

Dispositional Optimism and Perceived Stress in Adolescents Following Parental Divorce

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Abstract: Parental divorce constitutes a major family transition that may heighten adolescents' perceived stress, whereas optimism is generally regarded as a protective psychological resource. This study examined the association between dispositional optimism and perceived stress among adolescents whose parents had divorced. A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design was employed with 64 adolescents aged 14-18 years residing in Grobogan Regency, Indonesia. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and completed online measures described as Indonesian adaptations of the Life Orientation Test-Revised and the Perceived Stress Scale. Because both variables deviated significantly from normality, the hypothesis was tested using Spearman's rank-order correlation. The analysis revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive association between optimism and perceived stress ($r_s = .488$, $p < .001$; approximate 95% CI .28, .66), contrary to the hypothesized negative relationship. This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that optimism causes stress. Rather, it may reflect context-specific expectations, compensatory positive thinking elicited by distress, measurement-related characteristics, or unmeasured family and social conditions. The findings underscore the importance of distinguishing generalized dispositional optimism from family-specific hopes, including expectations of parental reconciliation. Counseling interventions should preserve adolescents' positive future orientation while fostering realistic appraisal, emotional acceptance, flexible goal adjustment, and access to supportive relationships.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social transformation. Throughout this stage, family relationships remain central to identity formation, emotional security, and stress regulation. Parental divorce may disrupt daily routines, residential stability, financial circumstances, parent-child contact, and adolescents' sense of family continuity. Meta-analytic and longitudinal evidence indicates that parental divorce is associated with an increased risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties; however, adjustment trajectories vary considerably across adolescents and over time (Amato, 2000; Auersperg et al., 2019; Tullius et al., 2022). Divorce should therefore not be conceptualized as a uniform or isolated event. Its psychological consequences are embedded within a broader ecology of interparental conflict, coparenting quality, economic strain, parenting practices, and social support.

Perceived stress is particularly salient in this context because it captures the extent to which individuals experience their lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming (Cohen et al., 1983; Harris et al., 2023). According to the transactional model of stress and coping, stress arises when individuals appraise environmental demands as exceeding the coping resources available to them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Obbarius et al., 2021). Adolescents experiencing parental divorce may therefore report elevated stress not merely because of the legal dissolution of the marriage, but also because of continuing conflict, altered caregiving arrangements, divided loyalties, uncertainty about the future, and diminished access to stable emotional support.

Optimism is commonly conceptualized as a generalized expectation that favorable outcomes will occur in the future (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Scheier et al., 1994). A substantial body of evidence associates optimism with more adaptive coping, lower psychological distress, and better mental health among adolescents and young adults (Candeias et al., 2026; Finkelstein et al., 2007; Rincón Uribe et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2025). Within family contexts, adolescents' optimism is also shaped by the emotional climate of the household and the quality of parent-child relationships (Hardie & Turney, 2022). Collectively, these findings support the conventional expectation that optimism may buffer the psychological strain associated with major family transitions.

Nevertheless, the psychological function of optimism may be context dependent. Generalized optimism can coexist with acute distress, and positive future expectations may sometimes be mobilized as a compensatory response when individuals confront circumstances over which they have limited control. Moreover, dispositional optimism is conceptually distinct from event-specific hopes, such as the expectation that divorced parents will reconcile. A cross-sectional association between optimism and stress may therefore reflect several plausible processes: stress may prompt deliberate positive thinking; adolescents may retain confidence in their broader future while remaining distressed about family circumstances; or unmeasured variables may simultaneously influence both constructs. Measurement considerations are also important, as adolescent adaptations of the Life Orientation Test Revised require careful evaluation of item wording, factorial structure, reverse scoring, and cultural equivalence (Kennes et al., 2021; Monzani et al., 2014).

Empirical evidence concerning optimism and perceived stress among Indonesian adolescents following parental divorce remains limited, particularly in nonmetropolitan settings. The present study addresses this gap by examining adolescents in Grobogan Regency. Rather than presuming that optimism is inherently beneficial or detrimental, the study evaluates whether the protective association commonly reported in the literature is also evident within this specific family-transition context. On the basis of the prevailing evidence, it was hypothesized that optimism would be negatively associated with perceived stress. The unexpected direction of the observed association is interpreted cautiously and used to identify implications for theory, measurement, and intervention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Parental Divorce and Adolescent Stress

Parental divorce may affect adolescents through multiple, interrelated pathways. Reduced daily contact with one parent, changes in household expectations, relocation, financial strain, and exposure to continuing interparental conflict may each intensify psychological stress. Long-term meta-analytic evidence indicates that offspring exposed to parental divorce face an elevated risk of several mental health difficulties, although average effect sizes are heterogeneous and vary across historical periods (Auersperg et al., 2019). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that mental health problems may increase following divorce and, for some adolescents, persist into adulthood (Tullius et al., 2022). These patterns highlight the importance of examining both immediate responses and longer-term adjustment trajectories.

The quality of post-divorce family relationships is particularly consequential. A systematic review of coparenting following marital dissolution found that coparental conflict and poor cooperation were associated with poorer child mental health, whereas supportive and coordinated coparenting was linked to more favorable adjustment (Lamela & Figueiredo, 2016). Adolescents' stress therefore cannot be understood solely from parental

divorce status. The intensity of conflict, the predictability of living arrangements, the availability of each parent, and the presence of emotionally supportive adults may determine whether the transition becomes manageable or develops into a chronic source of stress.

2.2 Dispositional Optimism as a Psychological Resource

Dispositional optimism refers to generalized expectations regarding future outcomes rather than confidence about a single event (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimistic individuals are generally more likely to persist when goals remain attainable and to disengage from or redirect effort toward alternative goals when circumstances become unattainable. This flexible self-regulatory capacity helps explain why optimism is frequently associated with adaptive coping and lower distress. Among adolescents, systematic evidence generally supports positive associations between optimism and mental health, including greater well-being and fewer internalizing symptoms (Rincón Uribe et al., 2022). Recent studies likewise report inverse relationships between optimism and stress or psychological distress in youth and young-adult populations (Candeias et al., 2026; Wu et al., 2025).

The protective function of optimism may also be partly relational. Family climate and parent–child relationships shape how adolescents envisage their future, while parental psychological difficulties may undermine adolescent optimism by disrupting the emotional and interpersonal environment of the family (Hardie & Turney, 2022). Optimism may further operate in conjunction with self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and perceived social support. Consequently, a single bivariate correlation is unlikely to capture the full set of mechanisms through which optimism contributes to psychological adjustment.

2.3 Context-Dependent Optimism, Measurement, and Research Gap

Although optimism is typically regarded as protective, its meaning depends on both the construct being measured and the context in which it is expressed. The Life Orientation Test–Revised was designed to assess generalized positive outcome expectancies rather than specific beliefs about parental reconciliation (Scheier et al., 1994). Validation studies with adolescents support its utility, but also emphasize the importance of examining factorial structure, positively and negatively worded items, and scoring procedures (Kennes et al., 2021; Monzani et al., 2014). Accordingly, a high total score should not be characterized as ‘idealistic optimism’ unless unrealistic or family-specific expectations have been measured directly.

Comparable caution is required when interpreting perceived stress. Although the Perceived Stress Scale is widely used, the meaning of its scores depends on the version administered, the adaptation process, the reference period, and the characteristics of the population (Cohen et al., 1983; Harris et al., 2023). In a cross-sectional study, a positive association between optimism and stress cannot establish temporal or causal direction. Such an association may indicate that distressed adolescents intentionally cultivate positive expectations, that optimism and stress are parallel responses to unmeasured family conditions, or that instrument adaptation and scoring procedures have influenced the observed pattern.

Accordingly, the present study examined whether dispositional optimism was associated with perceived stress among adolescents whose parents had divorced. The study contributes evidence from an underrepresented Indonesian district and evaluates whether the protective pattern dominant in the literature generalizes to this setting. The following hypothesis was tested: H1: Dispositional optimism is significantly and negatively associated with perceived stress among adolescents following parental divorce.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design and Participants

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design. The target population comprised adolescents residing in Grobogan Regency, Indonesia, whose parents had been divorced for at least one year. Eligible participants were 12–18 years of age and able to complete an online questionnaire. Convenience sampling described in the original study as accidental sampling yielded a final sample of 64 participants. Although the eligibility criteria included adolescents from 12 years of age, the final sample ranged from 14 to 18 years. Because

the sample was predominantly female and 18 years old, this demographic concentration should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings.

3.2 Measures

Optimism was measured using the Indonesian adaptation of the Life Orientation Test–Revised (LOT–R) developed by Scheier and Carver (1985). The instrument consisted of 10 items (six favorable and four unfavorable) rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Reverse-scored items were recoded before calculating the total score, with higher scores indicating greater dispositional optimism. The adapted instrument demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in previous validation for Indonesian adolescents (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Perceived stress was assessed using the Indonesian adaptation of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen et al. (1983). The instrument consisted of 10 items (six favorable and four unfavorable) rated on a five-point Likert scale. After reverse scoring the negatively keyed items, higher total scores indicated higher perceived stress. The adapted scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

3.3 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected online through Google Forms between 1 and 15 June 2025. The questionnaire link was distributed to adolescents who met the eligibility criteria. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were analyzed in aggregate form. Although online administration facilitated participation across geographically dispersed locations, it may have excluded adolescents with limited internet access and reduced the researchers' control over the circumstances in which the questionnaires were completed. This study was conducted using an anonymous online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of the data, and their right to discontinue participation at any time. No personally identifiable information was collected.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, participant characteristics and descriptive statistics were summarized. Second, the distributions of optimism and perceived stress were evaluated using the one-sample Kolmogorov Smirnov test. Because both variables deviated significantly from normality, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to test the hypothesis. All tests were two-tailed, with the significance threshold set at $\alpha = .05$. Correlation coefficients were interpreted according to their direction and magnitude, and an approximate 95% confidence interval was estimated using Fisher's transformation. Spearman's correlation does not require linearity, although it assumes a monotonic association; consequently, the linearity test reported in the original manuscript was excluded from the inferential sequence.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Participant Characteristics

The final sample comprised 64 adolescents. Participants were concentrated in late adolescence, with 54 respondents (84.4%) aged 18 years. Female participants accounted for 67.2% of the sample. This demographic imbalance restricts the generalizability of the findings to younger adolescents and to populations with a more balanced gender distribution.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N = 64)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age (years)	14	2	3.1
	15	2	3.1
	16	1	1.6
	17	5	7.8
	18	54	84.4

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	21	32.8
	Female	43	67.2

4.1.2 Descriptive Statistics and Distributional Assessment

The mean optimism score was 25.62 (SD = 7.16), whereas the mean perceived stress score was 28.02 (SD = 6.75). Both Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were statistically significant, indicating that the distributions deviated from normality. A nonparametric correlation analysis was therefore appropriate. The original classification of scores as ‘low,’ ‘moderate,’ or ‘high’ was excluded because the reported category frequencies totaled 66 rather than 64 and because no empirically validated cut-off scores were documented.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Normality Tests

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Observed min	Observed max	K–S D	p
Optimism	64	25.62	7.16	0	45	.134	.005
Perceived stress	64	28.02	6.75	0	50	.201	< .001

4.1.3 Hypothesis Testing

Spearman’s rank-order correlation revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive association between optimism and perceived stress, $r_s = .488$, $p < .001$, approximate 95% CI .28, .66. Thus, participants with higher optimism scores also tended to report higher levels of perceived stress. Because the direction of the association was contrary to H1, the hypothesized negative relationship was not supported.

Table 3. Spearman Correlation Between Optimism and Perceived Stress

Variables	r_s	p	Approx. 95% CI	Direction	Hypothesis decision
Optimism–perceived stress	.488	< .001	.28, .66	Positive	H1 not supported

4.2 Discussion

The present study revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive association between dispositional optimism and perceived stress among adolescents following parental divorce. This direction diverges from the prevailing evidence, which generally characterizes optimism as a protective psychological resource associated with lower stress, fewer internalizing symptoms, and more favorable mental-health outcomes (Candeias et al., 2026; Finkelstein et al., 2007; Rincón Uribe et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2025). The unexpected result is therefore theoretically important, but it should not be interpreted as showing that optimism produces stress. The cross-sectional design establishes covariation only and cannot determine temporal precedence, causal direction, or the influence of omitted variables.

One plausible interpretation concerns compensatory or reactive optimism. Within the transactional model of stress and coping, psychological stress depends on how individuals appraise situational demands relative to their available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Obbarius et al., 2021). Adolescents facing uncontrollable family changes may deliberately sustain positive future expectations to preserve motivation, coherence, and emotional stability. Under this account, elevated stress may activate optimistic cognitions rather than optimism intensifying stress. The positive association may also be reciprocal: distress may stimulate hopeful thinking, while the failure of anticipated improvement may subsequently maintain distress. Longitudinal cross-lagged designs are required to differentiate protective, reactive, and reciprocal pathways.

A second interpretation concerns the level of construct specificity. The LOT–R was designed to assess generalized expectations of favorable outcomes rather than event-specific beliefs about parental reconciliation, the cessation of interparental conflict, or the restoration of previous living arrangements (Scheier et al., 1994). Adolescent validation studies further indicate that optimism scores are sensitive to item wording, factorial structure, and the treatment of negatively phrased items (Kennes et al., 2021; Monzani et al., 2014). Consequently, the present data do not justify labeling the measured construct as unrealistic or idealistic optimism. Adolescents may retain confidence in their educational, occupational, or interpersonal future while simultaneously experiencing considerable stress related to family instability. Future studies should therefore measure dispositional optimism, family-specific hope, expectations of reconciliation, acceptance of divorce, perceived control, and goal-adjustment capacity as distinct constructs.

The family-system context provides a third and particularly compelling explanation. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that adolescents' post-divorce adjustment is shaped less by divorce status alone than by continuing interparental conflict, disrupted parenting, and the quality of post-divorce family processes (van Dijk et al., 2020; van Eldik et al., 2020). In such circumstances, optimism may coexist with stress because positive expectations are embedded within an environment that remains unpredictable or emotionally unsafe. Thus, adolescents who strongly anticipate family improvement may also be those who are most psychologically invested in parental relationships and therefore most sensitive to conflict, inconsistent caregiving, or repeated changes in household arrangements.

Recent divorce-specific research also highlights the importance of autonomy, belonging, and cross-generational boundaries. Adolescents report more favorable post-divorce adjustment when parenting and coparenting practices support their autonomy and sense of belonging across households (Rejaän et al., 2024). Conversely, triangulation and boundary diffusion situations in which adolescents are drawn into parental conflict, expected to carry adult emotional responsibilities, or pressured to align with one parent are associated with poorer adjustment and more conflictual parent adolescent relationships (van Dijk et al., 2022, 2025). These processes may help explain why a positive future orientation does not necessarily correspond to low current stress. An adolescent may remain hopeful while simultaneously experiencing loyalty conflicts, emotional parentification, or uncertainty about where they belong.

The observed association may further reflect the operation of unmeasured protective and risk factors. Family emotional climate, parental psychological functioning, social support, resilience, self-efficacy, and school-based relationships may influence both optimism and perceived stress (Hardie & Turney, 2022). Evidence also suggests that autonomy-supportive relationships at school are associated with fewer internalizing problems, although their protective effects vary across adolescents and family contexts (Lan & Mastrotheodoros, 2024). A simple bivariate correlation may therefore conceal suppression, moderation, or mediation effects. For example, optimism might be protective only when accompanied by strong social support, low parental conflict, and sufficient perceived control, whereas it may show little benefit under persistent family instability.

Measurement considerations warrant equally serious attention. The source manuscript did not report the precise instrument versions, cultural-adaptation procedures, item composition, scoring syntax, or sample-specific reliability coefficients. Moreover, the reported score ranges do not correspond clearly to the conventional formats of the LOT–R and PSS. This is consequential because incorrect reverse scoring, the inclusion of filler items, or culturally non-equivalent wording could alter both total scores and the direction of the association. Research on adolescent optimism emphasizes the need to verify dimensionality and scoring procedures (Kennes et al., 2021; Monzani et al., 2014), while contemporary psychometric work on the PSS shows that observed scores contain multiple sources of variance and must be interpreted with reference to the version, population, and measurement occasion (Harris et al., 2023). Replication should therefore begin with a transparent psychometric audit and verification against the raw dataset.

The characteristics of the sample also constrain interpretation. The sample was small, recruited through nonprobability online procedures, and heavily concentrated among 18-year-old respondents; approximately two

thirds were female. Consequently, the estimated association may be unstable and may reflect the experiences of late-adolescent girls more strongly than those of younger adolescents or boys. Online recruitment may additionally favor participants with reliable internet access, higher digital literacy, and greater willingness to disclose family-related experiences. These features limit external validity and reinforce the need for replication with larger, stratified, and more demographically balanced samples.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a useful conceptual contribution by challenging an overly universal interpretation of optimism as automatically protective. The findings support a contextualized model in which the psychological value of optimism depends on its content, attainability, perceived controllability, and alignment with available relational resources. Optimism may be most adaptive when it sustains engagement with controllable goals while allowing acceptance and flexible disengagement from outcomes determined primarily by adults. Accordingly, practitioners should not attempt to reduce adolescents' optimism; rather, they should help adolescents distinguish realistic agency from responsibility for parental decisions and should strengthen emotional acceptance, coping flexibility, and access to supportive relationships.

The practical implications extend beyond individual cognitive interventions. Although structured stress-management programs can reduce adolescents' perceived stress (Boucher et al., 2024), post-divorce support should also address the relational environment. School counselors, psychologists, and community services should provide confidential spaces in which adolescents can process grief, ambiguity, divided loyalties, and expectations regarding family reunification. Where safe and appropriate, parents should be supported to maintain predictable routines, protect adolescents from interparental disputes, communicate consistently, and develop cooperative coparenting arrangements (Rejaän et al., 2024; van Dijk et al., 2020, 2025). Such a multilevel approach is more consistent with the evidence than interventions that place the burden of adjustment exclusively on the adolescent.

Future research should test an integrated model in which dispositional optimism predicts perceived stress indirectly through cognitive appraisal, coping flexibility, and perceived control, while interparental conflict, coparenting quality, family belonging, and social support function as moderators. Repeated measurement would permit examination of within-person change and clarify whether optimism precedes reductions in stress, emerges in response to stress, or operates reciprocally over time. Qualitative interviews could also illuminate what adolescents mean when they endorse optimistic statements and whether their expectations concern their own future, their parents' relationship, or both. This mixed-method and longitudinal agenda would provide a more defensible explanation of the unexpected positive association identified in the present study.

5. Conclusion

This study identified a statistically significant, moderate positive association between dispositional optimism and perceived stress among 64 adolescents following parental divorce in Grobogan Regency. The result did not support the hypothesized negative relationship. However, the cross-sectional design does not establish that optimism causes stress, and the instrument did not directly assess unrealistic or family-specific expectations. The observed association may reflect compensatory optimism, the coexistence of generalized confidence in the future with family-related distress, unmeasured contextual influences, or measurement and scoring characteristics.

The principal contribution of the study lies in challenging an overly universal interpretation of optimism as inherently and uniformly protective. In post-divorce contexts, optimism should be examined in conjunction with acceptance, perceived control, goal flexibility, social support, interparental conflict, and coparenting quality. Any substantive conclusion must remain provisional until instrument scoring, reliability estimates, ethical documentation, and raw-data consistency have been verified and the finding has been replicated in larger, more diverse, and longitudinal samples.

6. Recommendation

Future research should employ probability-based or stratified sampling, larger samples, and more balanced representation across age and gender. Longitudinal designs are required to determine whether optimism predicts subsequent stress, stress activates optimistic thinking, or the relationship is reciprocal. Researchers should distinguish dispositional optimism from family-specific hope and unrealistic expectations, while also assessing interparental conflict, coparenting, social support, resilience, economic change, custody arrangements, and time since divorce. All adapted measures should be accompanied by transparent scoring procedures, confirmatory factor-analytic evidence, and sample-specific reliability estimates.

In practice, schools and community-based mental health services should provide confidential, developmentally appropriate support for adolescents experiencing parental divorce. Intervention programs should integrate stress-management skills with realistic appraisal, acceptance of uncontrollable circumstances, flexible goal setting, and the strengthening of social support. Where safe and appropriate, parents should be involved to promote consistent communication and cooperative coparenting, thereby avoiding the placement of responsibility for adjustment solely on the adolescent.

Data Availability

The de-identified data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional ethical approval, participant confidentiality, and applicable data-protection requirements.

Declaration of the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Generative artificial intelligence was used exclusively to support English-language editing, structural refinement, and consistency checking during manuscript revision. The authors critically reviewed, verified, and approved the final manuscript and retain full responsibility for the study design, data, analyses, interpretations, citations, and conclusions.

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