



## Daily life activities as mediators of the relationship between personality variables and subjective well-being among older adults

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to examine the mediational role of participation in daily life activities on the relationship between personality variables, such as self-esteem and optimism, and subjective well-being in Spanish older adults. Two hundred and fifty people (150 retirees and 100 workers) from late adulthood to old age were interviewed to complete the Rosenberg Scale, the Optimism Scale, the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, the satisfaction with life scale and their frequency of participation in daily life activities (social activities, mass communication use, building knowledge, home activities and hobbies, creative activities, activities outside home, community service activities and games). Results from mediational analyses revealed that social activities partially mediated the relationship between personality variables – self-esteem and optimism – and subjective well-being. Implications of these findings for future research on subjective well-being and the role of participation in daily life activities in old age are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Growing evidence has demonstrated that engaging in leisure activities is associated with positive outcomes in later life. For example, daily participation in activities has been associated to reduced mortality risk, reduced risk of cognitive impairment, and improved physical health (Dawson, Winocur, & Moscovitch, 1999; Silverstein & Parker, 2002). Similarly, life task participation have also been linked to better indicators of psychological adjustment such as greater life satisfaction and positive affect, lower levels of stress and lower scores in depressive symptoms (Park, 2009; Zimmer, Hickey, & Searle, 1995).

According to models of successful psychosocial aging, life satisfaction and well-being are major determinants of successful aging (Lupien & Wan, 2004). Subjective well-being has been defined as an individual's evaluation of his/her life as a whole (Diener, 1984). It is often regarded as consisting of three partially separate components: life satisfaction (a cognitive component), positive affect and negative affect (affective components). According to Suldo and Huebner (2006), individuals who report high levels of life satisfaction and more positive than negative affect, have high levels of subjective well-being.

It has generally been found that personality dispositions are strongly associated with subjective well-being even more than

other factors. According to Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) personality factors account for a large portion of the variance in individual differences in happiness – as much as 40–50% – and appear to be critical to well-being. Along with extraversion and neuroticism, a substantial body of research has demonstrated that personality variables are significantly related to subjective well-being and happiness (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). In this sense, both optimism (expectations of success) and self-esteem (generalized feelings of self-acceptance) have typically been shown to be two strong predictors of well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001).

Scheier et al. (2001) defined optimism as a dispositional tendency of an individual to hold generalized positive expectancies even when people confront adversity or difficulty in their lives. In contrast, those with a pessimistic life orientation have negative outcome expectations, withdraw effort and become passive, and potentially give up on achieving their goals (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Dispositional optimism–pessimism has been shown to be a relatively stable disposition across time (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) and in different contexts (Park & Folkman, 1997). There is growing evidence showing that dispositional optimism and pessimism have contrasting effects on psychological and physical well-being (Scheier et al., 2001).

Self-esteem is described as generalized feelings of self-acceptance, goodness and self-respect (Rosenberg, 1965). Numerous evidences show that self-esteem is positively related to emotional functioning including several predictors of life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995) and subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky,

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Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2006). In general, believing that the self is good and worthy provides a setting for effective personal functioning in young and older adults (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

Several authors have underlined that, although relatively immutable intrapersonal, temperamental, and affective personality dimensions account for a large portion of happiness variance, there still exist up to 40% of the variance in individual differences in happiness that is not accounted for by circumstances and dispositions, suggesting that it may be linked to intentional strategies and behaviours (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005).

In our research, particular emphasis was placed on the importance to well-being of participation in daily life activities in older people. Harlow and Cantor (1996) suggested that daily life participation enhances well-being independently of social-structural variables that promote well-being in any context and at any time. The authors found that, from the eight activity clusters considered (social activities, mass communication use, building knowledge, home activities and hobbies, creative activities, activities outside home, community service activities and games), social participation, community service activity and mass communication use predicted life satisfaction in late adulthood. Similarly, Warr, Butcher, and Robertson (2004), replicating the finding of Harlow and Cantor (1996), found that Family and Social Behaviours activities were most significant predictors of well-being in British adults aged between 50 and 74 years.

Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) found in a sample of university students that mood-increasing strategies, in particular, mental control (inversely related), direct attempts, social affiliation, religion, partying, and active leisure were related to higher self-reported happiness. Besides, these strategies accounted for 52% of the variance in self-reported happiness and 16% over and above the variance accounted for by personality traits. Other studies have found that adults who practiced more exercise showed higher levels of self-esteem and optimism and suffer from less distress, depression, and anxiety (Kavussanu & McAuley, 1995; Liao, Hunter, & Weinman, 1995).

Therefore, the relation between personality and happiness seems not to be direct: happiness-enhancing strategies are inter-related with personality, such that personality predicts the use of certain happiness-increasing strategies, and both personality and happiness-strategies jointly predict happiness levels (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). These findings support the notion that whereas personality dispositions are related to subjective well-being, other variables more related to intentional activities may play an important role in the personality–well-being relationship. It is plausible that certain personality variables (such as self-esteem and optimism) might lead people to participate in more daily activities and this participation might account for, to some degree, their increased level of subjective well-being.

In fact, there are also some reasons to consider a mediation model in which self-esteem and optimism influences subjective well-being through daily activities (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). First, daily activities have been found to be associated to healthy personality variables such as self-esteem and optimism (Kavussanu & McAuley, 1995; Reitzes, Mutran, & Verrill, 1995). Second, daily activities have shown to be a significant predictor of subjective well-being in older people (Harlow & Cantor, 1996; Warr et al., 2004). So, these findings are according to the criterion necessary for daily activities to be considered a potential mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Third, there is accumulative evidence to suggest that people with high optimism and self-esteem experience higher levels of subjective well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995; Scheier et al., 2001). Therefore, analyzing this hypothesis is important in understanding what leads older people to experience long-lasting subjective well-being while others not. Such knowledge is critical in

developing interventions and providing appropriate support throughout older ages to improve overall psychological outcomes.

Taking into account the above considerations, the purpose of the present study was twofold. First, we sought to examine the relations among self-esteem, optimism, daily life activities and subjective well-being. Secondly, consistent with the proposed mediation model, we examine the extent to which participation in activities might mediate the influence of personality variables on subjective well-being in older people.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 250 people selected from major old age associations and from a company in Málaga. They mainly come from a medium socio-economic level. One hundred were workers (50 women and 50 men) and 150 were retirees (100 women and 50 men). They participated voluntarily and anonymously in the study. The age range was 50–82 years (average age = 62.30, SD = 8.53).

### 2.2. Materials

The Positive and Negative Affect Scales, the Optimism Scale and the frequency of participation in daily life activities were translated from English into Spanish using the method of back-translation. The following scales were employed: self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Subject's self-esteem was assessed by 10 items on which they had to indicate the extent to which they accepted their own characteristics, they felt they possessed good qualities and to have achieved personal success or experienced failure. Participants provided their ratings by using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample items for this scale are: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others". Participants completed the Spanish version of the self-esteem scale (Baños & Guillén, 2000). Cronbach's alpha of the self-esteem scale in the present sample was .77.

### 2.3. Optimism Scale (Oláh, 2002)

Optimism, as a global expectancy of good outcomes, was measured by using a five item scale, which items were very similar to those included in the optimism subscale of the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al., 1994) ("I am convinced that most of the things that happen around me are positive in the long run"; "Even when I find myself in a difficult situation, I am convinced everything will turn out well in the end"; "Thoughts about my future give me good feelings"; "I am a person that has a very positive view toward life"; "People describe me as a very optimistic person"). Each item is answered on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (does not apply at all) to 4 (applies completely). In a data analysis carried out in late 2004 correlations of .73/–.42 were found between the Optimism Scale (Oláh, 2002) and the optimism/pessimism subscales of the Life Orientation Test-Revised, respectively. The scale showed adequate internal consistency reliability in older people (Daukantaite & Bergman, 2005). Cronbach's alpha of the Optimism Scale in the present sample was .60.

### 2.4. Well-being

To assess subjective well-being we administered the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). These scales were used to assess the frequency of positive and negative affect.

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