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Neuroticism, extraversion, goals, and subjective well-being: Exploring the relations in young, middle-aged, and older adults

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ABSTRACT

The positive association between intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic, goal importance and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) is well-documented. However, less is known whether these associations are consistent across age groups and when simultaneously considering personality traits. Structural equation models conducted with young, middle-aged, and older adults indicated that neuroticism was negatively related to SWB across age groups, while extraversion and intrinsic goal importance held age-differential associations: Extraversion was related to SWB in the two younger age groups, whereas in older adults only an indirect effect emerged via intrinsic goal importance. Intrinsic goal importance was related to SWB among young and older adults but not among middle-aged adults. These results underscore the importance of age-differential associations in determinants of SWB.

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1. Introduction

The lifelong ability of people to continually adapt to changes in life circumstances and to attain a positive developmental trajectory in psychological functioning has received great attention within the scope of life span psychology. Positive psychological functioning implies attainment or maintenance of an optimal level of Subjective Well-Being (SWB), the universal relevance of which is rooted in the assumption that the quest for happiness represents a fundamental human need, regardless of age. As a consequence, a great deal of research has focused on what constitutes happiness, in order to attain a complete description of SWB and of its causes and correlates (for an overview see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Personality traits, especially neuroticism and extraversion, reflect major determinants of SWB (for comprehensive meta-analyses see DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). However, dispositional traits represent only one possible group of determinants of SWB. Another group of determinants highlights the relevance of having and pursuing subjectively important goals for one's well-being (e.g., Diener et al., 1999).

Accordingly, a recent elaboration by Sheldon and Hoon (2007) highlights the importance of simultaneously considering different factors as determinants of SWB for a comprehensive description of its causes and correlates. From a theoretical point of view, the

multidimensional nature of SWB co-determined by multiple situational and dispositional factors is widely proffered across standard textbooks (e.g., Kahnemann, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Mroczek & Little, 2006). From an empirical point of view, however, efforts to simultaneously address different factors as determinants of SWB are scarce and lack an explicit life span perspective (e.g., Haslam, Whelan, & Bastian, 2009; Romero, Villar, Luengo, & Gómez-Fraguela, 2009; Sheldon & Hoon, 2007). The present study aims to address these issues by examining how personality traits and subjective goal importance are related to SWB from a life span developmental perspective across young, middle-aged, and older adulthood.

1.1. Personality traits and SWB

Abundant evidence points to a strong association between personality traits and SWB. Both theoretically and empirically, neuroticism and extraversion typically emerge as the two most relevant personality traits in predicting SWB. From a theoretical point of view, neuroticism and extraversion are viewed as core trait-based determinants of SWB due to their affective-based nature. The negative emotionality of neuroticism and positive emotionality implicit in extraversion are strongly related to, yet still distinct from, the positive and negative affect dimension of SWB (Yik & Russell, 2001). From an empirical point of view, there is ample evidence for a strong association between neuroticism, extraversion, and SWB (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; Lucas & Fujita, 2000; Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990; Vittersø, 2001; Vittersø & Nilsen, 2002; Watson & Clark, 1992). Comprehensive meta-analyses further

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support the link between these two traits and SWB (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Steel et al., 2008).

1.2. Goals and SWB

Life goals are defined as internal representations of desired outcomes, events, and processes and as the personally meaningful objectives people pursue in their daily lives (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). A great deal of research suggests that merely having personal goals, regardless of content, is positively related to life satisfaction (Emmons, 1986). Moreover, active pursuit and successful attainment of these goals is associated with positive affect (Emmons & Diener, 1986) and overall SWB (Brunstein, 1993; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

However, self-determination theory emphasizes not only the merely having goals, but rather the need to take goal content into account, and posits that the type of goals individuals find important (i.e., intrinsic or extrinsic) is differentially related to SWB (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). Intrinsic goals include personal growth, close and intimate interpersonal relationships, community contribution, and physical health, whereas extrinsic goals are related to financial success, fame, and social recognition. The former tend to be more satisfying, as they are congruent with innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The focus of the latter goals is on receiving positive evaluations from others and on obtaining external reward upon goal attainment. Extrinsic goals may lead to behavior that is incongruent with one's needs (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consistently assigning importance to intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals is positively related to SWB over the long run, with the reverse true for assigning more importance to extrinsic goals such as financial success and social recognition. Accordingly, extrinsic goals are neutrally associated with SWB, or even positively related to ill-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001; Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009; Schmuck, Kasser, & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, 2005; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). In a similar vein, recent analyses using household panel data revealed that life goals related to family, friends, social and political involvement (so-called non-zero sum goals) are positively related to life satisfaction, whereas career-, material- and successrelated goals (so-called zero sum goals) have detrimental effects (Headey, 2008; Headey, Muffels, & Wagner, 2010). Interestingly, when looking at goal content, Headey's distinction between nonzero sum goals and zero sum goals is nearly identical to the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goals according to self-determination theory.

1.3. Personality traits and goals

From a conceptual and theoretical point of view there is a distinction between personality traits and life goals: The former represent relatively stable, consistent patterns of behaving and feeling, whereas the latter are internal representations of the things we want to achieve in life and the person we want to become (e.g., McAdams, 1995). Some theorists like Cantor (1990) argue that while personality traits can be viewed as the structural attributes a person "has" (i.e., the "having" side of personality), goals or life tasks can be understood as the "doing" side of personality according to Allport (1937). As such, life goals adopt a linking function between people's traits and their behavior (Cantor, 1990). In a very similar vein, it has been hypothesized that traits express themselves in goals such that goals can be viewed as direct outcomes of personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1994). With respect to the empirical association between personality traits and life goals, a recent longitudinal study examined stability and change in personality traits and life goals in students during the transition to academic education or employment (Lüdtke, Trautwein, &

Husemann, 2009). The findings point to concurrent correlations mainly for the relation between extraversion and importance assigned to various goals in the areas of community, health, relationships, hedonism, and personal growth. Moreover, reciprocal effects models revealed effects of prior personality traits on subsequent life goal importance, but almost no effects of prior life goal importance on subsequent personality traits (Lüdtke et al., 2009). Other longitudinal results revealed modest correlations between extraversion and goal importance, whereas neuroticism was unrelated to any of the goal domains at baseline (Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004). Furthermore, changes in goal importance over a 4-year period were related to changes in personality traits, mimicking the baseline pattern (Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004). Similarly, another study found extraversion to be modestly related to life goals, whereas neuroticism was virtually unrelated to any life goal domain (Roberts & Robins, 2000). The lack of association between neuroticism and life goals may be due to inherent approach characteristic of life goals, more strongly related to positive affect, which is in turn strongly associated with extraversion (Watson & Clark, 1992), thus explaining the stronger connection between extraversion and life goals (Roberts & Robins, 2000).

1.4. Simultaneous contribution of traits and goals to SWB

An interesting line of recent multivariate research explores whether goals explain variance in SWB above and beyond the effect of personality traits. First evidence suggests that traits are more strongly associated with SWB than goals, and that the effects of goals on SWB are fully mediated by traits, thus implying that goals only exert an indirect influence on SWB via traits (Haslam et al., 2009). Conversely, when analyzing goals as mediators of the influence of traits on SWB, results indicate that the mediational effects of goals are not pronounced, and that the direct effect of traits on SWB remains substantial. However, although personality traits are stronger associated with SWB than goals, goals also account for variance in SWB, even after controlling for the effect of personality traits (Romero et al., 2009). These results underscore the importance to consider different potential determinants as correlates of SWB, since each determinant provides relevant and independent information for the understanding of SWB (Sheldon & Hoon, 2007). However, despite abundant research, it is only recently that researchers have begun to simultaneously take different determinants into account (e.g., Haslam et al., 2009; Romero et al., 2009; Sheldon & Hoon, 2007).

1.5. A life span perspective on goals and SWB

Framed within the concept of successful aging, maintenance of an optimal level of SWB despite age-related losses is of utmost importance (e.g., Baltes, 1997). From a life span developmental perspective, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) offers a valuable framework that focuses on the individual perception of time left in life (open-ended vs. limited) and posits developmental trends for social goals across the life span. This theory differentiates between knowledge- and emotion-related goals and posits that as people place more emphasis on emotion-related goals as compared to knowledge-related goals as they get older (i.e., the more they perceive their time in life as limited). In contrary, younger people perceive their time as openended and place more emphasis on knowledge-related goals. Moreover, mainly due to different time perspectives across the life span, socioemotional selectivity theory suggests better emotion regulation as people get older, as well as fewer negative emotional experiences (Carstensen et al., 1999). Interestingly, people typically list positive social interactions, personal growth, sense of purpose in life, and self-acceptance as important to successful

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