



## Career decidedness as a predictor of subjective well-being<sup>☆</sup>

Ramya Uthayakumar<sup>a</sup>, Ulrich Schimmack<sup>a</sup>, Paul J. Hartung<sup>b,\*</sup>, James R. Rogers<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Toronto Mississauga, Mississauga, ON, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy, Rootstown, OH, USA

<sup>c</sup> University of Akron, Akron, OH, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Forming, pursuing, and achieving life tasks constitute important determinants of subjective well-being (SWB). A principal life task for emerging adults involves deciding about career goals. Prior research indicates that depression predicts SWB and may be linked to lower levels of career decidedness. We tested whether or not career decidedness predicts SWB above and beyond the influence of depression and other personality traits. We also examined whether or not career decidedness partially mediates depression's influence on SWB when controlled for personality effects. Undergraduate students ( $N = 181$ ; 65% female, 52% Asian) responded to measures of career decidedness, SWB, and personality. Results largely confirmed predictions. A partial mediator model indicated a direct relationship between decidedness and SWB not moderated by grade level, and an inverse relationship between the depression facet of neuroticism and both career decidedness and SWB. Findings further support career interventions to increase decidedness during the first year of college.

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### Introduction

Humans' search for the determinants of happiness began, in the Western world, with the Ancient Greeks and continues today as a central focus of scientific study (Seligman, 2004). Over the last three decades, positive psychology has emerged as a field of inquiry concerned with identifying the antecedents of happiness (Diener, 2000; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). To conceptualize and study happiness, scholars introduced the term *subjective well-being* (SWB) and defined it as "people's evaluations of their lives—evaluations that are both affective and cognitive" (Diener, 2000, p. 34). A vast psychological literature now exists that deals with the conceptualization, causality, and measurement of SWB in terms of its postulated cognitive and affective dimensions (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). The cognitive dimension of SWB constitutes global satisfaction judgments about one's life (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999). The affective dimension comprises a hedonic balance between levels of positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 1999).

In recent years, vocational psychologists have made forays into considering SWB as a construct useful for advancing career theory and practice. For example, work satisfaction and SWB have been considered within social cognitive career theory (Lent & Brown, 2006). More broadly, scholars have considered the SWB construct from a variety of career theory and assessment perspectives (see Walsh, 2008). Continuing this line of inquiry, the present study investigated linkages between level of career decidedness and SWB. Building on prior work, we specifically examined whether or not career decidedness predicts SWB above and beyond the influence of depression and other personality traits that have been found to act as predictors of SWB (Diener et al., 1999; Schimmack, Oishi, Furr & Funder, 2004). We also examined whether or not career decidedness partially mediates the influence of depression on subjective well-being when controlled for personality effects. *Personality and SWB*.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [phartung@neoucom.edu](mailto:phartung@neoucom.edu) (P.J. Hartung).

Prior research suggests that personality traits most strongly and consistently predict SWB (Diener et al., 1999). Structural analyses of personality traits in diverse cultures revealed five global dimensions known as the Big Five personality factors: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Extraversion and Neuroticism represent broad traits that combine several more specific traits known as facets. Examining the relation between personality and SWB at a more specific level indicates that the depression facet of Neuroticism and the cheerfulness facet of Extraversion account for more variance in life satisfaction than do the broad dimensions of Neuroticism and Extraversion (Schimmack et al., 2004). This finding suggests that measures of these two facets sufficiently predict life satisfaction from personality.

Personality accounts for about 50% of the variance in SWB (Diener, 1984), leaving the rest to be explained by other variables. Prior research suggests that goals play a significant role in predicting SWB (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1986; Michaelos, 1980). Goals denote “internal representations of desired states” (Austin & Vancouver, 1996, p. 338) and assume particular importance in terms of developmental or life tasks, conceived of as goals that are personally meaningful, culturally valued, and age appropriate for one’s developmental stage (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Elder, 1998; Havighurst, 1956; Neugarten, Moore & Lowe, 1965).

Because life tasks are age-graded, they change over an individuals’ life course and some goals become especially salient around times of life transitions in various domains such as marriage, religion, and work (Elder, 1998; Neugarten et al., 1965; Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). Participation in life tasks benefits SWB through a sense of agency and purpose as well as the structure and meaning it provides to daily life (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). Developmental psychologists regard the stage between the ages of 18 and 25 as a distinctive period during the life course termed “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). This period is generally characterized by frequent changes and explorations in education and work (Arnett, 2000). Although career development encompasses the life span (Super, 1980), deciding on a career goal poses a particularly imminent normative life task for undergraduate university students. As they pursue post-secondary education, undergraduate students make important decisions about their future careers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997; Zirkel & Cantor, 1990).

Being decided about a career path may provide students with meaning and purpose in the sense that they have a goal to work toward that also structures their academic life. Research suggests that pursuing self-selected goals and projects relates positively to SWB (Walsh & Eggerth, 2005). Having a valued career goal to pursue also contributes to personal growth in terms of identity achievement, regarded as a central developmental task before entering adulthood (Erikson, 1959). We therefore predicted that career decidedness would relate positively and significantly to students’ levels of SWB. In this context, we conceptualized career decidedness as a continuous variable ranging from a self-perception of being completely decided to being completely undecided about one’s career goals (Jones & Chenery, 1980).

#### *Career decidedness and SWB*

To date, only a few studies have examined the relationship between career decidedness and SWB. For example, Lounsbury, Tatum, Chambers, Owens and Gibson (1999) found that career decidedness correlated positively and significantly with life satisfaction ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ) in a sample of 249 undergraduate psychology students across all years of study. An earlier study (Arnold, 1989) examined the relationship between career decidedness and life satisfaction in a longitudinal investigation of two cohorts of undergraduate students. Arnold found that career decidedness group membership significantly related to life satisfaction. A decided group reported higher mean levels of life satisfaction than did an undecided group. This effect was most pronounced for students in an older cohort *after* graduation (at second measurement).

These two studies suggest that being career decided relates positively to life satisfaction, yet they have several limitations. First, both studies used uncommon measures of life satisfaction representing only the cognitive component of SWB. It remains to be determined whether career decidedness also relates to the affective component of SWB. Second, career decidedness is widely considered a continuous variable. However, Arnold (1989) used a categorical measure and Lounsbury et al. (1999) used a self-constructed scale of questionable validity. The most important limitation is that these studies failed to test alternative explanations of the correlation between career decidedness and SWB. One possibility is that the correlation is spurious due to a common third variable that influences SWB and career decidedness.

A potential common cause of SWB and career decidedness is personality, in particular depression. Research suggests that depression is associated with lack of meaning and purpose in life (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005) that may cause low life satisfaction (Schimmack et al., 2004). Depression, then, may have a direct influence on SWB. On the other hand, depression could also influence SWB indirectly through its path over career decidedness. Depression is often associated with difficulty in decision making (American Psychiatric Association, 1994 cited in Saunders, Peterson, Sampson & Reardon, 2000). The depressed individual’s inability to effectively engage in problem-solving activities and the decision-making process has relevance to career decision making (Rottinghaus, Jenkins & Jantzer, 2009; Saunders et al., 2000). Previous studies suggest that depression relates significantly and positively to career indecision (Rottinghaus et al., 2009; Saunders et al., 2000). Rottinghaus and colleagues (2009) found that career-decided college students were significantly less depressed than were career-undecided students as indicated by scores on a depression scale. It seems therefore important to consider the depression facet of personality as a potential third variable when examining the correlation between career decidedness and SWB.

#### *Purpose of the study*

The present study addressed limitations of previous studies noted above in the following ways. First, we used a more established and psychometrically sound measure of the cognitive component of SWB. Second, we included a measure of the affective component of SWB. Third, we used a published scale to measure career decidedness along a continuum based on multiple

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