



A will and a proper way leading to happiness: Self-Directedness Mediates the Effect of Persistence on Positive Affectivity

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ABSTRACT

Persistence is a temperament dimension that enables maintenance of behaviors. Persistent pursuit of need-satisfying goals is suggested to lead to increased Subjective Well-Being (SWB). The psychological advantages of being highly persistent can be evaluated by investigating the interactions of Persistence with other personality dimensions in relation to SWB. The aim of the present study is to investigate if Self-Directedness, defined as the ability to develop good habits and behave in accordance with long-term values and goals, mediates the relationship between Persistence and SWB. In two studies high school pupils ($n = 468$) reported Persistence, Self-Directedness, Positive and Negative Affect, and Life Satisfaction. Mediation analysis showed that Self-Directedness accounts for a significant amount of the shared variance between Persistence and Positive affect, but did not mediate the relationship of Persistence to Negative affect neither to Life Satisfaction. It can be concluded that Persistence itself might maintain motivation through delay periods, while Self-Directedness guides behavior towards long-term pleasant experiences.

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1. Introduction

Persistence is a temperament dimension in Cloninger psychological model of temperament and character (Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, & Wetzel, 1994) that is coupled to the brain's noradrenergic system and explains maintenance of behaviour. Adolescents high in Persistence are described as hardworking, and stable despite frustration and fatigue. They are also expected to increase their efforts in response to anticipated reward (Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993). In other words, frustration and fatigue may be perceived as a personal challenge, they do not give up easily and are probably willing to make major sacrifices to be a success (e.g., good grades). In a recent study, for example, Garcia (under review) found that adolescents who reported high levels of Persistence also reported engaging in the pursuit of goals, studying to raise grades, and striving to accomplish things in order to increase positive emotions. Sheldon and colleagues (2010) found that persistent pursuit of need-satisfying goals lead to increased Subjective Well-Being (SWB: Life Satisfaction, frequency of positive affect, and infrequency

of negative affect). However, persistent pursuit to unachievable goals may lie behind medical conditions such as long-term risk for diabetes, and heart disease (Miller & Wrosch, 2007). In situations in which a key life-goal cannot be realized, the most adaptive response for mental and physical health may be to disengage from that goal (Miller & Wrosch, 2007). Indeed, Sheldon and colleagues acknowledge that "a will and proper way" is a prerequisite if gains in SWB are to be maintained (Sheldon et al., 2010, p. 39).

Persistence among adolescents seems to be an important personality dimension in the prediction of the experience of high levels of positive affect and low levels of Life Satisfaction (Garcia, 2011a,b; Garcia, Kerekes, Andersson-Arntén, & Archer, 2012; Garcia & Moradi, 2011). Perseveration might naturally lead to high levels of positive experience when goals are achieved. Nevertheless, high Persistence may be an adaptive behaviour only when rewards are intermittent but the contingencies remain stable (Cloninger et al., 1994). In the context of daily problems adolescents encounter an equally stressful experience as if they would be major life events (McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000). Hence, at least among adolescents, perseveration can become maladaptive and might lead to low SWB and bad physical health. The psychological advantages or disadvantages of Persistence can be evaluated by investigating its interactions with other personality dimensions in relation to SWB (Cloninger, Zohar, Hirschmann, & Dahan, 2012). Before we

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disentangle these interacting dimensions of personality we briefly present SWB as a measure of happiness and some of the benefits related to high levels of happiness.

1.1. Subjective Well-Being

Within the field of positive psychology, happiness is usually measured through subjective evaluation of individuals' experience of pleasure versus displeasure, involving both a cognitive and an affective component (Pavot, 2008). Life Satisfaction (LS) is suggested as the cognitive component, and refers to a comparison process in which individuals assess the quality of their lives on the basis of their own self-imposed standard (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The affective component of SWB involves the experience of positive (PA) and negative affect (NA) (Schimmack, 2008). These two components of SWB, cognitive and affective, are related to each other, but it is not clear how much. Some of the variations between these components can be attributed to methodological factors (e.g., reliable measures yield higher correlations between LS and affect balance), but they are still far from being collinear (Schimmack, 2008). In other words, SWB presents a compelling measure of well-being with components that are differently related to personality (see Garcia & Erlandsson, 2011).

According to Martin and Huebner (2007) the multidimensional model of SWB (i.e., LS, PA, and NA) is valid for adolescents as well. Thus, a happy adolescent can be recognized by: being satisfied with life and experiencing more positive than negative affect. Happiness by itself may appear to be an attractive goal, but it also has important implications in adolescents' lives—adolescents that experience high levels of happiness show less emotional and behavioural problems (Suldo & Huebner, 2006).

1.2. Persistence and Self-Directedness

Cloninger's psychobiological model of personality (Cloninger et al., 1993) is based on findings from neuroanatomy and neurophysiology as well as developmental and clinical psychology and psychiatry. Differences in the major brain systems for procedural versus propositional learning lead to the distinction between four dimensions of temperament and three dimensions of character (Cloninger, 2004). Temperament reflects the basic organization of different brain systems for the activation, maintenance and inhibition of behavior in response to stimuli. In contrast, character involves individual differences in self-concepts about goals and values (Cloninger, 2004). Cloninger's model can serve as a tool for unravelling and understanding which other interacting personality dimensions are important in the evaluation of the psychological advantages or disadvantages of persistence. An imperative in this evaluation is to outline how Persistence regulates the information processing of affective stimuli (Cloninger et al., 2012; Gusnard, Akbudak, Shulman, & Raichle, 2001; Gusnard et al., 2003). As stated in the introduction, Persistence is a temperament dimension characterized by the extent to which a person will continue to expect and seek rewards even when the expected outcome is only rarely successful, whereas Self-Directedness is a character dimension based on the concept of the self as an autonomous individual. Self-Directedness allows the individual to engage in purposeful actions because the individual has a "sense of following a meaningful direction in one's life" (Cloninger, 2004, p. 120).

A specific brain circuit, involving ventral striatum, the anterior cingulate cortex, and the orbital frontal cortex, is strongly correlated to TCI Persistence (Gusnard et al., 2003). As explained by Cloninger and colleagues (2012), this specific brain circuit regulates the behavioral conditioning of reward-seeking behavior (see also Schultz, Tremblay, & Hollerman, 2000, 2003 among others). Highly persistent individuals show increased activity in this

specific brain circuit when evaluating pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant stimuli (assessed by the International Affective Picture System; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1997). In contrast, those low in Persistence show decreased activity in this brain circuit. Moreover, when the number of neutral stimuli increases, in relation to pleasant and unpleasant stimuli, the activity of the brain circuit in high persistent individuals increases even further. However, the tendency to rate stimuli as pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant is independent of the number of neutral stimuli. Instead, the tendency to rate specific stimuli as pleasant depends on the interaction of Persistence and the character dimension of Self-Directedness, no other character dimension was involved. That is, individuals high in Persistence and high in Self-Directedness make more pleasant judgments at the expense of neutral ratings (Gusnard et al., 2003; see also Cloninger et al., 2012 for a review).

Accordingly, Self-Directedness is related to activation of the medial prefrontal cortex when individuals are consciously evaluating whether a stimulus is felt to be pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant (Cloninger, 2004; Gusnard et al., 2001). Self-Directedness, for instance, predicts high levels SWB among adolescents (Garcia, 2011a,b; Garcia, Archer, Moradi, & Andersson-Arntén, 2012; Garcia & Moradi, 2011; Garcia, under review). Adolescents that are self-directed develop good habits and automatically behave in accord with their long-term values and goals, probably as a consequence of self-discipline (Cloninger et al., 1994). Persistence seems to hold "incentive information in representational memory during delay periods in the guidance of goal-directed behavior" (Cloninger et al., 2012, p. 759), while Self-Directedness probably mediates the significance or meaning of what is experienced, in turn, influencing adolescents' happiness (Cloninger, 2004).

1.3. The present study

The present study aims to investigate if the TCI character dimension of Self-Directedness mediates the relationship between Persistence and SWB. In two separate studies we use mediation analysis to investigate if Self-Directedness accounts for a significant amount of the shared variance between Persistence and SWB measures.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 304 high school pupils (123 girls and 181 boys, age mean of 17.78, $SD = .81$) at one high school in west Sweden, participated. All parents and teachers have received written and oral information about the nature of the study (e.g., aim, methods, instruments, anonymity), the researchers answered all eventual questions, and written consents were collected from both adolescents and their parents. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Each participating adolescent received a cinema ticket at the end of the data collection.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Persistence and Self-Directedness

The TCI (Cloninger et al., 1993) measures personality in the seven dimensions by Cloninger's psychobiological model (238-items with forced binary answer: *yes* or *no*). Participants were asked to complete the whole instrument. Nevertheless, the only dimensions used in the present analysis were Persistence, with 8 questions like e.g., "I often push myself to the point of exhaustion or try to do more than I really can") and Self-Directedness, with 44 questions

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