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Happy as an Extraverted Clam? The Role of Personality for Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

Personality characteristics, especially the traits of extraversion and neuroticism, have been proposed as the primary determinant of subjective well-being (SWB). Meta-analytic evidence presented here suggests that personality is indeed strongly related with SWB, and that only health is more strongly correlated with SWB. In a study of 137 personality traits that have been correlated with SWB, neuroticism was one of the strongest negative correlates of SWB. However, extraversion was not the primary factor associated with increased SWB. Rather, several personality characteristics that focus on the characteristic experience of emotions, on enhancing relationships, and on one's characteristic style of explaining the causes of life events are most intimately tied to SWB.

Keywords

subjective well-being; personality; meta-analysis; extraversion; neuroticism

What makes people happy? Of course, this is an age-old question, yet it is one that psychologists did not really begin to address empirically until the 1970s. In the past three decades, psychologists have moved from examining demographic factors to focusing on personality as the primary determinant of individual reports of life quality, referred to as subjective well-being (SWB). Two personality constructs in particular, extraversion and neuroticism, have been proposed as the keys to the relation between personality and SWB (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, in press; McCrae & Costa, 1991). In this article, I summarize the utility of this view.

META-ANALYSES OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

By 1980, more than 550 research studies had examined various demographic variables in relation to SWB. A series of meta-analyses have analyzed the relation between SWB and variables ranging from age to socioeconomic status. A

meta-analysis uses statistical methods to synthesize the empirical literature addressing a given topic and can often provide insight into contradictions that exist among the various studies.

For example, a meta-analysis might fruitfully be conducted on studies that examined whether drinking red wine might delay the development of cardiovascular disease. Let us assume that some studies reported that drinking red wine minimizes the risk for cardiovascular disease, some studies reported that drinking red wine actually increases the risk, and some studies found no connection whatsoever. All of the results from all of these studies could be statistically combined (taking into account factors ranging from the size of the sample to the quality of the study) in order to provide an overall conclusion as to whether drinking red wine can indeed minimize the risk for cardiovascular disease. A meta-analysis could then point out some reasons why the studies reported different results in the first place. For example, perhaps the studies that found drinking red wine was harmful asked participants to drink five glasses of wine a day, whereas the benefits arose in the studies in which participants drank one or two glasses a day.

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that self-reported health is one of the strongest correlates of SWB. In their meta-analysis, Okun, Stock, Haring, and Witter (1984) found an average correlation of $r = .32$ be-

tween health and SWB. Interestingly, the average correlation between SWB and health was significantly lower when health was rated by others (e.g., a physician) than when health was assessed via a self-report ($r = .16$ and $.35$, respectively). Additional research suggests that personality variables, such as neuroticism and characteristic perceptions, are largely responsible for the strong relation between individual reports of health and SWB (Diener et al., in press).

Other meta-analyses suggest that demographic variables do little to distinguish happy from unhappy people. (See DeNeve & Cooper, 1998, for a complete list of meta-analyses conducted to date, as well as their findings.) Men and women report equal amounts of SWB. SWB does not decline with age. Married individuals report being slightly happier than their nonmarried counterparts. Education is moderately related to SWB, but this effect is primarily due to an association between education, income level, and occupational status (Diener et al., in press). Income is also moderately correlated with SWB. However, contrary to popular belief, income appears to enhance SWB only to the point that it allows an individual to meet basic survival needs (Diener et al., in press). The socially active report more SWB than the less active. Finally, religious individuals tend to report more SWB than their non-religious counterparts.

Demographic variables having the strongest associations with SWB, such as income and religion, do not provide an adequate picture of who is happy and who is not happy. No single demographic variable can explain more than 3% of the variation between individuals' SWB, and national studies find that combining all demographic variables explains less than 15% of the SWB differences between people (Andrews & Withey, 1976;

Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). Ultimately, psychologists have concluded that demographic variables are largely irrelevant for SWB. Instead, personality has been hypothesized as the major determinant of SWB.

THEORIES OF PERSONALITY AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

One recent perspective on SWB suggests that individuals who are happy have a genetic predisposition toward happiness. Research comparing identical and fraternal twins at the ages of 20 and 30 years revealed that approximately 50% of current well-being may be caused by genetic influences (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). In addition, SWB has been tied to two neurologically based systems that were initially described by Gray (1991). The behavioral activation system (BAS) regulates behavior in the presence of rewards and is typically measured as extraversion or positive emotionality. The behavioral inhibition system (BIS) regulates behavior in the presence of punishment and is usually linked to neuroticism or negative emotionality. It has been hypothesized that extraversion predicts the presence of SWB, whereas neuroticism predicts its absence.

SWB researchers also emphasize personality when they adopt a top-down perspective (Diener, 1984). This perspective assumes all individuals have a global tendency to experience life consistently in a positive or negative manner and that this global tendency is determined by personality traits. This global tendency then influences the interpretation of momentary events. Although SWB changes when momentary events (either positive or negative) deviate from their typical pattern, personality

characteristics (especially extraversion and neuroticism) will ultimately return the person to his or her previously stable level of SWB (Headey & Wearing, 1989). Personality theorists agree, proposing that extraversion and neuroticism represent enduring dispositions that lead directly to current positive and negative affective states (McCrae & Costa, 1991; Watson & Clark, 1992).

These theoretical formulations point to a single conclusion: Personality should be among the most influential factors for predicting SWB. More specifically, extraversion should be critical to the experience of SWB, and neuroticism should be critical for the lack of SWB.

A META-ANALYSIS OF PERSONALITY AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

By 1996, fully 137 personality traits had been correlated with SWB. My colleague, Harris Cooper, and I synthesized this literature using meta-analytic techniques (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). We found 1,538 correlations between personality and SWB. These correlations were reported using 197 distinct samples of individuals, for a total of 42,171 adult respondents (average age of 53.2 years) from English-speaking countries. We found the overall correlation between personality and SWB to be $r = .19$. Thus, personality obtained a very strong relation with SWB, second only to subjective ratings of health in importance. This result is especially noteworthy given that the personality-SWB correlation ignored distinctions among the 137 distinct personality traits.

Of the 137 personality traits, extraversion and neuroticism were expected to be the strongest correlates of SWB, followed by personality traits that focus on control vari-

ables, such as desire for control (the extent to which a person wants control over the events in his or her life) and perceived control (the extent to which a person feels he or she has control over the events in his or her life). Contrary to this prediction, the most important personality trait was repressive-defensiveness (the tendency to avoid threatening information), with an average correlation of $r = -.40$. Seven additional personality correlates of SWB that were examined in three or more different samples obtained an average absolute correlation above $r = .30$. Of these seven variables, five were positive correlates: trust, emotional stability, desire for control, hardiness (the tendency to cope positively with stressful life events), and positive affectivity. The remaining two were negative correlates: locus of control-chance (the tendency to think that events happen based on chance alone) and tension (the tendency to experience negative emotions).

Although extraversion and neuroticism have received extensive empirical and theoretical attention, they were not the strongest correlates of SWB. One might argue that because extraversion and neuroticism have been researched with a larger number of diverse individuals, the results for these variables are more accurate than the results for other personality variables that have not been so widely examined. To test this possibility, we examined the average correlation for all personality traits that had been used in 10 or more distinct samples. (A total of 13 personality traits met this criterion.) Of these personality traits, affiliation (the tendency to want to relate with other people; $r = .29$) and perceived control ($r = .29$) were the strongest correlates, followed by neuroticism ($r = -.27$), internal locus of control (the tendency to credit or blame the self for events that happen; $r = .25$), social

desirability (the tendency to respond in a manner that one believes will lead to approval from others; $r = .23$), and then sociability (the tendency to relate well with others; $r = .20$) and extraversion ($r = .20$). In sum, extraversion was still not one of the most important correlates, ranking 6th of the 13 most commonly researched traits.

HOW PERSONALITY MIGHT INFLUENCE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

This pattern of results suggests that SWB cannot be explained solely in terms of extraversion and neuroticism. Rather, three general trends can be described. First, SWB is intimately tied to personality traits that focus on emotional tendencies, namely, emotional stability, positive affectivity, and tension. This finding makes intuitive sense; measures of characteristic emotions should be related to measures of current emotions.

Second, relationship-enhancing traits are also important for SWB. Affiliation refers to the desire and ability to form good relationships. Trust focuses on how a person views the behavior of another person. Social desirability and sociability refer to adaptive ways to relate to others. In addition to fostering better relationships, these personality traits appear to provide the bonus of facilitating SWB. This general trend extends Myers and Diener's (1995) suggestion that happy individuals tend to have strong relationships. Not only do happy people have strong relationships, but happy people are also characteristically good at fostering strong relationships.

Finally, several of the strongest SWB correlates suggest that the way people think about and explain what happens in their lives is intimately tied to SWB. Results on repressive-defensiveness, control

variables, hardiness, and trust point to this conclusion. On the one hand, individuals who tend to be repressive-defensive and who tend to believe that they do not control the events in their own lives are among the least happy individuals. On the other hand, making positive attributions can enhance SWB. Unlike repressive-defensives who deny the very existence of threatening events, hardy individuals diminish the impact of stressful life events by appraising these events in an optimistic fashion and then engaging in active coping efforts. In contrast with individuals who believe that powerful others or chance events control their lives, individuals with a desire for control are more likely to make attributions that give them a sense of control over their lives (Burger & Hemans, 1988). Likewise, SWB is related to the belief that one has a great deal of control over the events in one's life and that one is largely responsible for these events (as measured by internal locus of control and perceived control). Finally, Costa and McCrae (1992) indicated that people low on the trust scale "tend to be cynical and skeptical and to assume that others may be dishonest or dangerous" (p. 17). Thus, trust essentially measures the tendency to make attributions of people's actions in an optimistic or pessimistic fashion. In short, the pattern of correlations suggests that making positive, optimistic attributions and avoiding negative, pessimistic attributions is one key to experiencing SWB.

CONCLUSION

The research I have reviewed here suggests that personality is indeed of considerable importance for the experience of SWB. As previous theoretical frameworks indicated, unhappy individuals tend to be

neurotic, with the most unhappy individuals being especially prone to denying threatening life events. In addition, unhappy individuals tend to deny the existence of negative emotions although they actually experience negative emotions more frequently than their happy counterparts. However, to "be as happy as a clam," a person does not need to be extraverted. Rather, the happiest people seem to be those who characteristically explain their life events in optimistic, adaptive ways. Happy people are also those who are characteristically able to foster their relationships. Taken together, these results challenge past theoretical models that suggested extraversion is the key for promoting SWB. New models that incorporate the personality characteristics found to have the highest correlations with SWB need to be developed. Given that most of these important traits have been examined in fewer than 10 SWB studies, additional research examining the processes by which these personality traits might influence SWB is also sorely needed.

In addition to relationship-enhancing and optimistic traits, characteristic positive emotionality relates strongly to SWB. This result, together with the findings that SWB has a large genetic basis and is stable across the life span (Diener et al., in press), suggests that SWB itself has some of the qualities of a personality trait.

Finally, SWB researchers should begin to utilize experimental

methodologies more and survey methodologies less to begin to examine causal links. One promising experimental paradigm was described by Lyubomirsky and Ross (1997). In this work, participants were characterized as happy or unhappy some time prior to being invited to the lab, at which point they then participated in one of several experimental conditions. Using this type of methodology, SWB researchers can begin to move from identifying which personality traits are most closely associated with SWB to examining how characteristically happy people differ from characteristically unhappy people as they live their lives.

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Note

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