



Emotional stability as a major dimension of happiness

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Received 19 June 2000; received in revised form 21 November 2000; accepted 30 November 2000

Abstract

Happiness is associated with both extraversion and neuroticism, and extraversion is generally considered the more important. A recent study of happy introverts has shown that extraversion is not always an essential correlate of happiness, and an extensive meta-analysis has found that neuroticism is a greater predictor of both happiness and life satisfaction. It is suggested that the reason for the importance of neuroticism having been overlooked in the past, is the difficulty of handling the idea that (positive) happiness is related to the absence of a (negative) construct. This difficulty could be resolved by the reversal of neuroticism into an alternative and positive concept of “emotional stability”. Happiness could then be regarded as being associated with two positive qualities. With this change of emphasis, a short empirical study has been made of the relationships between happiness as measured by the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) and extraversion and emotional stability. In bivariate and partial correlation, emotional stability was more strongly associated with happiness than extraversion, and accounted for more of the total variability in multiple regression. Emotional stability was also the greater correlate for a majority of the 29 items of the OHI, and the sole significant predictor of the happiness of younger people. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Emotional stability; Extraversion; Satisfaction with life; Self-esteem; Psychological well being; Dimensions of happiness

1. Introduction

Psychological well-being, or happiness, is a multidimensional construct comprising emotional and cognitive elements. The basic framework was established by Bradburn (1969) who operationalised well-being in terms of separate positive and negative “affects”, which are an amalgam of the feelings, moods and emotional responses of individuals to the variety of pleasant and

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unpleasant events which make up normal life. According to Bradburn “an individual will be high in psychological well-being in the degree to which he has an excess of positive over negative affect and will be low in well-being in the degree to which negative affect predominates over positive” (p. 9). Subsequently Andrews and Withey (1976) showed that well-being could better be represented by the addition of a third, cognitive-evaluative element, life satisfaction, of which self-esteem (Maslow, 1970), a sense of personal control (Rotter, 1966), optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985) and goal fulfilment (Headey & Wearing, 1981) are some specific aspects.

The idea that the positive and negative moods associated with well-being are unrelated is counter-intuitive; it is difficult to visualise being happy and unhappy at one and the same time. Nevertheless, a range of studies has provided evidence in support of the independence of positive and negative affect (for example Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965; Diener & Emmons, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1997), and this view has been accepted by the US National Advisory Mental Health Council (1995)¹. That happiness and its component parts are related differentially and independently to the personality traits of extraversion and neuroticism has been extensively documented since Costa and McCrae (1980) demonstrated that positive affect correlates (positively) with extraversion and that negative affect correlates (negatively) with neuroticism. Similar relationships have been reported for composite measures of well-being such as the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Lu & Argyle, 1991) and cognitive factors such as self-esteem and optimism (Lucas, Diener & Suh, 1996). Costa, McCrae and Norris (1981) found that extraversion and neuroticism data antedated and predicted differences in happiness 17 years later. Similar results were reported by Headey and Wearing (1989) over a period of 7 years for an Australian sample.

In parallel with the substantial literature on the relationships between extraversion, neuroticism and well-being, the idea has emerged that extraversion is the predominant predictor of happiness. This would appear to be self-evident because extraversion is associated with friendship and social activity, which are major sources of joy, happiness and personal satisfaction in both private and public life (Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976). There are other plausible reasons for this attribution. Most of the relevant work has been conducted in the West, particularly in the United States, where sociability and the pursuit of personal happiness are legitimate and associated cultural norms. Contemporary life in the West is also highly interactive, and the ability easily to establish friendly relationships with many people is a valued and advantageous social skill (Diener, Larsen & Emmons, 1984). Neuroticism, on the other hand, is associated with distress, depression and despair, and these states are the antithesis of happiness. The construct of neuroticism used in personality theory originated from a clinical measure of mental instability used for the diagnosis of psychological disorder. In a society that is conditioned to “accentuate the positive”, it is not intuitively easy to grasp the idea that happiness is related as much to the absence of negative affect (neuroticism), commonly associated with mental illness, as to the presence of positive affect (extraversion).

In order to resolve this difficulty in studies of well-being, it is now suggested that the concept of neuroticism should be reversed and termed “emotional stability”, so that greater emotional sta-

¹ This view is not universally accepted. Several workers, notably Russell and Carroll (1999), have argued that the observed independence of positive and negative affects is an artefact created by inherent measurement error, and have reported alternative evidence which supports theoretical predictions based on bipolarity.

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