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A Study of Personality and Student Involvement

On the College Campus

Most people would agree that it is better to be optimistic than pessimistic, to believe you control your fate rather than believe you do not, and be involved in community affairs rather than uninvolved. These three ideals may be the cornerstone to being a psychologically healthy person. It has been shown that these three factors produce a well rounded individual who strives for their goals, achieves them, and provides assistance for others. Responsibility, leadership, and hope are attached to these factors (Geist & Borecki, in Long, Williams, Gaynor, & Clark, 1988; Jackson, Weiss, Lundquist, & Soderlind, 2002; McCannon & Bennett, 1996; Seligman, 1998; Pandey, 1979).

The goal of many universities is to create individuals who work hard not only for themselves but also for the greater good. Salve Regina is no exception considering its mission:

> As a community that welcomes people of all beliefs, Salve Regina University, a Catholic institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy, *seeks wisdom and promotes universal justice*.
>
> The university through teaching and research prepares men and women for *responsible lives* by imparting and *expanding knowledge, developing skills, and cultivating enduring values*. Through liberal arts and professional programs, students develop their abilities for thinking clearly and creatively, enhance their capacity for sound judgment, and prepare for the challenge of learning throughout their lives.

> In keeping with the traditions of the Sisters of Mercy, and recognizing that all people are stewards of God's creation, the university encourages students to *work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful*. (Emphasis added)

Obviously, Salve Regina is interested in creating students who are involved in the lives of others. To be involved, students must not only acquire the right set of skills, but must believe that they can change the world. This study examines how such beliefs are associated with such a commitment. It is an attempt to see if an optimistic outlook and a sense of control over important outcomes is linked to student involvement, both on and off campus.

The Benefits of Optimism

Optimism and pessimism are rooted in one's explanatory style. Explanatory style is not simply words spoken, but the frame of mind and habit of thought when it comes to explaining one's behavior. Explanatory style stems from one's view of one's place in the world. An optimistic explanatory style can be seen in those who feel valuable and deserving, whereas a pessimistic style can be seen in those who feel worthless and hopeless (Seligman, 1998).

"Optimists end up healthier and more successful" in most aspects of life (Adams, 2007, p.142). They are less likely to be depressed than pessimists and have been found to make more money and have more successful marriages. Optimists also actually have a longer life expectancy than pessimists. Luckily, roughly 80% of the U.S. population is considered to be optimists (Adams, 2007). Optimists show more persistence and, as opposed to pessimists, they experience enhanced adjustment in a number of situations,

such as transition to college, pregnancy, and serious health threats (Jackson, Weiss, Lundquist, & Soderlind, 2002).

Though both optimists and pessimists are equally depressed when faced with adversity, optimists recover more quickly and are more likely to believe that there will be a positive outcome. Pessimists have a tendency to catastrophize and turn situations into the worst case scenario. "A cough turns into pneumonia [and o]ne missed deadline is the first step in a fast trip to permanent unemployment" (Adams, 2007, p. 143). When good things happen, optimists take credit and pessimists believe it's a fluke and when bad things happen, optimists believe it has little to do with them and the trouble will pass, whereas pessimists blame themselves and suffer for a long time.

It has also been shown that optimists are more persistent in puzzle solving. One study, in Adams (2007), showed that optimists spent 50 to 100% more time trying to solve a difficult puzzle than pessimists. This very persistence is what allows optimists more opportunity for success in school, work, and other endeavors. Another study showed that a person's level of optimism in the first year of law school resulted in a higher salary 10 years later (each 1-point increase on a 5-point scale resulted in a $33,000 increase in annual income) (Adams, 2007).

Optimists are more likely (as a result of this persistence) to choose appropriate goals and achieve them. They *expect* positive outcomes and view their projects and goals to be more fulfilling. Optimists also feel that they hold more control over their projects and experience less stress in accomplishing their goals (Jackson et al., 2002). In conclusion, optimists experience positive outcomes as a direct result of their expectations of achieving the positive outcomes.

Pessimism can be related to poor health, lower immune functioning, and decreased athletic performance (McConnell & Bill, 1993). Pessimists are less susceptible to self-enhancing biases and tend to see future outcomes more negatively. Additionally, pessimists stew over failure and dwell on their poor performance and are more prone to depression (McConnell & Bill, 1993). Pessimism is actually at the core of depression (Seligman, 1998). Because of their negative concept of the future, pessimists see bad events as permanent, pervasive, and personal and see the cause of good events as the opposite. An optimistic explanatory style can prevent depression because pessimism and depression seem to effect each other; depressed people are pessimistic and pessimistic people are depressed (Seligman, 1998).

Seligman postulates that there are four sub categories of optimism and pessimism: permanence, pervasiveness, hope, and personalization. A pessimist views the causes of bad events as permanent. A pessimist thinks about bad things in *alway's* and *never's* whereas an optimist thinks about these bad things in *sometime's* and *lately's*. Just the opposite is true for good events. The pessimist explains these events as temporary positives while the optimist explains them as permanent. This can affect how a person views future endeavors. Pervasiveness deals with universal versus specific explanations for events. When a bad event happens, pessimists view it as universal and affecting their entire lives. In other words the pessimist believes, "This bad event happened and will now ruin my life." An optimist would look at the bad event as something to deal with and simply move on (Seligman, 1998). This pessimistic view is dangerous because one small thing could go wrong and it would be attributed to many other aspects of their lives and be perceived as overwhelming.

Hope is a major part of optimism. This category is actually a combination of permanence and pervasiveness. Temporary and specific causes for bad events are characteristic of an optimist and are the underlying factor in hope.

> Temporary causes limit helplessness in time, and specific causes limit helplessness to the original situation. On the other hand, permanent causes predict helplessness far into the future, and universal causes spread helplessness through all your endeavors…People who make permanent *and* universal explanations for their troubles tend to collapse under pressure, both for a long time and across situations. (Seligman, 1998, p. 48-49)

Personalization refers to whether a person internalizes good or bad events or externalizes them. In the presence of a negative outcome, pessimists will blame themselves while optimists will blame others or the circumstances. Again, the opposite is true for a good outcome. People who blame themselves have low self-esteem as a result and are more likely to believe they are worthless, talentless, and unlovable. Optimists do not lose their self-esteem as a result of a bad event (Seligman, 1998).

The Benefits of Internality

Personalization is not unlike Rotter's notion of Locus of Control. "Locus of Control refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they can control events that affect them" (Rotter, 1966). People with an internal locus of control believe events result from their own actions. On the other hand, a person with an external locus of control is someone who believes powerful others, fate, or chance determines events (Rotter, 1966). Many people would agree that an internal locus of control is ideal. It is seen as the more

responsible and mature of the two. However, there is much more to being internal than the appearance of maturity and responsibility.

Studies show that internal people are more likely to be healthy and productive because they accept responsibility for the events in their lives (Geist &Borecki, in Long et al., 1988). Internality is also related to achievement in academic and professional settings and is a significant predictor of mature career attitudes (Geist &Borecki, in Long et al., 1988). It was also found that people who "reported high social avoidance and distress were significantly more externally oriented than individuals who were moderate or low on the social variable" (Geist & Borecki, in Long et al., 1988, p. 210). In addition, externality can be linked to competitiveness rather than cooperativeness (Geist &Borecki, in Long et al., 1988).

Externals tend to value leisure more than internals. "Perhaps individuals who view the control of life events as externally based are more inclined to value enjoyment of leisure rather than hard work to improve their circumstances" (Kleiber & Crandel, in Long, Williams, Gaynor, & Clark, 1988, p. 210). It is not that internals prefer not to indulge in leisure activities, but they would be drawn to activities involving physical exertion and activity whereas externals would be more likely to employ sedentary leisure activities (Kleiber, et al., in Long, et al., 1988). Such findings directly relate to student involvement. From the comments noted above, it would seem that an internal student should be more likely to take on more activities outside of the classroom.

The same inference can be made when applied to social help and social change. Internals will be more likely to participate actively considering their belief that their actions can have an effect. "Their competencies influence them to become active in

social action, change, and help for others in society" (Pandey, 1979, p. 285). This study found that active volunteers showed high internality while non-volunteers showed high externality. The volunteers who only volunteered for a short period of time and then dropped out were positioned between these two extremes.

The Benefits of Student Involvement

These findings indicate that internality should be correlated with the degree of involvement: the more internal the individual, the more likely they will be involved in both on and off campus activities. Student involvement in college is considered by many people a direct representation of their likely involvement outside of school later in life. Participating in organizations, groups, and other activities allows students to improve their leadership and organizational skills and is related to increased skill development as well as other aspects of personal growth (McCannon & Bennett, 1996).

"Student organizations play an especially critical role in leadership development where students learn, are tested, succeed, and sometimes fail" (Guido-DiBrito & Bachelor, in McCannon & Bennet, 1996, p. 312). Student involvement is important to success in college as well as in the outside world because such participation helps students improve their leadership and organizational skills. Additionally, involved students are more likely to be exposed to professionals in their fields and make connections for future positions. It has also been shown that students who are more involved in college experience a higher quality educational experience (McCannon & Bennet, 1996).

The study conducted by McCannon and Bennet (1996) looked at what influenced students' participation in organizations associated with their majors. They developed a

questionnaire on which students gave specific reasons for their involvement or their apathy. The two main reasons students were not involved were because they either did not have the necessary time due to a job or other reasons or they were not aware of the organizations available to them. The students who claimed to belong to one or more organizations indicated that they wanted to list membership on their resume or they wanted to meet people with similar interests (McCannon & Bennett, 1996). This study, however, did not examine what types of personalities were more likely to engage in extracurricular activities. This study was limited because it only focused on organizations devoted to the student's major area of study and also took at face value student explanations for involvement and noninvolvement in these specific groups.

Kuh and Gonyea (2006) examined involvement in spirituality enhancing activities and found that students who frequently engage in them exercise more, attend more cultural events, and are more likely to participate in community service. They also are more satisfied with their college experience and view the out-of-class environment more positively. The most relevant conclusion of this study is the finding that these students spend less time relaxing and socializing and more time participating in extracurricular activities.

Do Optimism and Locus of Control Influence Student Involvement?

The above review of the literature suggests that optimism, internality, and active involvement should all play an important role in the success of students. This study attempts to determine if and how these three factors are related. Unlike previous studies in the area, this study will look at student involvement in a wider sense. Other studies have looked at on-campus involvement within their majors, spiritual involvement, or

simply volunteering. This study will look at involvement in across variety of activities including off-campus jobs, involvement in student clubs, volunteering, and involvement in campus activities. It is assumed that involvement on these areas is positive because it increases student leadership skills, sense of responsibility, and the learning of new information and ideas that can be applied in the future. Student involvement not only benefits the student, but also benefits others and the community.

Method

Participants

Participants were 94 undergraduate students, both male and female, attending Salve Regina University. Participants were all volunteers and between the ages of 18 and 22. Some participants were offered the option of participating in lieu of another previously assigned assignment. Participants were not compensated in any other way. All participants signed an "Informed Consent" form prior to participation that provided a very brief description of the study and made claim that students could withdraw at any time.

Materials

There were three separate scales used for this study: *Optimism Scale, Locus of Control Scale,* and *Involvement Scale*. The three scales were counterbalanced to prevent carryover effects. The *Optimism Scale*, developed by Martin E. P. Seligman (1998), consisted of 32 questions addressing explanatory style for both good and bad events. The participants read a scenario and then chose one of two options for their likely reaction with this "forced choice" format. One option is considered "optimistic" while the other is

considered "pessimistic." For the purposes of this study, the overall optimism score is used to assess the relationship of optimism to student involvement.

The *Locus of Control Scale*, developed by Julian Rotter (1966), consists of 29 questions, including six distracter questions. Each question has two options and participants chose the response that is closest to how they feel about a particular choice. One response reflects an internal locus of control while the other indicates an external locus of control.

The *Involvement Scale* was constructed for this study and consisted of 12 questions. Three questions were simple demographic questions and the remaining nine were related to student involvement on and off-campus. For the purposes of this study, only questions 4 through 10 were used. Two questions were distracters (see the appendices A, B, and C for all three scales).

Design and Procedure

This study employs a correlational design to test the hypothesis that optimism and internality are related to students' involvement on and off campus. Ninety four packets consisting of the three scales were given to participants at the beginning or end of their regularly scheduled classes. Each student was first handed an informed consent form and verbally notified their participation was completely voluntary. Students were then handed the scale packet and given instructions on how to complete the questionnaires. The majority of students completed the packet in 15 to 20 minutes and then placed the packets on a table near the investigator. The answers were not reviewed until a later date and participants' names were not recorded.

Results

A correlational matrix was constructed to analyze the statistical association between all pairs of variables. A Pearson's *r* statistic revealed a significant relationship between optimism and internality ($p = 0.352$, $p < .01$). This analysis also found significant relationships between optimism and involvement in on-campus clubs and optimism and volunteering ($p = 0.297$ and $p = 0.33$, $p < .01$, respectively). A nearly significant relationship was found between optimism and involvement in campus activities ($p = 0.21$, $p < .10$). Internality was not significantly related to any of the involvement variables, contrary to predictions. However, a nearly significant result was obtained when examining the relationship between internality and involvement in clubs ($p = 0.207$, $p < .10$).

Discussion

Results were partially supportive of the hypotheses. Optimism appeared to be a more important factor in participants' involvement overall than internality. The relationship between optimism and club involvement and volunteering was clearly significant, whereas the relationship between optimism and involvement in campus activities showed to be nearly significant. Surprisingly, internality was not significantly related to any of the involvement measures. However, the relationship between internality and club involvement was nearly significant, indicating that internality is more likely than not related to club involvement.

Since optimism was found to be related to student involvement, optimism could play an important role in college students' first year experience. Universities work to ensure success in their students and if this is established through involvement, then it

might be concluded that improving optimism will increase student involvement. Seligman (1998) proposes a method for changing pessimism to optimism. Three simple techniques make up the bulk of his theory. The first is Distraction which is simply informing yourself to "STOP" thinking pessimistically. Some people have employed basic techniques, such as ringing a bell or snapping an elastic on their wrist, to snap them out of their negative thoughts (Seligman, 1998).

The second technique is Disputation which is characterized by arguing with the pessimistic response. For example, when receiving a lesser grade than expected a pessimistic response would be "This is so horrible! I will never succeed." The disputation would look like, "It's not that bad. The man next to me got a worse grade and I'll just study harder for the next test." The final technique is Distancing which tackles the common problem of reflective explanations being distorted. The idea behind this technique is to step out of yourself and check the response for accuracy. More often than not, the original response is a distortion and inaccurate (Seligman, 1998). These three techniques could be taught to freshman to help initiate them to an optimistic perspective.

Future research could look into the common claim that, "Involvement today means involvement tomorrow." A longitudinal study could be employed to trace alumni who were considered "involved" in school to find if later in life, they remained involved. Also, one could look into the four sub-categories proposed by Seligman (1998). Findings may show that one or two sub-categories are more significant factors in involvement than others. Therefore, the more significant sub-categories could be the focus of attention in a training program, such as described above, to improve involvement and future success.

There is also the question of directionality between the variables. Is it optimism that is influencing student involvement or is it actually student involvement influencing optimism? The relationship could also be circular meaning optimism equals greater involvement, equals greater optimism, and so on. Regardless of the direction of causality, however, it is important to increase students' optimism and to get them involved outside of the classroom, since there's little doubt that both optimism and involvement are associated not only with each other, but with other valuable outcomes.

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Appendix A

Optimism Scale

1. You and your significant other make up after a fight.
    a. I forgave him/her
    b. I'm usually forgiving
2. You forget your significant other's birthday.
    a. I'm not good at remembering birthdays.
    b. I was preoccupied with other things
3. You get a flower from a secret admirer.
    a. I am attractive to him/her
    b. I am a popular person
4. You run for a community office position and you win.
    a. I devote a lot of time and energy to campaigning
    b. I work very hard at everything I do.
5. You miss an important engagement.
    a. Sometimes my memory fails me
    b. I sometimes forget to check my appointment book
6. You host a successful dinner.
    a. I was particularly charming that night
    b. I am a good host
7. You owe the library ten dollars for an overdue book.
    a. When I am really involved in what I am reading, I often forget when it's due
    b. I was so involved in writing the report that I forgot to return the book
8. Your stocks make you a lot of money
    a. My broker decided to take a chance on something new
    b. My broker is a top notch investor
9. You win an athletic contest.
    a. I was felling unbeatable
    b. I train hard
10. You fail an important examination
    a. I wasn't as smart as the other people taking the exam
    b. I didn't prepare for it well
11. You prepared a special meal for a fiend and he/she barely touched the food.
    a. I wasn't a good cook
    b. I made the meal in a rush.
12. You lose a sporting event for which you have been training for a long time.
    a. I am not very athletic
    b. I am not good at that sport
13. You lose your temper with a friend
    a. He/she is always nagging me
    b. He/she was in a hostile mood

14. You are penalized for not returning your income tax forms on time.
    a. I always put off doing my taxes
    b. I was lazy about getting my taxes done this year
15. You ask a person out on a date and he/she says no.
    a. I was a wreck that day
    b. I got tongue tied when I asked him/her on the date
16. You are frequently asked to dance at a party
    a. I am outdoing at parties
    b. I was in perfect form that night
17. You do exceptionally well in a job interview.
    a. I felt extremely confident during the interview
    b. I interview well
18. Your boss gives you too little time in which to finish a project, but you get it finished anyway.
    a. I am good at my job
    b. I am an efficient person
19. You've been feeling run down lately.
    a. I never get a chance to relax
    b. I was exceptionally busy this week
20. You save a person from choking to death.
    a. I know a technique to stop someone from choking
    b. I know what to do in a crisis situation
21. You romantic partner wants to cool things off for a while
    a. I'm too self centered
    b. I don't spend enough time with him/her
22. A friend says something that hurts your feelings.
    a. She always blurts things out without thinking of others
    b. My friend was in a bad mood and took it out on me
23. Your employer comes to you for advice.
    a. I am an expert in the area about which I was asked
    b. I am good at giving useful advise
24. A friend thanks you for helping him/her get through a bad time.
    a. I enjoy helping him/her through tough times
    b. I care about people
25. Your doctor tells you that you are in good physical shape.
    a. I make sure I exercise frequently
    b. I am very health conscious
26. Your significant other takes you away for a romantic weekend.
    a. He/she needed to get away for a few days
    b. He/she likes to explore new areas
27. You are asked to head an important project.
    a. I just successfully completed a similar project
    b. I am a good supervisor
28. You fall down a great deal while skiing
    a. Skiing is difficult
    b. The trails were icy

29. You win a prestigious award.
    a. I solved an important problem
    b. I was the best employee
30. Your stocks are at an all time low
    a. I didn't know much about the business climate at the time
    b. I made a poor choice of stocks
31. You gain weight over the holidays and you can't lose it
    a. Diets don't' work in the long run
    b. The diet I tried didn't work
32. They won't honor your credit card at a store
    a. I sometimes overestimate how much money I have
    b. I sometimes forget to pay my credit card bill

Appendix B

Locus of Control Scale

1.
a. Children get into trouble because their parents punish them too much.
b. The trouble with most children nowadays is that their parents are too easy with them.

2.
a. Many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck.
b. People's misfortunes result from the mistakes they make.

3.
a. One of the major reasons why we have wars is because people don't take enough interest in politics.
b. There will always be wars, no matter how hard people try to prevent them.

4.
a. In the long run, people get the respect they deserve in this world.
b. Unfortunately, an individual's worth often passes unrecognized no matter how hard he tries.

5.
a. The idea that teachers are unfair to students is nonsense.
b. Most students don't realize the extent to which their grades are influenced by accidental happenings.

6.
a. Without the right breaks, one cannot be an effective leader.
b. Capable people who fail to become leaders have not taken advantage of their opportunities.

7.
a. No matter how hard you try, some people just don't like you.
b. People who can't get others to like them don't understand how to get along with others.

8.
a. Heredity plays the major role in determining one's personality.
b. It is one's experiences in life which determine what they're like.

9.
a. I have often found that what is going to happen will happen.
b. Trusting to fate has never turned out as well for me as making a decision to take a definite course of action.

10.
a. In the case of the well prepared student, there is rarely, if ever, such a thing as an unfair test.
b. Many times exam questions tend to be so unrelated to course work that studying is really useless.

11.

a. Becoming a success is a matter of hard work, luck has little or nothing to do with it.
b. Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.

12.

a. The average citizen can have an influence in government decisions.
b. This world is run by the few people in power and there is not much the little guy can do about it.

13.

a. When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work.
b. It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow.

14.

a. There are certain people who are just no good.
b. There is some good in everybody.

15.

a. In my case, getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck.
b. Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.

16.

a. Who gets to be the boss often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first.
b. Getting people to do the right thing depends upon ability. Luck has little or nothing to do with it.

17.

a. As far as world affairs are concerned, most of us are the victims of forces we can neither understand not control.
b. By taking an active part in political and social affairs the people can control world events.

18.

a. Most people don't realize the extent to which their lives are controlled by accidental happenings.
b. There really is no such thing as "luck."

19.

a. One should always be willing to admit mistakes.
b. It is usually best to cover up one's mistakes.

20.

a. It is hard to know whether or not a personal really likes you.
b. How many friends you have depends upon how nice a person you are.

21.

a. In the long run, the bad things that happen to us are balanced by the good ones.
b. Most misfortunes are the result of lack of ability, ignorance, laziness, or all three.

22.

a. With enough effort we can wipe out political corruption.
b. It is difficult for people to have much control over the things politicians do in office.

23.

a. Sometimes I can't understand how teachers arrive at the grades they give.
b. There is a direct connection between how hard I study and the grades I get.

24.

a. A good leader expects people to decide for themselves what they should do.
b. A good leader makes it clear to everybody what their jobs are.

25.

a. Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me.
b. It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck plays an important role in my life.

26.

a. People are lonely because they don't try to be friendly.
b. There's not much use in trying to hard to please people, if they like you, they like you.

27.

a. There is too much emphasis on the athletics in high school.
b. Team sports are an excellent way to build character.

28.

a. What happens to me is my own doing.
b. Sometimes I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking.

29.

a. Most of the time I can't understand why politicians behave the way they do.
b. In the long run, the people are responsible for bad government on a national as well as on a local level.

Appendix C

Involvement Scale

1. Age?

17 18 19 20 21 22 23

2. Year in School?

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

3. Sex?

Male Female

4. Do you have an off campus job during the school year when school is in session? If no, go to question 5. If yes, on average, how many hours do you work **each week**?

1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21+

5. Do you participate in any on campus academic clubs (e.g., psychology club, accounting club, biology club, etc.)? If no, go to question 6. If yes, on average, how many hours do you devote to the club(s) **each month**?

0-2 3-5 6-8 9-10 11+

6. Do you volunteer in the community (include activities for which you get school credit as long as you don't get paid)? If no, go to question 7. If yes, on average, how many hours do you volunteer **each week**?

1-3 4-7 8-10 11-14 15+

7. Do you participate in on=campus activities not required by professors (e.g., Late Night at Wakehurst, Stress Busters, Feature Films, Comedy shows, Lectures, etc.)? If yes, on average, how many times do you attend such events **each semester**?

1-2 3-4 5-6 7-8 9+

8. If you commute to school from home, skip this question. Excluding breaks (i.e. Thanksgiving, Intersession, Spring Break, etc.), how often do you go home for any reason **each semester**?

0-1 2-3 4-5 6-7 8+

9. If during the semester you go home (not including the Breaks listed above), how many hours do you work **each time** you go home?

0-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21+

10. If during the semester you go home, how many hours do you volunteer **each time** you go home?

0-2 3-5 6-8 9-11 12+

11. In an **average week**, how often do you "go out" at night to party, visit friends off-campus, watch a movie, etc.?

Never Once or Twice Three or Four Five+

12. On average, how many hours **per weekday** do you watch TV?

0-1 2-3 4-5 6-7 8+

Table 1

Pearson's r *Values*

p< .01	**Locus of Control**	**Club**	**Volunteer**	**Campus Activities**
Optimism	-0.352	0.297	0.33	0.21
Locus of Control	1	-0.207	-0.138	-0.096

*Significant values are shown in yellow and nearly significant values are shown in blue.