



Did curiosity kill the cat? Evidence from subjective well-being in adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the relations between trait curiosity and the well-being of adolescents. The differences between adolescents with high, average and low trait curiosity on a number of subjective well-being (SWB) and distress measures have been examined. The sample consisted of 408 high school students, with an average age of 16.6 years. The results showed that adolescents high in trait curiosity have higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect and greater sense of purpose in life and hope than adolescents with both low and average curiosity. Contrary to significant differences on positive well-being measures, there were no robust differences between adolescents with high, average and low curiosity in distress. The findings of this research indicated that curiosity is a specific predictor of positive well-being and gave support to the two continua model of mental health, which view positive and negative well-being as relatively independent constructs.

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1. Introduction

Curiosity seems to be a universal phenomenon, both in humans and non-human animals. Curiosity/exploration emerged as one of the major components of trait openness in a review of 19 studies of personality dimensions in 12 non-human species, and it was identified in most species (Gosling & John, 1999). In a study conducted by Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, and Seligman (2007) curiosity was most commonly endorsed among 24 character strengths, and one of the strengths most strongly positively correlated with life satisfaction. Although it is recognized as universal and deeply rooted in human evolutionary heritage, curiosity has not always been regarded as a positive trait, particularly in the context of adolescence.

Adolescence is considered to be a period of experimentation when multiple risk behaviors emerge (Galambos & Tilton-Weaver, 1998). Curiosity is often considered a trait with detrimental effects on mental health of adolescents and it was marked as one of the determinants of numerous aversive outcomes such as substance use (De Micheli & Formigoni, 2002), risky sexual behavior (Cullari & Mikus, 1990) and delinquent behaviors (Zuckerman, 1994).

Only recently, curiosity has been put in the context of positive mental health and well-being. Focus of the research has been altered toward positive aspects of curiosity, referring to the construct as an important mechanism of personal growth (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004) and one of the psychological strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Previous research on the relations

between curiosity and well-being has found some interesting developmental differences. While curiosity is positively related to life satisfaction among adults, there is no significant association between curiosity and happiness among young children (Park & Peterson, 2006a). On the other hand, there are only few studies investigating character strengths in adolescence (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2006b), thus the relationship between curiosity and happiness among adolescents remains vague.

The model of curiosity by Kashdan and colleagues was used as a conceptual guide for this research. By this conception, curiosity is defined as a trait encompassing two dimensions: exploration or stretching and embracing. Exploration involves actively seeking out new experiences, information and knowledge, while embracing refers to readiness to accept the novel and unpredictable nature of everyday life (Kashdan et al., 2009). This model underscores the function of curiosity as a facilitator of personal growth and conceptualizes curiosity as a positive emotional-motivational system, which represents one of the core mechanisms towards achieving positive mental health. The theoretical rationale for putting curiosity in the context of subjective well-being was guided by similarity of curiosity to concepts of intrinsic motivation, flow and emotion of interest, all of which are associated with subjective well-being (Fredrickson, 1998). Curiosity is presumed to play an important role in the development of well-being through a number of mechanisms. Firstly, trait curiosity seems to be closely linked to the reward sensitivity system, which makes people more prone to experience positive affect (Shiota, Keltner, & John, 2006). Secondly, curious individuals engage in novel and challenging activities which enable them to build personal resources (Silvia, 2006), like self-efficacy and resilience, leading to greater well-being. A growing number of recent findings (Gallagher & Lopez, 2007; Kashdan &

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Steger, 2007; Kashdan et al., 2009) demonstrated that curiosity was positively associated with various measures of subjective, psychological and social well-being.

In spite of the growing body of research on the relationships between curiosity and SWB, most of these studies have been restricted to samples of students and adults. Only one study, to our knowledge, has focused on adolescents (Kashdan & Yuen, 2007) showing that curiosity was positively correlated with subjective happiness and self-esteem.

1.1. Overview of the present research

Whereas previous research has dealt with maladaptive consequences (i.e., risk behaviors) of high curiosity among adolescents, the nature of relations between extremely high curiosity and adolescents' well-being remains an open question. Research on the relations between curious behaviors (such as novelty seeking) and adolescent health risk behaviors has unambiguously shown that curiosity could have detrimental effects on adolescents' mental health (Cloninger, 2004). On the other hand, there is a limited number of research papers evaluating the advantages of curiosity in the context of adolescents' well-being. Hence, the main aim of this research was to explore the relations between trait curiosity as defined by Kashdan et al. (2009) and numerous aspects of well-being, both positive and negative. Specifically, we tested whether extremely high curiosity was associated with positive functioning. In order to test our hypothesis we identified adolescents with extremely high trait curiosity, and compared them with adolescents with both average and low curiosity, on a broad range of mental health indicators. We included both positive (positive affect, life satisfaction, hope and purpose in life) and negative indicators (emotional distress) of mental health, most commonly used in the field of adolescent well-being (Lou, Anthony, Stone, Vu, & Austin, 2008). This enabled us to investigate whether different levels of trait curiosity were distinctively related to positive and negative well-being, which represent relatively independent constructs (Keyes, 2007).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 408 (250 females, 158 males) high school students, from five schools in Serbia. The mean age of the participants was 16.6 (SD = 0.88) with a range of 15–19. The measures were administered to participants who agreed to complete the study on a voluntary basis, in the classroom, during the last week of the first term.

2.2. Measures

All measures were first translated from English into Serbian and then independently back-translated into English by a second translator. The back-translated versions were then sent to the original authors, who confirmed its accuracy.

2.2.1. Curiosity

Trait curiosity was measured with the Serbian translation of the *Curiosity and Exploration Inventory-II* (CEI-II; Kashdan et al., 2009) which is an improved version of the *Curiosity and Exploration Inventory* (CEI; Kashdan et al., 2004). CEI-II consists of 10 items divided into two 5-item subscales: Stretching (motivation to seek out new experiences and challenging situations; e.g., “I am always looking for experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world”) and Embracing (willingness to embrace the novel and

unpredictable nature of everyday life; e.g., “I am the kind of person who embraces unfamiliar people, events and places”). The participants were asked to rate each item for how accurately they reflect the way they generally feel and behave on a five point scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Results indicated that the CEI-II has acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.76$).

2.2.2. Life satisfaction

Adolescents' life satisfaction was assessed with the Serbian translation of the *Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (MSLSS; Huebner, 1994). The MSLSS is a 40-item self-report instrument designed to measure satisfaction across five life domains: family (e.g., “My parents treat me fairly”), friends (e.g., “I have a lot of fun with my friends”), school (e.g., “I enjoy school activities”), living environment (e.g., “I like my neighborhood”), and self (e.g., “I am fun to be around”). Participants provided their responses using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The reliability and validity of the MSLSS has been considered adequate (Huebner, 2004). The MSLSS was validated for Serbian adolescents and reported high reliability (Jovanovic & Zuljevic, in press). For this particular research, we used only total score ($\alpha = 0.90$) reflecting global life satisfaction.

2.2.3. Hope

The Serbian translation of the *Children's Hope Scale* (CHS; Snyder et al., 1997) was used to assess goal-related hopeful thinking in children and adolescents. The CHS comprises two subscales reflecting agency (e.g., “I think I am doing pretty well”) and pathways thinking (e.g., “When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it”), with three items each. Pathways thinking refers to the perceived ability to find routes to goals, while agency thinking reflects the motivation to use those routes. The responses to each of the six items range from 1 (*none of the time*) to 7 (*all of the time*). Psychometric properties of the CHS are considered to be adequate (e.g., Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman, 2003). Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was 0.75.

2.2.4. Purpose in life

Purpose in life was assessed by means of the Serbian translation of the *Life Engagement Test* (LET; Scheier et al., 2006). LET consists of 6 items (e.g., “To me, the things I do are all worthwhile”), measuring the extent to which a person engages in activities that are personally valued. Items are rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.73.

2.2.5. Affective well-being

The Serbian Inventory of Affect based on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-X (SIAB-PANAS; Novovic & Mihic, 2008) is a Serbian translation and adaptation of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-X (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). The scale demonstrated excellent psychometric properties in previous research (Novovic, Mihic, Tivilovic, & Jovanovic, 2008). In the current research, we used the 20-item short form to measure Positive affect (PA sample items: “excited”, “active”, “strong”) and Negative affect (NA sample items: “scared”, “guilty”, “irritable”). Participants were asked to rate how they feel in general, using a 5-point scale from 1 (*never or almost never*) to 5 (*always or almost always*). Cronbach's alpha for the PA subscale was 0.77 and 0.81 for the NA subscale.

2.2.6. Loneliness

Sense of loneliness was measured with the Serbian translation of the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS; De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985). The DJGLS consists of 11 items, measuring two aspects of loneliness: social (e.g., “There are enough people I feel

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