



SELF-DECEPTION AS A MEDIATOR OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISPOSITIONS AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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Summary—Psychological theories of subjective well-being (SWB) have been ambiguous in their explanations of how dispositions influence happiness. This paper suggests that self-deception may serve as one important psychological variable that partly explains the disposition–subjective well-being link. Our findings suggested that self-deception significantly affected subjective well-being. In addition, our results indicated that dispositional tendencies such as affective disposition and locus of control influenced subjective well-being through self-deception. Consequently, individuals who were positively disposed or had high expectations of control tended to use self-deception which in turn increased their SWB. This research provides a preliminary yet provocative look at the explanatory power of thought processes such as self-deception on subjective well-being.

Despite a long tradition of research exploring the sources of individuals' happiness, no one theory of subjective well-being (SWB) has risen above others to dominate this area of study. The main reason for this is incompleteness in the existing subjective well-being theories. Psychological theories of SWB are mainly divided into two broad categories, top–down and bottom–up (Diener, 1984). The top–down approach suggests that individuals are happy because they are predisposed to react to events and circumstances in a positive way, while the bottom–up approach maintains that people are happy because they experience numerous happy moments in their lives. A key distinction between these two approaches revolves around the role of personality. Top–down approaches emphasize the role of personality in interpreting the environment, while bottom–up approaches downplay personality influences. Both these theoretical approaches, however, ignore the cardinal question of *how* personality influences SWB. The top–down theory does not explain how and why predispositional reactions to stimuli influence happiness, while the bottom–up theoretical approach does not explain how different people can experience the same events but have very different interpretations. Consequently, although evidence has been presented to support both hypotheses (Dicner & Larsen, 1993), the fact that these theories are ambiguous makes it difficult to interpret the research testing these theories, as well as determine which results are valid and explain why contradictions occur. Accordingly, in order to make these theories more useful, they need to be better clarified and developed.

In as much as these theories are deficient in their explication of the mental processes leading to SWB, one possible way of better constructing these theories is by linking them to individual thinking styles. Thinking styles may explain how individuals select and process information in interpreting life events, and may account for individual differences in these interpretations. The idea of linking certain thinking styles to subjective well-being is not a new one. Evidence has been presented that dysfunctional thought processes, such as perfectionism and overgeneralization may cause unhappiness (Haaga, Dyck & Ernst, 1991). These thought processes are self-detracting and comprise inaccurate cognitions involved in screening, encoding and evaluating information (Keller, 1983), thus negatively biasing attitudes. On the other hand, accumulated evidence in social psychology research suggests that individuals may possess self-enhancing thought processes that, although irrational by nature, have a positive influence on levels of subjective well being (Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, thought processes such as unrealistic optimism, egocentric attributions, and illusion of control were found to

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be positively correlated with happiness and negatively correlated with unhappiness (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Greenwald, 1980; Miller & Ross, 1975; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980).

Despite this growing body of evidence suggesting that both positive and negative thought processes have a significant influence on happiness (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Haaga *et al.*, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988), little is known about the source of these thought processes. In other words it is not completely clear why some people engage in thought processes that enhance their happiness while others engage in thought processes that detract from their happiness. One possible answer is that people are predisposed to engage in these cognitive–evaluative thought processes. If indeed thought processes are the missing link between dispositions and subjective well-being, it is necessary to find a thought process which is linked to both of these constructs. Such a thought process is self-deception. Numerous studies suggest a strong influence of self-deception on happiness (Erez, 1994; Paulhus, 1986; Roth & Ingram, 1985; Sackeim, 1983; Sackeim & Gur, 1979). In addition, evidence suggests that self-deception is also associated with low levels of neuroticism (negative affectivity) and internal locus of control (Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Roth & Ingram, 1985; Sackeim & Gur, 1979). Thus, self-deception may serve as a link between dispositions and happiness.

Self-deception was defined by Sackeim and Gur (1978) as an unconscious tendency to see oneself in a positive light while denying information which threatens the self. According to these authors, four conditions describe self-deception. First, an individual holds two contradictory beliefs. Second, these two contradictory beliefs are held simultaneously. At face value these two conditions seem logically impossible since how can an individual believe in a proposition (e.g. it is raining) and its opposite (e.g. it is not raining) at the same time? However, the third condition provides clarification by stating that the individual must not be aware of holding one of these beliefs. This solution does not require a Freudian split of the mind but only that the self-deceiver can be aware of both a belief and a contradictory belief while overlooking the contradictory belief (Demos, 1960). Finally, the fourth condition holds that the individual must be motivated to determine which belief (s)he should be aware of and which (s)he should not notice. For example, as a graduate student, Mary had several papers accepted at top-level journals, leading her to believe that the review process was fair and accurately assessed quality research. However, as a new assistant professor at a leading University, the last five papers that she submitted to these same top-level journals were rejected. If Mary engages in self-deception, she will hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously. One belief is that the review process is fair and accurately screens research, while the contradictory belief is that top-level journal reviewers are not open to Mary's innovative ideas and therefore are unfairly judging her recent work. Since Mary knows the importance of top-level publications for her tenure review, if she is to be happy it is likely she will focus more on the belief that the reviewers are unfair while overlooking the possibility that the review process is accurate and that her recent research may not be top quality.

Sackeim and Gur (1978) demonstrated empirically the existence of self-deception and provided solid evidence that this construct is comprised of the four conditions described (see Sackeim & Gur, 1978 for review). These authors along with others (Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Roth & Ingram, 1985) also provided evidence that self-deceivers are less depressed. In addition, all these authors found that well-adjusted individuals, those who are less negatively disposed as well as those who do not believe they are victims of fate, engage in self-deception. Their self-deception is manifested by holding positively biased views of themselves, ignoring minor criticisms, discounting failures, avoiding negative thoughts, and expecting a high level of success in new efforts (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Accordingly, we hypothesize that self-deception may explain, in part, how dispositions such as affective disposition and locus of control influence subjective well-being. In other words, self-deception, as a thinking process, may mediate the relationship between dispositions and subjective well-being.

CAUSAL MODEL

A causal model was hypothesized which includes relationships between dispositions, self-deception, and subjective well-being. Figure 1 depicts the links contained in the hypothesized structural model. The links in this model are discussed below.

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