



## Early adolescents' personality and life satisfaction: A closer look at global vs. domain-specific satisfaction <sup>☆</sup>



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 22 July 2014

Received in revised form 18 March 2015

Accepted 20 March 2015

Available online 4 April 2015

#### Keywords:

Personality traits

Global life satisfaction

Domain-specific satisfaction

Early adolescence

MSLSS

SLSS

Big Five

### ABSTRACT

We examined relations between US early adolescents' major personality traits and global life satisfaction (LS) and satisfaction in five specific domains (i.e., family, friends, school, self, living environment). A sample of 344 7th graders completed the Adolescent Personal Style Inventory (Lounsbury et al., 2003), which assesses the Big Five traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Furthermore, participants completed the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991) and the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, Zullig, & Saha, 2012), assessing global and domain-specific satisfaction, respectively. Neuroticism (inversely), and conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion (positively) were uniquely associated with early adolescents' global LS, with neuroticism showing the strongest association. With respect to domain-specific satisfaction, neuroticism (inversely) and conscientiousness (positively) were uniquely related to satisfaction in all five domains. Extraversion displayed the strongest, unique (positive) association with friend and self-satisfaction reports. Openness displayed the strongest, unique (positive) association with school satisfaction. Agreeableness demonstrated a unique (positive) association with family satisfaction. The results demonstrated the importance of neuroticism in understanding early adolescents' global LS, while the personality variables revealed varying patterns of relationships with domain-specific satisfaction reports.

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### 1. Introduction

We focused on the relations between early adolescents' major personality traits and their reports of *global* life satisfaction (LS) and *domain-specific* LS in this study. Global LS reports reflect a cognitive evaluation of the quality of one's life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) whereas domain-specific LS reports reflect cognitive evaluations of the quality of specific, major life domains, such as school, family, and self. Such evaluations are based on comparisons of individuals' circumstances with standards set by the individual (e.g., Diener et al., 1985). Focusing on both global and domain-specific satisfaction has been considered useful when examining indicators of subjective well-being (e.g., Huebner, 1994). While measures of global LS utilize items that are domain-free (e.g., "I have a good life"), measures of domain-specific satisfaction utilize domain-specific items (e.g., "I have a

good family life") (e.g., Huebner, 1991, 1994) to provide more comprehensive portraits of well-being.

The importance of both global and domain-specific reports of LS is demonstrated by the fact that although scores on key domains are correlated, they are distinguishable in children as young as age 8 (Huebner, 1994). Individuals can report high satisfaction in one area and low in another. Persons' scores on the domains also show differing patterns of correlations with variables. For example, Antaramian, Huebner, and Valois (2008) observed that adolescents' satisfaction with family life (but not global LS) was significantly associated with an intact (vs. non-intact) family structure. For another example, satisfaction with school experiences appeared to be most strongly associated with good teacher–student relationships (Jiang, Huebner, & Siddall, 2013) whereas overall LS appeared to be most strongly associated with good family–student relationships (Siddall, Huebner, & Jiang, 2013). Thus, the exploration of the relations between personality traits and domain-specific LS reports promises to yield more nuanced information about the goodness of fit between various personality traits and early adolescents' experiences of subjective well-being in specific life domains.

Within the present study, we focused on the Big Five approach to personality as it has received widespread acceptance as a

<sup>☆</sup> Preparation of this paper was supported by a Grant of the Swiss National Science Foundation to the first author (SNSF; PBZHP1\_147319).

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comprehensive model describing a set of five broad, cross-culturally relevant personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) (Digman, 1990). This set of five personality factors has also been validated among young people (e.g., Goldberg, 2001; Lounsbury et al., 2003).

There has been noteworthy research attention paid to the relations between personality traits and global LS in adults (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), with less attention paid to youth (e.g., Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). The traits of neuroticism (inversely) and, to a lesser degree, extraversion (positively), have consistently been shown to be related to global LS of adults (for a review, see DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Furthermore, adults' levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness appeared to be positively associated with global LS (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1991). Regarding youth, the traits of neuroticism (inversely) and extraversion (positively) have also consistently been shown to relate to global LS (e.g., Fogle, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2002; Garcia, 2011; Heaven, 1989; Weber, Ruch, & Huebner, 2013). A recent study also revealed that in addition to neuroticism and extraversion, the remaining Big Five traits were significantly positively correlated to youth global LS (Suldo, Minch, & Hearon, in press).

Given the relative lack of research with youth, more studies are needed to clarify the personality correlates of their LS. Furthermore, prior research with youth samples has mostly studied the relations between two or three of the Big Five personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion), and also has been restricted to measures of global LS. Hence, little is known about the relations between major personality traits of youth (especially in terms of the Big Five) and their satisfaction in differing life domains.

Such knowledge of personality-based predictors of LS (global and domain-specific) among youth appears to be important, as LS is not an epiphenomenon but rather appears to play a causal role with respect to a variety of important outcomes, such as peer victimization, disengagement from schooling, decreased parental support, and increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors (see Huebner, Hills, Siddall, & Gilman, 2014, for a review). Therefore, it seems helpful to identify the full range of determinants of such cognitive evaluations related to life as a whole and with specific life domains.

### 1.1. The present study

The purposes of this study were twofold. First, we investigated relations between the Big Five traits and early adolescents' domain-free, global LS. Based on previous findings in adult (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) and youth samples (e.g., Proctor et al., 2009), we hypothesized that neuroticism would be substantially negatively correlated with early adolescents' global LS. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the remaining personality traits (i.e., extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) would be significantly positively related with global LS, but to a lesser degree (cf. Suldo et al., in press).

Second, due to a lack of theory and empirical research in this field, we used an exploratory approach to examine the relations of the Big Five traits and satisfaction in five specific, key domains in early adolescents' lives. Therefore, we formulated no specific hypotheses about such relations.

We focused on early adolescence (about ages 10–15) in this study because it is a significant transition time for US youth (Eccles et al., 1993), reflecting important biological, cognitive, interpersonal, and schooling changes. In addition to the aforementioned changes, early adolescence is an important age group because it is marked by small, but statistically significant decreases in global LS and other domains (e.g., school satisfaction) relative to younger and older age groups (e.g., Proctor et al., 2009; Suldo, Bateman, & Gelley, 2014).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of  $N = 344$  7th graders (54.9% were female) from a middle school in the Southeastern US. Their mean age was 12.23 years ( $SD = 0.46$ ), ranging from 11 to 14 years. Most of them were Caucasian/White (60.7%), 28.4% were African-American, and 10.9% reported other ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Latino, Asian American). About one fourth were eligible for free or reduced lunch (24.8%),<sup>1</sup> indicating lower socioeconomic status (SES).

### 2.2. Instruments

The *Adolescent Personal Style Inventory* (APSI; Lounsbury et al., 2003) assesses the Big Five traits of *neuroticism* (e.g., changes in mood; feelings of worthlessness; tension; etc.), *extraversion* (e.g., liking to meet people; being outgoing and talkative; etc.), *openness* (e.g., liking to try new things; liking to work on problems/puzzles; coming up with new solutions; etc.), *agreeableness* (e.g., getting along with others; being nice and polite; liking to help others; etc.), and *conscientiousness* (e.g., finishing tasks; being on time and orderly; liking to plan; etc.). We administered the APSI version consisting of 48 items, utilizing a five-point Likert-style answer format (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is: "Sometimes I don't feel like I am worth much (neuroticism)". Evidence for its reliability and validity has been reported (e.g., Lounsbury et al., 2003; Suldo et al., in press).

The *Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (SLSS; Huebner, 1991) assesses satisfaction with life as a whole. The SLSS consists of seven items and utilizes a 6-point Likert-style response format (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is "I have what I want in life". Evidence for its reliability and validity has been provided (Huebner, 1991).

The *Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (MSLSS; Huebner, 1994) assesses satisfaction in five life domains (i.e., family, friendships, school, self, and living environment). The abbreviated version of the MSLSS consists of 30 items and utilizes a 6-point Likert-style answer format (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is "Members of my family talk nicely to one another (family domain)". Evidence for the reliability and validity of the abbreviated version of the MSLSS has been reported in Huebner, Zullig, and Saha (2012).

### 2.3. Procedure

Data were collected in classrooms via teachers administering paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Measures were presented in counterbalanced order. All participants attended voluntarily and provided informed consent from their parents or legal guardians and student assent beforehand.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

All analyses (e.g., means, standard deviations, correlations, regressions) were computed using the statistical software package SPSS 22. For all three measures, means, standard deviations, internal consistencies (i.e., Cronbach's alphas), and zero-order correlations with participants' age and sex were computed (see Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), this is a representative finding for this area as 20.8–25.6% of the 5–17-year-olds are expected to live with their families in poverty.

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