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The relative contributions of extraversion, neuroticism, and personal strivings to happiness

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Abstract

According to Ryan and Deci (2001), research into well-being has focused on pleasure and pain (hedonic well-being) or meaning and self-actualization (eudaimonic well-being); little research has combined the two perspectives. Using a sample of 271 college students, we found that extraversion and neuroticism, hedonic factors, were strongly related to happiness, but personal strivings, eudaimonic factors, were unrelated, thus providing support for the hedonic view. Future research should study hedonic and eudaimonic well-being simultaneously.

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1. Introduction

Within the realm of psychology, human well-being has been the focus of substantial and ongoing research. Topics within this domain include happiness, unhappiness, positive and negative affect, subjective well-being, and psychological well-being. Ryan and Deci (2001), have organized this literature into two major orientations: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being.

According to Ryan and Deci (2001), these two perspectives differ in terms of underlying philosophical orientation, basic conceptualizations, measures, and research paradigms. According

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to the hedonic view, people attempt to attain pleasure and avoid pain. Therefore, well-being may be defined as hedonic well-being or subjective well-being (SWB) and may be equated with happiness or subjective happiness. Measures of this concept may include life satisfaction, presence of positive mood, and absence of negative mood. Happiness then may be measured as the sum of these three components. Many researchers in this tradition have explained subjective well-being in terms of rewards and punishments, expectancy-value formulations, and personality characteristics such as extraversion and neuroticism. Ryan and Deci (2001) cite Tooby and Cosmides (1992) who label such research as examples of “the standard social science model.”

The eudaimonic research tradition within psychology differs significantly from the hedonic approach. The fundamental assumption here is that well-being is not just happiness; it includes meaning and self-actualization. Indeed, activities that do not lead to happiness may nonetheless lead to personal growth or development, or self-expression. Well-being may be defined as psychological well-being, the actualization of one’s true potential. Measures of this concept include the Ryff and Keyes (1995) six dimensions of psychological well-being, namely, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness. Researchers investigating this type of well-being may focus on factors that promote well-being, e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001), or personal strivings (Emmons, 1991, 1996, 1999) rather than personality traits such as extraversion and neuroticism. Ryan and Deci (2001) note that this version of well-being is not “the standard social science model.” Rather, it is the province of “philosophers, religious masters, and visionaries, from both East and West” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 145).

Ryan and Deci (2001) found more than 28,000 PsycINFO citations using the search term “well-being”. Despite the explosive growth in this research, very little work has combined the two basic viewpoints. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the relative claims of the two schools. Perhaps well-being depends on both hedonic and eudaimonic factors; perhaps the two sets of factors are related but only one set of factors contributes to well-being. A third possibility is that hedonic factors contribute to hedonic well-being (i.e., subjective well-being), but eudaimonic factors contribute to eudaimonic well-being, i.e., well-being defined as personal growth or self-actualization.

Therefore, the purpose of the present research was to look at well-being from both the hedonic and the eudaimonic perspectives simultaneously.

2. Hypotheses

As summarized above, the two schools of well-being research disagree on the definition of well-being as well as its sources. Ryan and Deci (2001) point out that despite this disagreement, researchers in both schools have tended to use measures of subjective well-being as their major dependent variable.

In the general area of subjective well-being, researchers have studied happiness and unhappiness, positive affect, negative affect, and general life satisfaction. DeNeve and Cooper (1998) made the following distinctions among these concepts. Happiness, unhappiness, positive affect and negative affect are affect states, not cognitive appraisals. General life satisfaction is a cognitive appraisal of one’s general state. Happiness, unhappiness, and general life satisfaction refer to long-term states; positive and negative affect refer to reactions to recent events and states.

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