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Social connectedness, extraversion, and subjective well-being: Testing a mediation model

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ABSTRACT

This investigation examined social connectedness as distinct from extraversion and as a mediation variable in the relationship between extraversion and subjective well-being. A college student sample ($N = 295$) and a sample of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB; $N = 148$) completed measures of extraversion, social connectedness, life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect. Factor analytic results suggest social connectedness is a unique construct from extraversion. Moreover, the relationship between extraversion and well-being was mediated by social connectedness.

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In personality and well-being research, extraversion has received considerable attention because of its association with life satisfaction, positive affect, and psychological adjustment. However, the psychological mechanisms that underpin this relationship between extraversion and well-being are less understood. Building upon the idea that the self-system functions as a psychological mediator, we investigated social connectedness as distinct from extraversion and as a mediator of the relationship between extraversion and subjective well-being.

Extraversion and well-being

Extraversion is considered a core higher-order trait of most personality taxonomies (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Depue & Collins, 1999; Goldberg, 1999; Watson & Clark, 1997) that is consistently associated with subjective well-being, particularly positive affect and life satisfaction. DeNeve and Cooper (1998), for example, found in a meta-analysis that extraversion was the strongest predictor of positive affect and happiness when personality traits were grouped according to the Big Five higher-order traits. Lucas and Fugita (2000) similarly found a moderate correlation between extraversion and positive affect in a follow-up meta-analysis. What remains relatively unclear in psychological research is how extraversion is associated with subjective well-being.

Most researchers have focused on instrumental-based and temperament-based explanations of the extraversion–well-being association. From an instrumental perspective, extraverts are more likely to socialize with other people, enjoy other people's company, and subsequently experience greater positive affect. But research has disproved some aspects of this instrumental view of extraversion. Pavot, Diener, and Fujita (1990), for instance, found that extraverts are happier even when not in social situations. Researchers subsequently have examined a temperament-based explanation for the association. That is, extraverts may have a higher baseline of positive affect regardless of the social situation or may react more strongly to positive stimuli than introverts. Across six studies and a meta-analysis, Lucas and Baird (2004) found support for the baseline affect model and only mixed support for the affect reactivity model. They concluded, "It is possible (and even likely) that the association between extraversion and positive affect is multiply determined" (p. 482). That is, temperamental and instrumental processes may work independently and collectively, as well as through other psychological structures and processes.

The self-system is a psychological structure and process that provides an alternative perspective on the extraversion–well-being association. DeNeve and colleagues (DeNeve, 1999; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) suggested that well-being is sustained by the ways in which individuals organize and make sense of social experiences through attributions, appraisals, and self-regulation. These psychological mechanisms reflect aspects of the self-system. However, only a few studies have examined self-system variables in this way. Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, and Finch (1997) reported that

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self-esteem mediated the relationship between personality and psychological adjustment in a study of college students. Other researchers have found emotion and self-regulation to mediate the relationship between personality and well-being (Chomorro-Premuzic, Bennett, & Furnham, 2007; Erez, Johnson, & Judge, 1995; Harris & Lightsey, 2005; Lischetzke & Eid, 2006; Uziel, 2006). These studies provide an initial understanding of how self-related variables organize instrumental and temperamental processes, as well as operate independently, to mediate the association between personality and subjective well-being, but more research is necessary to elucidate the relationship, particularly as it relates to extraversion and well-being.

Social connectedness as a mediator

We examined social connectedness as another self-system explanation for the association between extraversion and well-being. Social connectedness refers to a person's subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world *in toto* (Lee & Robbins, 1995). As people satisfy their need for belonging and connection, they develop a stable, secure sense of connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kohut, 1984). Social connectedness is related to but distinct from feelings of loneliness and isolation (Hawkey, Browne, & Cacioppo, 2005). In psychological studies, social connectedness has been found to be correlated with interpersonal trust, attachment security, social competence, fewer interpersonal problems, and identification with social groups (Barnai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Moller, Fouladi, McCarthy, & Hatch, 2003; Williams & Galliher, 2006), as well as to affective balance, self-esteem, fewer anxiety and depressive symptoms, and less rejection sensitivity and social avoidance (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Lee et al., 2001; Mashek, Stuewig, Furukawa, & Tangney, 2006; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001; Williams & Galliher, 2006). It also has been associated with length of home residency, marital status, religious affiliation, social networks, frequent conversations, and cell phone usage (Hawkey et al., 2005; Lee & Robbins, 1998; Wei & Lo, 2006). A few studies even suggest connectedness is related to elevated testosterone levels and more rapid blood pressure recovery following negative emotional arousal (Edwards, Wetzel, & Wyner, 2006; Ong & Allaire, 2005).

Social connectedness appears to be similar to extraversion as both constructs address the social experiences of the individual, but an examination of key features of each construct reveals conceptual differences. Extraversion taps primarily into sociability and agency or the motivation to form interpersonal bonds, to be warm and affectionate, and to seek excitement and attention. By contrast, social connectedness reflects a self-evaluation of the degree of closeness between the self and other people, the community, and society at large. It does not include motivations and agentic behaviors, as is the case with extraversion. Theoretically, extraversion likely precedes and even contributes to the emergence of social connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996). This distinction is evidenced in a study which found that extraverted people were more likely to take photographs that included themselves touching other people and with other people in the background (Dollinger & Clancy, 1993). These photographic self-representations reflected a general sense of connectedness experienced by extraverted individuals. Another set of studies found extraversion and a psychological sense of community, which is measured similarly to social connectedness, were only moderately correlated ($r = .34-.44$; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996; Lounsbury, Loveland, & Gibson, 2003). Although these studies suggest extraversion and connectedness are related but distinct, no known studies have directly examined the psychometric relationship between extraversion and social connectedness.

We specifically propose that social connectedness mediates the association between extraversion and subjective well-being. That is, extraversion relates to subjective well-being, in part, because people have developed and subsequently have maintained a sense of connectedness in their lives. This viewpoint helps to explain the mixed, empirical support for both instrumental and temperament-based explanations of the extraversion–well-being association. From an instrumental perspective, extraversion leads people to exhibit trust and affiliation tendencies which allow them to create and take advantage of social opportunities and develop more and better relationships. These relationships, in turn, likely satisfy the innate need for belonging and connection. From a temperament-based perspective, an internalized sense of connectedness helps to explain why extraverted individuals are able to regulate their interpersonal and emotional needs and feel happy and satisfied with their lives. It enables people to feel positive and good about themselves even when alone, in non-social situations, or in novel social settings. In other words, the proposed mediation model organizes instrumental and temperament-level explanations of the extraversion–well-being link around social connectedness as a self-system. However, no known studies to date have examined the relationships between social connectedness, extraversion, and subjective well-being.

Purpose of study

We examined social connectedness as an aspect of the self-system that helps to explain the association between extraversion and subjective well-being. First, we examined social connectedness as distinct from facets of extraversion. We hypothesized that psychometric analysis would reveal two theoretically related but distinct constructs. We also hypothesized that the two constructs would be moderately correlated. Second, we hypothesized that social connectedness would mediate the association between extraversion and subjective well-being which we measured by life satisfaction and affective balance. Specifically, extraverted individuals develop a stable sense of connectedness in their lives which provides them with the relationship-enhancing skills and the ability to organize and make sense of social experiences. These experiences, in turn, contribute to subjective well-being. We tested these hypotheses in two disparate samples of undergraduate students and individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB).

Method

Participants

College sample

The undergraduate sample consisted of 79 men and 216 women for a total sample of 295 participants whose ages ranged from 18 to 44 years ($M = 19.85$, $SD = 3.01$). Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White/European American ($n = 239$, 81%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 38$, 13%), Black/African American ($n = 11$, 4%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 2$, <1%), Native American ($n = 1$, <1%), and Biracial/Mixed ($n = 2$, <1%), with 2 omitted responses.

LGB sample

The LGB sample consisted of 76 men and 72 women for a total sample of 148 participants whose ages ranged from 18 to 56 years ($M = 26.93$, $SD = 8.68$). Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White/European American ($n = 123$, 83%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 9$, 6%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 6$, 4%), and Native American/American Indian ($n = 3$, 2%), and Other ($n = 4$, 3%) with 4 omitted responses. The majority identified as gay ($n = 71$, 48%) or lesbian ($n = 49$, 33%) with 28 (19%) identifying as bisexual.

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