

***Exploring the Relationship Between Realistic Optimism and Big Five Personality Traits
Among Indian University Students***

Aneesah Nishaat, Higashi Nippon International University, Japan

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between realistic optimism and the Big Five personality traits among Indian university students, offering insights into these constructs in a non-Western context. Realistic optimism, emphasizing a hopeful yet grounded perspective toward the future, was measured using Nishaat's (2018) Realistic Optimism Scale, while personality traits were assessed using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI). A total of 209 students from three universities in West Bengal, India participated in the study. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that Emotional Stability showed the strongest positive correlation with realistic optimism, particularly with the Flexibility subcomponent. Other significant correlations were found between realistic optimism and Agreeableness, Openness to experience, and Conscientiousness. Notably, Extraversion showed no significant correlation. These results suggest that emotional regulation, interpersonal harmony, and cognitive openness play critical roles in fostering realistic optimism in an Indian cultural context. Additionally, the absence of a link between Extraversion and realistic optimism may reflect cultural differences in the expression of personality traits. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of considering cultural nuances when examining optimism and personality, suggesting that interventions to enhance realistic optimism should focus on emotional regulation and flexibility. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how personality and optimism intersect across different cultural settings.

Keywords: Realistic Optimism, Big Five Personality Traits, Indian University Students

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Introduction

In recent years, the field of positive psychology has increasingly focused on optimism as a key construct in understanding and promoting well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2005). Optimism, broadly defined as a tendency to hold positive expectations about future events, has been associated with numerous positive outcomes, including better psychological adjustment, healthier behaviors, and improved physical health (Rasmussen et al., 2009; Scheier et al., 2001). Some researchers, however, argue that optimism and pessimism might not be completely opposite constructs but rather independent dimensions (Zuckerman, 2003). Various forms of optimism have been conceptualized, including dispositional optimism, explanatory style (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Scheier et al., 1994; Seligman, 1991). Studies have shown that individuals with a more optimistic outlook tend to have better psychological adjustment, engage in healthier behaviors, and experience improved physical health (Rasmussen et al., 2009; Scheier et al., 2001).

While various forms of optimism have been conceptualized, this study focuses on realistic optimism. Realistic optimism, as described by Schneider (2001), emphasizes a hopeful yet grounded perspective toward the future. It involves focusing on favorable past experiences while acknowledging and accepting reality, thus driving individuals toward their goals with effort and resilience.

The relationship between optimism and personality has been a subject of growing interest in psychological research. The Big Five personality model, which encompasses five core dimensions - Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability (or Neuroticism), and Openness to Experience - provides a comprehensive framework for examining individual differences in personality (John & Srivastava, 1999). Traditionally, optimism has been most strongly associated with low levels of Neuroticism and high levels of Extraversion (Marshall et al., 1992; Williams, 1992). However, emerging evidence suggests that other Big Five traits, such as Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, may also play significant roles in shaping optimistic outlooks (Milligan, 2003).

While much of the research on optimism and personality has been conducted in Western contexts, there is growing recognition of the need to explore these constructs in diverse cultural settings. India, with its rich cultural heritage and rapidly changing social landscape, provides a unique context for examining the interplay between personality traits and optimism. The concept of optimism in Indian philosophy, often linked to concepts like karma and dharma, may differ from Western conceptualizations. Therefore, exploring how realistic optimism relates to personality traits in an Indian context can provide valuable insights into the cultural nuances of these psychological constructs.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the relationship between realistic optimism and Big Five personality traits among Indian university students. Specifically, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How does realistic optimism correlate with each of the Big Five personality traits in an Indian university student population?
2. Are there unique relationships between specific subcomponents of realistic optimism (Future Orientation, Flexibility, and Will/Courage) and particular personality traits?

By exploring these questions, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of optimism and personality in Indian context.

Sample

The study included 209 university students (97 males and 112 females) from three universities in West Bengal, India. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with data collection occurring in June 2023.

Two main instruments were used in this study:

1. Realistic Optimism Scale: Developed by Nishaat (2018), this scale consists of 12 items that measure three factors: future orientation, flexibility, and will/courage.
2. The Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) by Gosling et al. (2003) was employed to assess the Big Five personality traits. This inventory includes ten items, with each dimension represented by a pair of positive and negative items. Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0, where a correlation coefficient analysis was conducted. Pearson correlation coefficient analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between realistic optimism (and its subcomponents) and the Big Five personality traits. Prior to analysis, data were screened for outliers and normality. No significant violations of assumptions were found.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	SD
Future Orientation	209	3.91	.56
Flexibility	209	3.67	.83
Will/Courage	209	2.77	.95
Realistic Optimism (Total)	209	3.74	.50
Extraversion	209	3.92	1.49
Agreeableness	209	5.58	1.18
Conscientiousness	209	4.95	1.54
Emotional Stability	209	4.67	1.50
Openness to Experiences	209	5.25	1.33

Correlations Between Realistic Optimism and Big Five Personality Traits

The analysis revealed positive correlations between Realistic Optimism and several of the Big.

Five personality traits: Emotional Stability showed a moderate positive correlation with Realistic Optimism ($r = .37, p < .01$), indicating that individuals with higher emotional stability tend to exhibit more realistic optimism. Similarly, moderate correlations were observed between Realistic Optimism and Agreeableness ($r = .28, p < .01$) and Openness to experience ($r = .21, p < .01$). Conscientiousness had a lower, yet significant, positive

correlation with Realistic Optimism ($r = .15, p < .05$). Notably, Extraversion showed no significant correlation with Realistic Optimism in this sample.

Table 2: The Relationship Between Realistic Optimism Total and Big Five Personality Traits

	Realistic Optimism
Emotional Stability	.37**
Agreeableness	.28**
Openness to experience	.21**
Conscientiousness	.15*
Extraversion	-

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Correlations Between Factors of Realistic Optimism and Big Five Traits

Further analysis examined the relationships between specific factors of Realistic Optimism and the Big Five traits. Flexibility was moderately correlated with Emotional Stability ($r = .36, p < .01$) and Agreeableness ($r = .22, p < .01$). Future Orientation showed a moderate correlation with Agreeableness ($r = .30, p < .01$) and Emotional Stability ($r = .20, p < .01$). A slightly lower correlation was found with Openness to experience ($r = .19, p < .01$) and Conscientiousness ($r = .14, p < .05$).

Will/Courage also demonstrated a positive but low correlation with Emotional Stability ($r = .18, p < .01$). Notably, Extraversion did not correlate significantly with any of the Realistic Optimism factors in this study.

Table 3: The Relationship Between the Factors of Realistic Optimism and Big Five Personality Traits

	Future Orientation	Flexibility	Will/Courage
Emotional Stability	.20**	.36**	.18**
Agreeableness	.30**	.22**	-
Openness to experience	.19**	-	-
Conscientiousness	.14*	-	-
Extraversion	-	-	-

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the relationship between realistic optimism and Big Five personality traits among Indian university students, contributing to our understanding of these constructs in a non-Western context. The findings reveal a complex interplay between personality traits and optimism, with some results aligning with previous Western studies and others diverging in interesting ways.

The strong positive correlation between Emotional Stability and realistic optimism emerged as the most salient finding of this study. This result aligns with previous research by Sharpe

et al. (2011), who identified Emotional Stability (or low Neuroticism) as a key predictor of optimism. The robust relationship observed in the Indian sample suggests that the ability to regulate emotions and maintain emotional balance is crucial for fostering a realistically optimistic outlook, regardless of cultural context.

The particularly strong correlation between Emotional Stability and Flexibility further underscores the importance of emotional regulation in adapting to changing circumstances while maintaining a positive outlook. This finding may have particular relevance in the Indian context, where rapid social and economic changes may require significant adaptability from young adults.

Agreeableness, Openness to experience, and Conscientiousness also demonstrated significant associations with realistic optimism, albeit to varying degrees. Agreeableness suggests that interpersonal harmony and a cooperative nature contribute to an optimistic view of the world. This is consistent with the Sharpe et al.'s result (2011), indicating that optimists are more socially adept and friendly, leading to higher satisfaction in relationships. Openness implies that an openness to new experiences and a flexible cognitive style facilitate the development of realistic optimism. Conscientiousness, though less pronounced, highlights the role of goal-directed behavior and persistence in fostering a positive outlook (Sharpe et al., 2011).

The Subcomponent of realistic optimism—Future Orientation, Flexibility, and Will/Courage—further elucidates the nuanced relationships between personality traits and optimism. Emotional Stability had a significant influence on all three subcomponents, especially Flexibility, underscoring its role in adapting to changing circumstances with a positive mindset. Agreeableness was strongly associated with Future Orientation, suggesting that individuals who value interpersonal harmony are more inclined to hold positive expectations about the future. This finding may reflect the collectivistic aspects of Indian culture, where social relationships and harmony are highly valued (Sinha, 2014). Openness to experience and Conscientiousness showed specific associations with Future Orientation and Flexibility, respectively, reinforcing the idea that these traits contribute uniquely to how individuals perceive and approach the future.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of this study was the lack of significant correlation between Extraversion and realistic optimism. This result diverges from many Western studies that have consistently linked optimism with high Extraversion (e.g., Marshall et al., 1992; Williams, 1992). This discrepancy may reflect cultural differences in the manifestation of optimism or in the interpretation of Extraversion-related items.

Interestingly, Extraversion did not show a significant relationship with realistic optimism in this study, which diverges from the findings of Sharpe et al. (2011) that typically link optimism with high Extraversion. In Indian context, where interdependence and social harmony are often prioritized over individual assertiveness (Sinha, 2014), the typical Western conceptualization of Extraversion may not align as closely with optimistic tendencies. This finding underscores the importance of considering cultural context when studying personality traits and their correlates.

Overall, the findings highlight the complexity of realistic optimism and its multifaceted relationship with the Big Five personality traits. While Emotional Stability stands out as a central factor, Agreeableness, Openness to experience, and Conscientiousness each contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how personality shapes an individual's

optimistic outlook. These results suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing realistic optimism could benefit from a focus on emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and cognitive flexibility, potentially leading to more resilient and adaptable individuals.

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