

Traits Can Be Powerful, but Are Not Enough: Lessons from Subjective Well-Being

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In the field of subjective well-being (SWB), Mischel's (1968) critique of personality is flipped on its head: personality traits strongly predict SWB, whereas situations often have only a small influence. Thus, the field of SWB is used to explore under what circumstances personality traits are likely to be important. Because of the strong influence of traits on SWB and a resurgence of interest in the "Big Five" system of traits, the area offers an excellent object lesson in the pitfalls of a personality psychology that relies exclusively on trait constructs. It is shown that even when traits offer strong predictions, they do not offer a complete account of psychological phenomena. It is concluded, however, that traits can be very important organizing structures with which to initially classify and understand some important phenomena of psychology. At the same time, scientific understanding based on traits must be augmented by a process orientation and a study of relevant situational factors in order for the field of personality to remain an intellectually vigorous science. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

Temperament concepts have proven to be extraordinarily useful in understanding people's subjective well-being (SWB). Not only are traditional traits crucial in predicting people's reports of happiness and life satisfaction but also personality affects other variables such as life events that in turn influence SWB. Because of the close link between the two fields, the study of subjective well-being provides an object lesson for personologists. The predictors of SWB demonstrate how important personality traits can be. Thus, by exploring findings on SWB, we may learn about the conditions in which personality traits have potent effects. A related lesson, however, is that trait concepts, with their simplicity and power, can be overused and therefore limit one's complete understanding of a phenomenon. Traits can become intellectual cul-de-sacs—pleasant, safe, and attractive, but not leading to full understanding. The field of SWB is ideal for demonstrating that the limitations of traits are not due simply to their lack of predictive power. Traits do strongly predict SWB, and therefore other limitations of the trait approach can be clearly brought into focus in this field. Thus, the domain of SWB

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shows both the inherent value of traits in comprehending human psychology, and that more than traits is needed for complete scientific understanding.

DEFINING SWB

During the past decade, substantive advances were made in understanding subjective well-being. For general reviews of the field, the reader is referred to Argyle (1987), Diener (1984), Diener and Larsen (1993), Myers (1992), and Myers and Diener (1995). Subjective well-being comprises people's evaluative responses to their lives—both cognitive and emotional responses. For instance, individuals can construct evaluations of their lives (life satisfaction) and specific domains of their lives (e.g., work and marriage satisfaction). At the emotional level, people react to the activities in which they are involved and to life events with pleasant affect (e.g., joy and affection) and with unpleasant affect (e.g., anxiety and grief). These cognitive and affective reactions to a person's life can be understood within the matrix of personality.

PERSONALITY TRAITS AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

The subdiscipline of personality focuses on exploring the consistencies and differences in everyday behavior—at the within-person, individual, group, and cultural levels. Subjective well-being is one such type of difference. How are we best to understand variations in SWB? Mischel (1968) concluded that situations are often powerful determinants of behavior, and that traits are usually only weakly related to specific responses. In the field of subjective well-being, however, Mischel's conclusion seems to be reversed: personality controls most of the variance in SWB, and situations appear to have virtually no long-term impact. If one examines SWB, one might even conclude that it is itself a trait that is predetermined by temperament at birth.

The evidence for the impact of personality on SWB starts with heritability. The well-known Minnesota study of separated twins suggests that approximately half of the variability in positive and negative affect is due to genetic variance (Tellegen, Lykken, Bouchard, Wilcox, Segal, & Rich, 1988). In contrast, common family environment had little effect on negative affect and only a modest influence on positive affect. The genetic influence on emotions can be seen in the temperament of infants. Temperament differences such as anxiety are evidenced very early in life, are related to physiological differences, and persist over time (Kagan, Snidman, & Arcus, 1992). In infants, asymmetries in the activation of the right versus left frontal cortex predict the infants' reactions to novel stimuli (Davidson & Fox, 1982). It is evident from existing evidence that one's inborn biology provides individuals with more or less of Meehl's "joy juice," predisposing the individual to greater or lesser SWB.

In adults, temperament predispositions are seen in people's consistent and stable emotional reactions. Diener and Larsen (1984) found that people's average affective reactions across situations were quite consistent. For example, individu-

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