



The influence of personality and life events on subjective well-being from a life span perspective

Veronica Gomez^{a,*}, Franciska Krings^b, Adrian Bangerter^c, Alexander Grob^{a,*}

^a Faculty of Psychology, Department of Personality and Developmental Psychology, University of Basel, Missionsstrasse 60/62, 4055 Basel, Switzerland

^b Faculty of Business and Economics HEC, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

^c Institut de Psychologie du Travail et des Organisations, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the relation between personality (Big Five) and positive and negative life events as predictors of subjective well-being (SWB) in a sample of 766 young, middle-aged, and old adults. Analyses comprised data on personality, SWB, and reconstructed positive and negative life events. Results for the total sample indicate a strong relation between neuroticism and SWB, and an important influence of reconstructed life events on SWB with a stronger effect for negative as compared to positive events. Age differences in the prediction of SWB emerge for personality and life events: extraversion is only a predictor of SWB in young adults and the effect of neuroticism is more pronounced in old adults. Moreover, the influence of negative life events on SWB is stronger in young and middle-aged adults as compared to old adults. These results emphasize the need to study dispositional and situational variables across the life span in order to better understand the underlying mechanisms of SWB.

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1. Introduction

To understand why people are happy and what the underlying causes of happiness are is of crucial importance for mankind and the major aspiration of research in subjective well-being (SWB). SWB is commonly understood as an umbrella term for life satisfaction, positive affect, and absence of negative affect (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996), and has been shown to be quite stable over the lifetime, although prone to minor changes after significant life events (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). There is a large body of evidence suggesting that life circumstances and demographic factors fail to account for a substantial percentage of variance in SWB (for an overview see Diener et al., 1999; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). As a consequence, there has been a shift in SWB research away from the focus on external factors and demographics (bottom-up factors) to analyses of top-down processes, i.e. factors within the individual (e.g., Diener et al., 1999). However, despite the large impact of personality on SWB, other lines of research also show a substantial influence of life events on SWB. Thus, both considerations should be taken into account when trying to explain the psychological mechanism of SWB. In what follows, we will start by separately focusing on established evidence for the impact of personality and life events on SWB, before elaborating on their joint contributions to SWB. Finally,

we suggest that the influence of personality and life events on SWB may vary across the life span as a function of age and propose an integrating approach covering these dimensions.

1.1. Personality and SWB

A broad range of studies has compellingly shown that personality is an important precursor of SWB (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; Diener, 1984; Diener & Larsen, 1993; Diener & Lucas, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1991; Myers, 1992; Myers & Diener, 1995). In this regard, variance in SWB can be explained by the personality traits of neuroticism and extraversion (Costa & McCrae, 1980), and personality has been demonstrated to substantially predict SWB 20 years later (Costa & McCrae, 1984). As a consequence, many researchers have focused on the correlations between neuroticism, extraversion, and SWB (Chico-Librán, 2006; Headey & Wearing, 1992; Lucas & Fujita, 2000; Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990; Vittersø & Nilsen, 2002; Watson & Clark, 1992), finding a robust negative relationship between neuroticism and SWB, and a robust positive relationship between extraversion and SWB. Moreover, the association has consistently been shown to be stronger for neuroticism than for extraversion. In addition, conscientiousness and agreeableness also predict SWB (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Therefore, focusing exclusively on neuroticism and extraversion does not reveal the full picture of relations between personality and SWB. Recently, Steel, Schmidt, and Shultz (2008) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis and evaluated the associations between each personality factor and SWB including the effects on the different components

* Corresponding authors. Fax: +41 61 267 06 61.

E-mail addresses: veronica.gomez@unibas.ch (V. Gomez), alexander.grob@unibas.ch (A. Grob).

of well-being (happiness, positive and negative affect, overall affect, and quality of life). Their findings support a strong relationship between neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and all components of SWB, whereas openness to experience shows close associations with the SWB facets of happiness, positive affect, and quality of life. Moreover, results from multivariate meta-analytic regression indicate that up to 39% of the variance in SWB can be accounted for by personality factors (Steel et al., 2008), a much higher proportion than reported in a previous meta-analysis (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Twin and adoption studies provide further evidence for the strong relationship between dispositional factors and SWB, and clearly suggest that genetic factors are more important than environmental influences. Indeed, genetic factors explain approximately 80% of the variance in long-term SWB, whereas environmental influences only affect mood states in the short term with no long lasting effect on SWB (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Nes, Røysamb, Tambs, Harris, & Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2006). Moreover, stability of SWB is supposed to be due to heritable dispositions represented by the personality facets of neuroticism and extraversion (Nes et al., 2006).

Thus, given the strong relationship between personality and SWB and assumptions about the stable character of personality across the life span (Costa & McCrae, 1997; McCrae et al., 2000), the conclusion might be drawn that SWB should be as stable as personality over the lifetime. However, recent work demonstrates mean-level change in personality traits throughout the life course (Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). Moreover, panel studies document only moderate stability in individual SWB scores over time (Abbey & Andrews, 1985; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Headey, Glowacki, Holmstrom, & Wearing, 1985). For instance, a recent panel study revealed that although 34–38% of the variance in SWB can be accounted for by stable characteristics like personality, a substantial amount (29–34%) is only moderately stable over time (Lucas & Donnellan, 2007; for similar results see Ehrhardt, Saris, & Veenhoven, 2000). Hence, SWB is relatively stable over time, but there is considerable space for change and instability that might be due to changes in life circumstances.

1.2. Life events and SWB

A great deal of research has been based on the assumption that environmental changes represented by positive and negative life events substantially influence SWB (Abbey & Andrews, 1985; Block & Zautra, 1981; Headey, Holmstrom, & Wearing, 1984; Headey et al., 1985; Zautra & Reich, 1983). Positive life events enhance SWB, and negative life events reduce it, whereas neutral life events have no effect (Grob, 1991). Moreover, it seems that individuals are able to manage one critical life event, but if they are faced with two or more critical life events within a five-year period their SWB decreases importantly (Grob, 1995). These findings are supported by Veenhoven's (1994) review, stating that people's levels of happiness are affected by positive and negative life events, especially if they represent major life transitions. Nevertheless, the major inconvenience of these studies is the fact that life events are treated as entirely exogenous. In fact, there is evidence that the same kind of event often happens to the same type of people, indicating that there may be a relation between personality and the type of life events people experience (Headey & Wearing, 1989).

1.3. Personality, life events, and SWB

Attempts to focus on the overall interplay between personality, life events, and SWB started with Brickman and Campbell's (1971) article on adaptation and the resulting hedonic treadmill hypothesis. According to this theory, adaptation is an inevitable basic pro-

cess and individuals return to baseline levels of SWB after experiencing even most extreme positive (win of a lottery) or negative (severe accident) life events (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Based on a longitudinal study, Headey and Wearing (1989) suggested that each person has equilibrium levels of life events and SWB to which they return dependent on their personalities. Life events only alter SWB when they exceed equilibrium levels. Moreover, they found that people scoring high in extraversion experience many (subjectively) positive events and those scoring high in neuroticism experience many (subjectively) negative events (for similar results see Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993). In contrast, people scoring high in openness experience many events of both kinds (Headey, 2006; Headey & Wearing, 1989). Therefore, the dynamic equilibrium model assumes stable levels of SWB depending on personality and life events, whereas the way individuals perceive life events (positive, negative, neutral) throughout their lives is in turn regulated by personality characteristics (Headey & Wearing, 1989).

Although set point models of happiness have received substantial empirical support (e.g., Argyle, 1987; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Diener, 1984; Headey & Wearing, 1989; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996), there is still no consensus about whether the influence of life events goes beyond the effects of personality. In fact, adaptation level theories imply that the effect of life events is only temporary and that people always return to their individual baseline level of well-being (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Headey & Wearing, 1989; Nes et al., 2006). However, some evidence suggests a substantial and long-term influence of life events on SWB. For example, Lu (1999) found that positive life events predict life satisfaction 2.5 years later. Moreover, panel studies show that for a significant life event like marriage, adaptation seems to occur on average within a couple of years, whereas for widowhood, adaptation is very slow and individuals only return to their baseline levels of life satisfaction after about 8 years (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). After divorce (Lucas, 2005) or unemployment (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004) people do not return completely to their initial level of life satisfaction. Thus, for some respondents there are long lasting and permanent changes in life satisfaction as a consequence of specific life events (Lucas, 2005; Lucas et al., 2004). Also, changes in SWB can be substantial: people's life satisfaction after onset of a disability is significantly below the initial level and does not recover completely over time (Lucas, 2007a). Moreover, when revising the dynamic equilibrium model, Headey (2006, 2008) not only found that people scoring high in extraversion or neuroticism have permanent and substantial changes in SWB, but he also offered further support for a longer lasting influence of life events on life satisfaction: the more life events in the last two years compared to the individual average level of life events, the greater is the upward (if positive events) or downward (if negative events) change in life satisfaction (Headey, 2006). In sum, recent research has started questioning the absoluteness of set point models (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Headey, 2006, 2008). The major claim is to consider the fact that some circumstances can cause a shift in SWB set points and that adaptation to life events is not a universal phenomenon that applies to all individuals in an analogous manner (Diener et al., 2006).

1.4. The relation between personality, life events, and SWB from a life span perspective

Two different perspectives should be taken into account when considering the relation between personality, life events and SWB from a life span perspective: On the one hand, personality traits are thought to be independent of environmental influences and stable across the life course (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1997; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Nes et al., 2006) with negligible mean-level

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