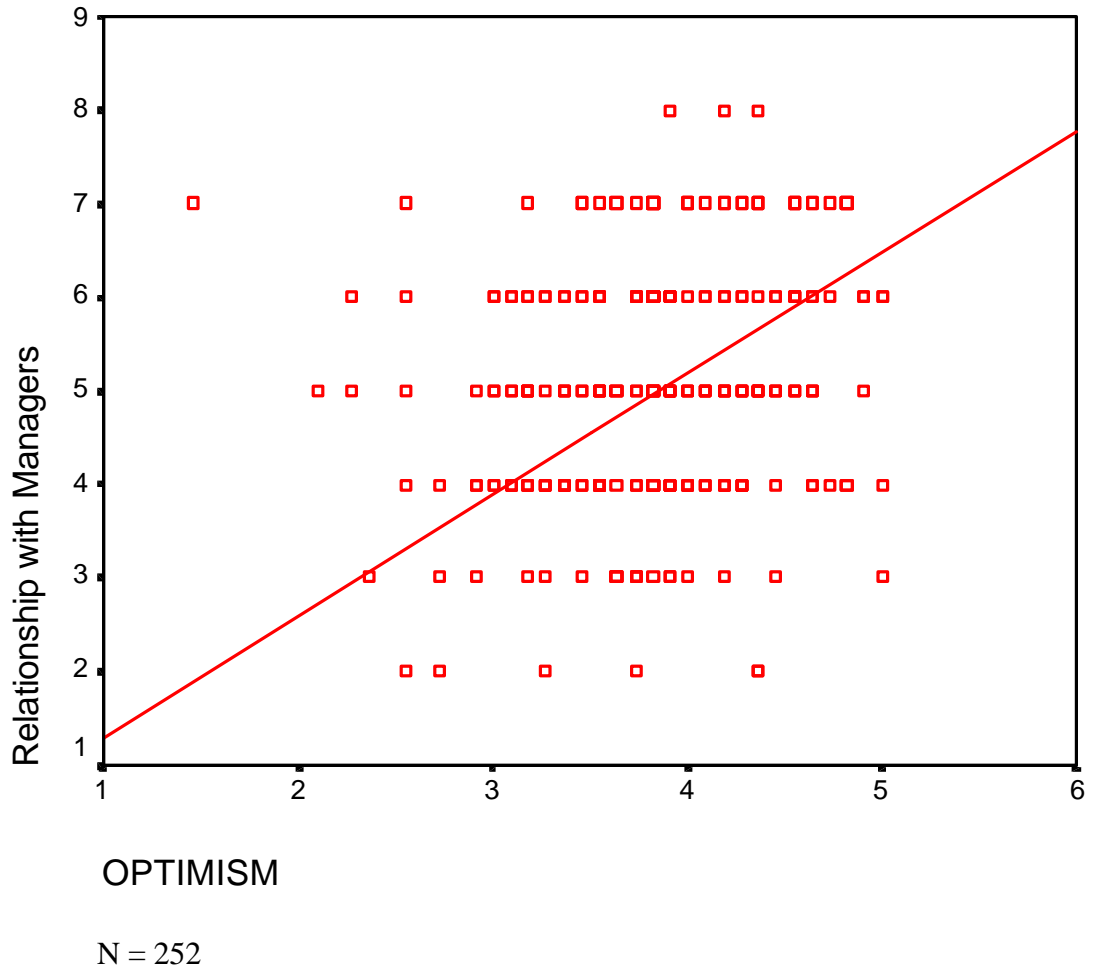Individual Optimism Scores.**

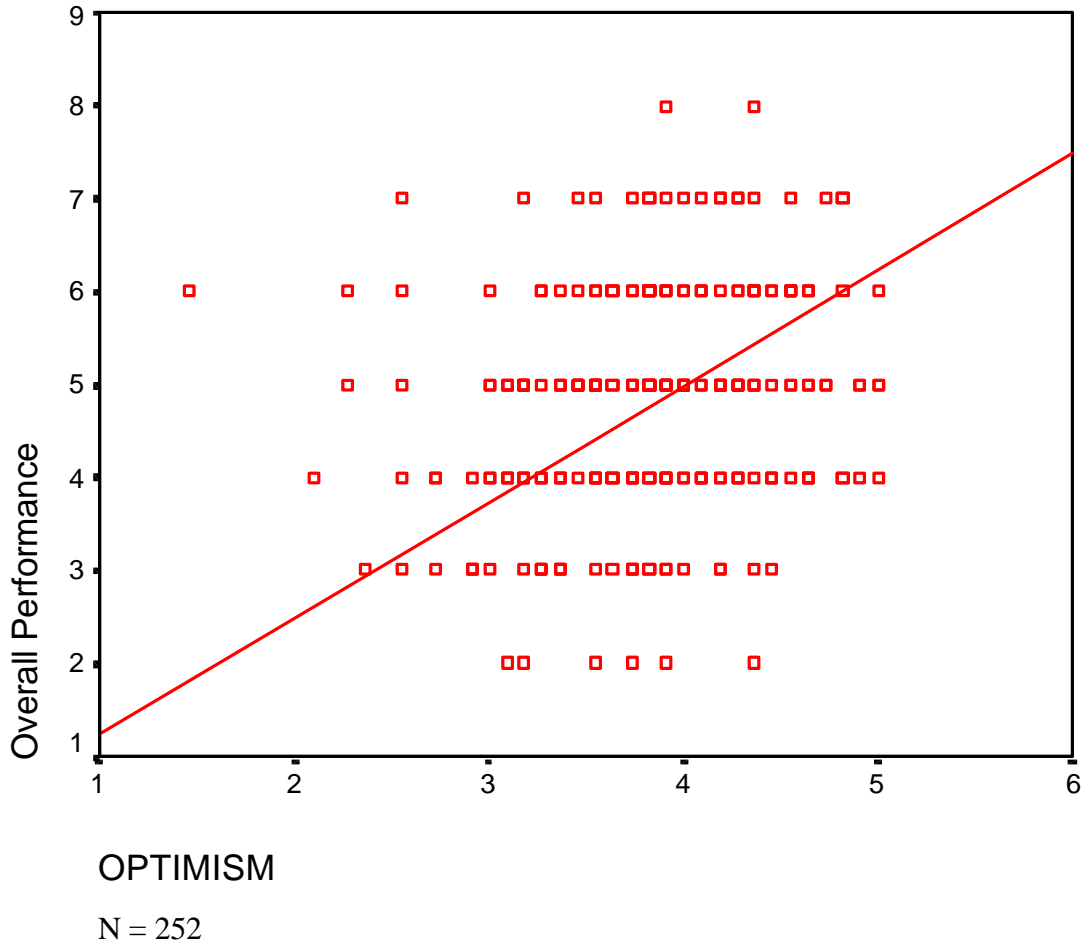**Figure 3: Scatter plot of Relationship with Managers and Supervisors and Individual Optimism Scores.**

Figure 4: Scatter plot of Individual Optimism Scores and Overall Performance Scores.

VITA

Fung Ming Chan was born in Kaohsiung, Taiwan on November 4th, 1976. His family moved to Hong Kong at the age of 7 where he started grade school. Three years later, his family moved to Orange County, California where he attended Golden elementary school for 4th and 5th grade. Fung Ming and his family moved once again to Atlanta, Georgia where he graduated from Morrow High School. From there, he attended Emory University in Atlanta and received a B.A. in Psychology in 1998.

Fung Ming is currently pursuing his doctorate in industrial / applied psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His research interests include positive psychology and its effects on life and at work, gender research, suggestibility, marital relationships, and vengeance behaviors.