



## Insight, but not self-reflection, is related to subjective well-being

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### ABSTRACT

This investigation tested the hypotheses that (1) individuals with higher levels of insight would be both happier and more satisfied with their lives than those with lower levels and (2) that an interaction between self-reflection and insight would affect both happiness and life satisfaction. Participants ( $N = 208$ ) were community members who completed four self-report instruments. They were divided into three groups according to their self-reflection (SRE) and insight scores. Then a  $3$  (SRE)  $\times$   $3$  (insight) MANCOVA was performed on satisfaction with life (SWLS) and subjective happiness (SHS) after controlling for age and psychological distress. Results indicated that insight was significantly positively associated with SWLS and SHS, but SRE was not. The interaction between SRE and insight was also not significant. Univariate analyses indicated that participants with the highest levels of insight were both significantly more satisfied with their lives and happier than participants with medium or low levels of insight, but the medium and low insight groups did not differ significantly from each other on either SWLS or SHS. Implications for future research are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

A variety of psychotherapeutic techniques attempt to improve personal experience by encouraging self-reflection and insight. Thinking about one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors is hypothesized to lead to increased self-awareness, more behavioral choices, and possibly opportunities for cognitive or emotional insight. However, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of therapeutic techniques has repeatedly found that the primary effective factor is the quality of the therapeutic relationship (Orlinksy, Grawe, & Parks, 1994), which calls into question whether other mechanisms are as important to therapeutic outcomes as they are theoretically supposed to be.

A related line of thinking that pertains to improving personal experience is the emphasis of positive psychology on finding factors that contribute not only to symptom reduction and remediating psychopathology, but instead promote optimal human experience. Theorists and researchers in this area have begun to investigate the role of personality characteristics and behaviors in improving the quality of individual lives with some surprising findings. For example, self-reflection may have complex effects on well-being (Conway & Giannopoulos, 1993) which leads to further questions about when and with whom self-reflection should be encouraged.

For these reasons, it is important to determine whether aspects of subjective well-being are significantly associated with self-reflection and/or insight.

#### 1.1. Subjective well-being

One particularly important aspect of personal experience that has been targeted by positive psychologists is subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is a broad construct meant to encompass all aspects of personal experience that contribute to feelings of well-being. Subjective well-being includes people's emotional and cognitive evaluations of their lives (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003).

Many studies have already addressed the relationships between elements of subjective well-being and personality factors (e.g., Steel, Schmidt, & Schultz, 2008). These studies have generally found that neuroticism is negatively related to well-being and extraversion and self-esteem are positively related (Diener et al., 2003), but no studies have investigated the specific characteristics of self-reflection and insight as they relate to subjective well-being.

For the purpose of this study, two components of subjective well-being, happiness and life satisfaction, were chosen as outcomes. Happiness is an emotional aspect of subjective well-being that depends on genetics, circumstances, and behaviors (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Satisfaction with life is another aspect of subjective well-being that is often associated with happiness but is also somewhat distinct because it encompasses an individual's evaluative judgment of all aspects of his or her life. Thus,

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happiness and life satisfaction together capture both emotional and cognitive aspects of subjective well-being.

### 1.2. Self-reflection

Self-reflection is a cornerstone of many psychological approaches to improving well-being. For example, increasing awareness of automatic thought and behavior processes is a fundamental principle of cognitive-behavioral therapies. Reflecting on emotional experiences is also an elemental principle of psychodynamic and humanistic therapeutic techniques. In light of the theoretical importance of self-reflection, the ambiguous empirical evidence that has been mounting with respect to its benefits requires further explanation.

For example, Watson, Morris, Ramsey, Hickman, and Waddell (1996) found that self-reflectiveness was associated with shame, guilt, other-directedness, and social anxiety. More recently, Abbe, Tkach, and Lyubormirsky (2003) found through an experience sampling method that dispositionally happy people are less ruminative and self-reflective than less happy people. However, other researchers have found that self-reflection is distinguished from rumination in important ways. Self-reflection has been shown to be positively correlated with openness to experience (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999) and empathy (Joireman, Parrot, & Hammersla, 2002) and when other personality factors are controlled, self-reflectiveness is not correlated with neuroticism (Scandell, 2001).

Self-reflection has been investigated as a main component of private self-consciousness, a construct established by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975). The original private self-consciousness scale (PrSCS, Fenigstein et al., 1975) measures two components, internal state awareness and self-reflection. However, because self-reflection, as measured by the PrSCS, has been found to correlate with measures of psychopathology, it has been argued that the self-reflection component more accurately describes a ruminative or dysfunctional self-absorption than constructive self-reflection (Anderson, Bohon, & Berrigan, 1996). In an attempt to improve upon the PrSCS, Grant, Franklin, and Langford (2002) developed the self-reflection and insight scale (SRIS), a self-report instrument intended to better measure aspects of private self-consciousness that relate to cognitive flexibility and self-regulation. Self-reflection, as measured by the SRIS, is comprised of both an individual's *need* to think about their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and also their actual *engagement* in the activity of self-reflection. Self-reflection as measured by this instrument has not been found to be so closely related to rumination as the self-reflection subscale of the PrSCS (Grant et al., 2002). Self-reflection need and engagement as measured by the SRIS are both positively correlated with anxiety and stress, but not with depression and alexithymia (Grant et al., 2002).

Consistent with prior research outlined above, it was expected that self-reflection would not be directly positively related to life satisfaction and happiness, but that it might interact with insight to increase the likelihood of life satisfaction and happiness.

### 1.3. Insight

Insight was another factor expected to be associated with elements of subjective well-being. Insight is a personality characteristic also often theoretically assumed to be related to psychological health. For example, insight is the main mechanism hypothesized by psychoanalytic theory to reduce intrapsychic conflict and therefore relieve psychopathological symptoms. A primary goal of traditional psychoanalysis, and less so later psychodynamically oriented therapies, is to bring emotional conflicts to consciousness in order to produce immediate, complete understanding and subsequent symptom remission (Freud, 1965).

However, insight is broadly defined and therefore approached differently by researchers in different disciplines. For example, cognitive theorists have focused on insight as it relates to problem-solving (e.g., Davidson, 2003). In this context, insight is the complete and rapid understanding that follows cognitive restructuring and results in the "Aha" experience. Although clearly functionally distinct, both emotional and cognitive insight involves a rapid and highly functional subjective sense of understanding. Cognitive and behavioral therapies also rely partly on insight to facilitate understanding of maladaptive thoughts and behaviors and motivate change (Clemens, 2003) and many current researchers consider insight the ultimate goal of psychotherapy (e.g., Brinegar, Salvi, Stiles, & Greenberg, 2006).

The relationship between self-reflection and insight is unclear. Depending upon how they are defined, insight may be considered a consequence of self-reflection, as in Kuiken, Carey, and Nielsen's (1986) investigation during which affective insight occurred as a result of self-reflection. However, more recently insight and self-reflection have been considered orthogonal constructs, partly as a result of the original two factors identified as components of the PrSCS, self-reflection and internal state awareness (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999; Ben-Artzi, 2003). Insight, as operationalized in this investigation, is related to internal state awareness since they are both associated with the ability to identify and express feelings. If self-reflection and insight are unrelated, one may reflect without necessarily understanding the thoughts or feelings reflected upon. One may similarly experience insight without the need for reflection. However, it is possible that individuals who engage in high levels of both self-reflection and insight may experience greater happiness and life satisfaction than those who do neither.

### 1.4. Psychological distress

Both self-reflection and insight should reduce psychological distress. For example, improved self-reflection is a significant outcome of transference-focused therapy for people with borderline personality disorder (Levy et al., 2006) and Wampold, Imel, Bhati, and Johnson-Jennings (2007) suggest that insight is a common factor in all effective psychotherapies. Conversely, individuals with little self-reflective ability or low levels of insight may be more likely to experience higher levels of psychological distress (e.g., Williams & Collins, 2002). Psychological distress is also clearly negatively related but not necessarily orthogonal to subjective well-being (Massé et al., 1998). The relationships among self-reflection, insight, and psychological distress are complex and a thorough analysis of them is beyond the scope of this investigation. For these reasons, psychological distress was controlled in this investigation in order to determine what effect, if any, may be attributed to self-reflection and insight in improving well-being beyond simply reducing psychological distress.

It was expected that individuals with higher levels of insight would be both happier and more satisfied with their lives than those with lower levels. It was also expected that an interaction between self-reflection and insight would be significantly positively associated with happiness and life satisfaction. Further, it was expected that these findings would hold after controlling for age and psychological distress.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 208 community members who were selected through snowball sampling and did

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