Examining sources of self-informant agreement in life-satisfaction judgments

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ABSTRACT

This study examined sources of self-informant agreement in life-satisfaction judgments. Pairs of participants (92 dating couples, 145 friendship pairs) provided self-ratings and informant ratings of life-satisfaction and domain satisfaction in five domains (family, health, academics, friends, and weather). Key findings were (a) significant self-informant agreement for life-satisfaction and all five domain satisfaction ratings, (b) significantly higher agreement for domain satisfaction than for life-satisfaction judgments, (c) discriminant validity of domain satisfaction judgments, (d) a top-down effect of general satisfaction on domain satisfaction, and (e) self-informant agreement in life-satisfaction judgments was fully explained by bottom-up effects of family satisfaction, health satisfaction, and academic satisfaction on self-ratings and informant ratings of life-satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Accurate knowledge about oneself and others is important to set attainable goals and to avoid negative events in the future. A large literature has examined how individuals form perceptions of others and how accurate these perceptions are (Funder, 1995). These studies typically demonstrate that personality ratings by knowledgeable informants show moderate convergent validity with self-ratings of personality (Connolly, Kavanagh, & Viswesvaran, 2007). Informant ratings also tend to predict objective behaviors above and beyond self-ratings (Vazire & Mehl, 2008).

Relatively few studies have examined the accuracy of well-being judgments (i.e., judgments of life-satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and negative affect; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996; Schneider & Schimmack, 2009), although inaccurate perceptions of others' well-being have considerable practical and theoretical implications. Suicides are probably the most dramatic example of costly failures to recognize low well-being in others. Relatives of individuals who committed suicide sometimes experience guilt because they failed to notice that somebody close to them suffered from severe depression (Cleiren, Grad, Zavasnik, & Diekstra, 1996). Inaccurate perceptions of others' well-being can also have serious consequences for social relationships. For example, it is not uncommon for spouses to assume that their partners are happily married, only to find out one day that their partner was actually having an affair for several years (Kingston, 2008). Even self-perceptions of well-being can be error prone. For example, people may focus too much on a salient aspect of their lives or they

may use denial and other defense mechanisms to boost self-perceptions of well-being. A better understanding of biases in self-ratings and informant ratings of well-being requires a closer examination of the cognitive processes underlying these judgments (Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002).

Another reason for studying these processes is that self-ratings of life-satisfaction are often used to examine the determinants of well-being (Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009; Schimmack, 2009). Many key findings in well-being science rest on the assumption that self-ratings of life-satisfaction are valid (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Unfortunately, it is difficult to examine the validity of life-satisfaction judgments because well-being is by definition a subjective construct (Diener et al., 2009; Schimmack, 2009). The most widely used validation criterion for self-ratings of life-satisfaction have been informant ratings of life-satisfaction by knowledgeable informants (see Schneider and Schimmack (2009), for a review). In these studies, it is commonly assumed that the shared variance between self-ratings and informant ratings reflects valid variance in well-being. In contrast, the nature of unique variance in self-ratings and informant ratings is less clear. This variance may reflect rater specific biases (Anusic, Schimmack, Pinkus, & Lockwood, 2009) or it may reflect valid information that is not shared across raters (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). So far, the sources of self-informant agreement and disagreement in well-being judgments have not been systematically examined. A better understanding of these sources can provide helpful information about the validity of well-being judgments.

One study examined whether even brief video clips contain valid information about well-being (Yeagley, Morling, & Nelson, 2007). The evidence was mixed with significant self-informant correlations for male targets, but not for female targets. Overall

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agreement was considerably lower than agreement in studies with well-acquainted informants (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009). Moreover, we have demonstrated that self-informant agreement increases with length of relationship (Schneider, Schimmack, Petrican, & Walker, 2010). These findings suggest that information about others' well-being is acquired slowly over time. The main purpose of this article is to reveal the sources of agreement in self-ratings and informant ratings of well-being. Our study focused on life-satisfaction judgments for several reasons. First, life-satisfaction judgments are conceptually the closest indicator of well-being (Diener et al., 2009). Second, life-satisfaction judgments are the most widely used indicator of well-being. Third, life-satisfaction judgments produce higher self-informant agreement than affective indicators of well-being (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009). Finally, bottom-up theories of life-satisfaction judgments suggest that life-satisfaction ratings are based on information about satisfaction with specific life domains (Schimmack, 2008; Schimmack et al., 2002). Thus, we could rely on domain satisfaction as a set of potential cues that produces self-informant agreement in life-satisfaction judgments.

1.1. Domain satisfaction as a potential source of agreement

We used satisfaction with various life domains as potential sources of agreement in life-satisfaction ratings. To control for the problem of systematic measurement error in the assessment of domain satisfaction, we measured domain satisfaction as the shared variance between self-ratings and informant ratings of domain satisfaction. This multi-method approach reduces the problem of shared method variance between ratings of life-satisfaction and domain satisfaction by the same rater (Anusic et al., 2009; Campbell & Fiske, 1959). In our model, a life domain that contributes to self-informant agreement in life-satisfaction has to have three characteristics: (a) it has to predict self-ratings of life-satisfaction, (b) it has to predict informant ratings of life-satisfaction, and (c) both raters have to agree in their rating of domain satisfaction. For example, if satisfaction with academic performance contributes to self-informant agreement in life-satisfaction judgments, self-ratings of satisfaction with academic performance should show convergent validity with informant ratings of satisfaction with academic performance, and the shared variance between these two judgments should predict self-ratings and informant ratings of life-satisfaction (Fig. 1). This pattern of correlations would provide evidence for bottom-up effects of satisfaction with life domains on global life-satisfaction ratings.

Our model also allows for top-down effects of a general disposition to be more easily satisfied on domain satisfaction. This assumption is based on the well-established finding that self-ratings of satisfaction with various domains tend to be positively cor-

related with each other (Schimmack, 2008). However, shared variance between self-ratings of domain satisfaction may reflect rating biases as well as top-down effects (Schimmack, 2008). Our multi-rater design allows us for the first time to separate top-down effects from rater-specific method variance. Whereas rater biases produce only correlations among domain satisfaction ratings by one rater, top-down effects should also produce correlations of domain satisfaction ratings by different raters. This prediction is similar to the logic of multi-trait–multi-method studies of personality, in which the presence of higher-order factors is inferred from cross-rater–cross-trait correlations (Anusic et al., 2009). In short, our model allows us to examine the contribution of domain satisfaction to self-informant agreement in ratings of life-satisfaction, and it allows us to examine bottom-up and top-down effects independent of the effects of rating biases.

1.2. Empirical predictions

This is the first study that uses a top-down bottom-up model with self and informant ratings to examine sources of agreement in life-satisfaction ratings. As a result, it is impossible to make a priori predictions on the basis of prior findings. However, we were able to make predictions for some parts of the model on the basis of theories of life-satisfaction judgments and prior findings in the well-being literature. First, we predicted moderate self-informant agreement for global life-satisfaction judgments based on a meta-analysis by Schneider and Schimmack (2009) of self-informant agreement in well-being judgments.

Second, we predicted that there would be self-informant agreement for judgments of domain satisfaction because a few studies have reported agreement for a limited number of domains. For example, Heller, Watson, and Ilies (2006) reported self-informant agreement for spouses' informant ratings of marital satisfaction and job satisfaction. Another study found self-informant agreement for judgments of health satisfaction (Pruchno, Lemay, Field, & Levinsky, 2006).

Our third prediction was that self-informant agreement for domain satisfaction would be higher than self-informant agreement for global life-satisfaction judgments. This novel prediction was based on two assumptions. First, we assume that it is common for people to share information about satisfaction with life domains with close others. Based on our personal experience, we think it is more common to talk about satisfaction or dissatisfaction in specific life domains than to talk about life in general. If our assumption is correct, informants would have more accessible information about domain satisfaction than about satisfaction with life in general. Second, we assume that judgments of domain satisfaction are simpler than judgments of life as a whole. As a result, fewer things can go wrong in a judgment of domain satisfaction.
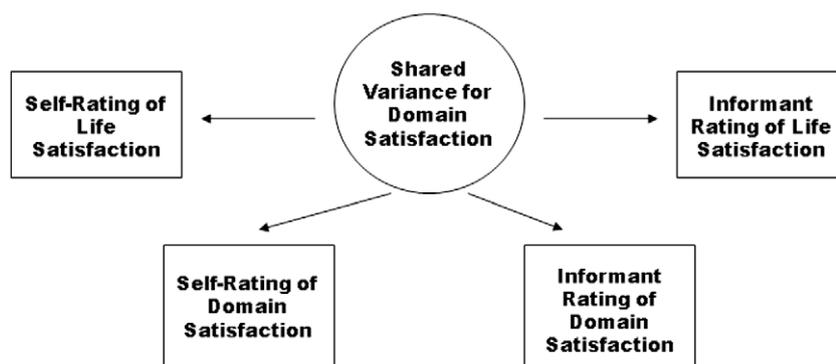

Fig. 1. The shared variance from self-ratings and informant ratings of domain satisfaction influences self and informant ratings of global life-satisfaction.