



Personality traits and subjective well-being: emotional stability, not extraversion, is probably the important predictor

Joar Vittersø*

Department of Psychology, University of Tromsø, N9037 Tromsø, Norway

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Abstract

In a panel study, the relationship between Emotional Stability (ES), Extraversion (E) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) was tested against questionnaire data from 264 Norwegian folk high school students. After a careful reading of recent studies concerned with relationships between personality and subjective well-being, it was hypothesized that the effect from ES on SWB indicators (Life Satisfaction, presence of Positive Affect and absence of Negative Affect) is stronger than the corresponding effect from E. Moreover, it was anticipated that if ES was controlled for, the effect from E on SWB would decrease substantially. In several multiple regression analyses, it was found that, on average, the amount of SWB variance accounted for by ES was 34%, while similar figures for E were 1%. The results are discussed with reference to cultural values and traditions. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

More than 2000 years ago, Aristotle claimed that “It is contemplation alone that yields happiness” (cited in McGill, 1967, p. 18). Despite the popularity of paraphrasing Aristotle in current happiness research, his postulate about contemplation has had no impact on the literature. Contemplation is almost never mentioned as a correlate of happiness or subjective well-being (SWB). Reviews since the days of Wilson (1967) point to such factors as self-esteem, optimism and, not

* Tel.: +47-77-64-63-69; fax: +47-77-64-52-91.

E-mail address: joarv@psyk.uit.no

least, sociability and extraversion as the primary sources, or at least correlates, of SWB. Moreover, by many authors extraversion is held to be the cardinal trait of happiness and well-being (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Argyle & Martin, 1991; Baumeister, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Diener & Larsen, 1993; M.W. Eysenck, 1990; Hotard, McFatter, McWhirter & Stegall, 1989; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989; Lu & Shih, 1997; Lu, Shih, Lin & Ju, 1997; Magnus, Diener, Fujita & Pavot, 1993; Myers & Diener, 1995; Pavot, Diener, Colvin & Sandvik, 1990; Rusting & Larsen, 1997). However, in a recent meta-analysis DeNeve and Cooper (1998) found that when personality traits were grouped according to the Five Factor Model, emotional stability (i.e. the positive pole of neuroticism) was the strongest predictor of both life satisfaction and happiness, although extraversion contributed somewhat in explaining the variance in positive affect. Similarly, studies in which both extraversion and emotional stability are included as independent variables reveal that the effect on satisfaction from emotional stability normally outweighs the effect from extraversion (David, Green, Martin & Suls, 1997; DeNeve & Cooper; Hotard et al.; Pavot, Fujita & Diener, 1997; Ryan & Frederick, 1997). In other words, unless emotional stability is controlled for, there is a need for care when researchers interpret the relationship between well-being and extraversion.

The purpose of this paper is to question the status that extraversion has attained as the cardinal subjective well-being trait, and to ask whether emotional stability may not actually be a more salient personality trait in predicting SWB. SWB is a broad category of phenomena including people's emotional responses, domain satisfaction and global judgment of life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). Quite often, SWB is presented as a three-dimensional phenomenon, comprising perceived life satisfaction, presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Argyle, 1996; Diener, 1984, 1994), and all three aspects will be employed in the current article.

Personality is regarded as one of the strongest predictors of subjective well-being (for reviews, see Argyle & Martin, 1991; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener, 1996; Diener & Lucas, 1999a). Among the personality traits, extraversion is the one that has received the most theoretical and empirical attention. Already a generation ago, Warner Wilson claimed that the happy person is extraverted (Wilson, 1967). Since Wilson's seminal review, a huge body of literature has reported significant associations between extraversion and well-being (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Argyle & Martin, 1991; Baumeister, 1991; Diener & Lucas; Emmons & Diener, 1985; Fujita, 1993; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989, 1991; Lu et al., 1997; Pavot et al., 1990; Rusting & Larsen, 1997). However, a closer examination of these studies reveals that at least two issues remain ambiguous in the treatment of extraversion as the most dominant predictor of SWB.

First, the effect size of prediction from extraversion to SWB is normally quite small compared with the corresponding effect size from emotional stability. For instance, in a landmark article published in 1980, Costa and McCrae proposed a model relating positive and negative affect to the personality traits of extraversion and neuroticism respectively (Costa & McCrae, 1980). Within the framework of 1 year (four measures, 3 months apart) and likewise after 10 years, neuroticism correlated highly with negative affect, whereas extraversion correlated more moderately with positive affect. In both studies, the correlation coefficients were about 0.40 between neuroticism and negative affect and about 0.20 between extraversion and positive affect. Despite the fact that extraversion accounts for only about 4% of positive affect in a 10-year time span, and despite the fact that neuroticism predicts both positive and negative affect, the Costa and

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