



## Core self-evaluations, meta-mood experience, and happiness: Tests of direct and moderating effects

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 20 December 2011

Received in revised form 10 March 2012

Accepted 15 March 2012

Available online 7 April 2012

#### Keywords:

Core self-evaluations

Meta-mood experience

Subjective happiness

Moderating effect

### ABSTRACT

In this study, an integrative analysis involving core self-evaluations and meta-mood experience as concurrent predictors of subjective happiness was conducted on a large sample of Spanish adults. Along with the expected direct and additional influence on subjective happiness, a significant core self-evaluations  $\times$  meta-mood experience was found in explaining happiness scores beyond the independent effect of socio-demographic variables, core self-evaluations and meta-mood dimensions. However, this interaction was only found for core-self evaluations and beliefs about mood repair. Our findings provide some preliminary support for a specific interaction between a broad personality construct and beliefs about mood repair in explaining levels of happiness. Finally, some theoretical implications of the study of personality-happiness linkage from a mood self-regulation perspective are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the appearance of the contemporary movement of positive psychology, social researchers have become greatly interested in understanding the underlying factors that help to explain individual variations in well-being and happiness (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Diener and colleagues' definition of happiness has become widely accepted within the scientific community, who prefer to use the label subjective well-being, defining it as a combination of three components: infrequent instances of negative affect, frequent instances of positive affect, and a high level of life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). In this sense, positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction are considered as indicators of the same underlying construct, highly correlated, and typically yield a single dimension to be closely related to happiness, because they involve evaluative judgments based on individuals' life experiences. To refer to this collection of indicators, we have used the term happiness or subjective well-being, although we also include terms of mood positive or life satisfaction at times according to the instruments used for researchers for measuring specific indicators of subjective well-being.

Researchers have made much progress in identifying variables that increase happiness. In fact, beyond the objective circumstances related to happiness (Diener & Oishi, 2000), several dispositional factors within the individual are considered to significantly affect the degree of happiness experienced by people (Steel & Ones,

2002). Empirical evidence has provided support for the notion that formulating models which take personal factors into consideration would entail a fuller account of individuals' happiness (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005).

Over the last two decades, an increasing number of researchers have focused their interest on a broad personality trait termed core self-evaluations (CSE; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). The CSE concept represents one's appraisal of people, events and things in relation to oneself (Judge et al., 1997). This broad, latent personality trait, composed by self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, locus of control and (low) neuroticism (high emotional stability), is viewed as a bottom-line appraisal of one's self-worth. As CSEs define how an individual sees her- or himself, they also affect how people perceive and assess situations. During recent years, research has found some empirical support for the associations between CSE and indicators of subjective well-being (Piccolo, Judge, Takahashi, Watanabe, & Locke, 2005; Tsaousis, Nikolau, Serdaris, & Judge, 2007). In this sense, there is evidence that CSE is related to positive and negative affect (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999), to higher life satisfaction (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998) and to greater levels of happiness (Piccolo et al., 2005). As Judge et al. (1998) noted, it seems reasonable that CSE could be a valuable cause of judgments of satisfaction and happiness because thinking well of oneself should make one happier. Consequently, previous studies have thus far concentrated on demonstrating the main effects of CSE on well-being. However, earlier research has not paid enough attention to the question of how these positive outcomes related to CSE may be moderated, i.e., to the factors that may facilitate the influence of CSE on well-being.

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In light of this gap, one psychological mechanism that may link CSE to subjective well-being is people's beliefs about their moods and their ability to manage them. Mayer and Stevens (1994) defined meta-mood experience as the reflective experience involving thoughts and feelings about one's moods. This reflective process is particularly relevant to the understanding of individual differences in how people continually reflect upon psychological states to monitor, discriminate, and regulate their emotions (Mayer & Stevens, 1994). Since its introduction in 1995, the Trait meta-mood scale (TMMS, Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995) has been widely used as a measure for assessing these beliefs or attitudes about one's moods and emotions. Numerous studies have demonstrated that dimensions of the TMMS are positively related to several predictors of overall life satisfaction (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2005), psychological well-being (Shulman & Hemenover, 2006) and adaptive coping behaviours (Gohm & Clore, 2002). In sum, the existing literature suggests that higher levels of beliefs about mood are strongly related to a higher degree of subjective well-being. Given the potential of meta-mood and CSE as unique antecedents to subjective well-being, an examination as joint contributors would be needed.

Though the relationship between CSE and meta-mood experience has not been considered theoretically, it would appear that the two constructs operate similarly in terms of their significant relationships with the other positive functioning indicators mentioned above. In expanding the theoretical framework for identifying useful predictors of well-being, there are several worthwhile reasons for considering a model that involves not only CSE, but also meta-mood dimensions. From a theoretical perspective, while CSE includes an evaluative appraisal of oneself and one's functioning in his or her environment (Judge et al., 1997), meta-mood experiences specifically include self-beliefs or personal attitudes about one's moods and emotions (Salovey et al., 1995), suggesting that the two constructs may partially overlap. That is, when people feel they are doing well, they feel good about themselves.

In terms of divergent validity, it is possible that a global evaluative judgment of one's worthiness, effectiveness and capability as a person (CSE) might in part reflect positive self-beliefs about one's own emotions and capacity to regulate moods (positive beliefs of moods), and may in fact inflate the findings obtained with both constructs on real-life criteria. However, in a recent study, Kluemper (2008) found that with Big-five dimensions and IQ controlled, CSE and self-reports of emotional abilities showed incremental validity on coping, stress and life satisfaction. In short, these findings suggest that CSE and self-reported emotional abilities measure something unique and add value to the study of individual differences. However, Kluemper's (2008) research was focused specifically on examining the incremental validity of both constructs, not focusing on an integrative model involving CSE and self-reported emotional abilities as concurrent predictors of well-being.

In our opinion, there are some theoretical and empirical reasons for considering an integrative model involving CSE and emotional abilities as concurrent predictors of subjective happiness. First, CSE and emotional abilities measured by self-reports are only moderately correlated with each other (Kluemper, 2008); in addition, given that both constructs have been found to be moderately associated to subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction and subjective happiness), CSE should add unique incremental validity to the prediction of well-being beyond these emotional abilities. Secondly, Mayer and Salovey (1995) suggested that emotional abilities can vary to fit with specific personality constructs (i.e., core self-evaluations), implying a potential moderator effect on the effectiveness of personality for explaining well-being. Beyond and above the effect of personality dispositions, emotion-regulatory processes such as beliefs about mood are important determinants

of well-being and are predicted to heighten the influence of personality on well-being (Mayer & Salovey, 1995).

Although the idea has been previously suggested that some emotional coping processes may moderate the relationship between CSE and outcome variables (Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009), there is also empirical justification to specifically consider meta-mood dimensions as a moderator of psychological and physical indicators (Extremera, Durán, & Rey, 2009; Goldman, Kraemer, & Salovey, 1996; Lischetzke & Eid, 2003). Nevertheless, as far as we know, no studies have been published that examine the moderating role of meta-mood experience on the CSE  $\times$  happiness linkage. In this sense, meta-mood experience refers to the wide variation in individuals' beliefs and attitudes about the experience of emotions. Individuals who can identify, understand and effectively repair their emotional experiences will pursue and cope more successfully with negative experiences by using an effective regulatory process (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999) and, therefore, increase positive mood states (Lischetzke & Eid, 2003).

With regard to the specific relationship between meta-mood dimensions and well-being indicators, whilst clarity and repair are substantially related to subjective well-being criteria, such as satisfaction with life (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2005), attention is not correlated with any well-being outcomes (Kämpfe & Mitte, 2010). In addition, some correlational studies have found that emotional repair is uniquely related to subjective well-being (Thompson, Waltz, Croyle, & Pepper, 2007) and can act as a specific coping buffer when individuals are exposed to a stressful condition that induced a negative mood (Ramos-Díaz, Fernández-Berrocal, & Extremera, 2007). Therefore, in a recent follow-up study, emotional repair uniquely predicted prospective levels of subjective happiness suggesting that one's belief in our ability to terminate a negative mood state is one of the most important of the meta-mood dimensions involved in the maintenance of subjective happiness (Extremera, Salguero, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2011).

Taking into account the aforementioned concerns, the purpose of the present study was threefold. The first purpose was to examine the relations between CSE, meta-mood dimensions and subjective happiness in a large Spanish adult sample. Second, we sought to determine the extent to which CSE accounts for subjective happiness beyond what is accounted for by the influence of trait meta-mood. Third, we sought to examine whether there is a significant interactive model involving CSE and trait meta-mood as concurrent predictors of subjective happiness beyond what is accounted for by direct effects of socio-demographics variables, CSE and meta-mood dimensions. Given previous research on CSE, higher levels of CSE were expected to be significantly associated with greater subjective happiness. Similarly, with respect to TMMS, high levels of clarity and repair were expected to be significantly associated with higher subjective happiness. In addition, consistent with our expectations for additive effects, we predicted that CSE and TMMS would add unique and significant incremental validity in explaining subjective happiness. Finally, consistent with the formulated interactive model, we hypothesised a significant core self-evaluations  $\times$  meta-mood (specifically mood repair) interaction in explaining levels of subjective happiness.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 1005 young and middle-aged adults were recruited from the community. Their mean age was 26.55 years ( $SD = 10.63$ ). They were recruited and tested by research assistants who were undergraduate students, all unpaid volunteers, trained in the data collection and techniques of questionnaires. Of the

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