



Are smarter people happier? Meta-analyses of the relationships between general mental ability and job and life satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Despite folk and scholarly interest on the relationship between intelligence and happiness, there is an absence of cumulative knowledge on this topic to guide theory and practice. Accordingly, we conducted meta-analyses of the relationships of general mental ability (GMA) with two organizationally relevant indicators of happiness (i.e., job and life satisfaction). Drawing on the gravitation model and job design theory, we test a model that posits GMA has positive indirect effects on job and life satisfaction through the mediating effects of job complexity and income. Overall, the results of the meta-analyses showed that there was a small, positive correlation between GMA and both job satisfaction ($\rho = 0.05$) and life satisfaction ($\rho = 0.11$). The results of meta-analytic path analysis generally supported the hypothesized model. Further, there was an unexpected negative, direct relationship between GMA and job satisfaction. We discuss the implications of these findings for theory and practice.

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For centuries, scholars and laypeople have attempted to answer the basic question, “What makes people happy?” In particular, folk wisdom is littered with statements claiming negative relationships between intelligence, or general mental ability (GMA), and happiness. From the popular adage “ignorance is bliss” to Ernest Hemingway’s (1986) contention that “happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know”, one might conclude that smarter people are more likely to be unhappy. Given the popular interest in intelligence and happiness, a variety of studies in the management field have investigated the relationships of GMA with organizationally relevant indicators of happiness (i.e., job and life satisfaction), but the extant empirical evidence is mixed. For example, some studies have found negative relationships between intelligence and both job and life satisfaction (e.g., Barrett, Forbes, O’Connor, & Alexander, 1980; Meulmann, 1991), whereas others have found positive relationships (e.g., Judge, Ilies, & Dimotakis, 2010a; Sigelman, 1981) or none at all (e.g., Maltarich, Nyberg, & Reilly, 2010). This is surprising, because GMA is positively related to a variety of work-related outcomes, including job performance and indicators of extrinsic career success (i.e., income and occupational attainment) that research shows are positively related to happiness (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004).

Coinciding with the popular and scholarly interest in the relationships between GMA and job and life satisfaction, researchers have recently called for an expansion of the criterion domain associated with GMA beyond just the study of job performance to include attitudinal variables. For example, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) lamented the neglect of cognitive variables in the study of attitudes, noting that recent developments in studying the person-based components of job and life satisfaction have largely been with respect to affective dispositions (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002) and suggested

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this as a worthwhile avenue of research. Similarly, Lievens and Reeve (2012, p. 155) called for additional research that “seeks to better understand the practical significance of *g* via the breadth of its associations with an array of social, psychological, and health-related variables”. The implication is that if intelligent people are happier, it may identify a new path by which GMA affects the performance and bottom line success of the organization (in addition to the well-established linkage between intelligence, job knowledge and job performance; e.g., Hunter, 1986; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986). In this vein, the purpose of this study is to conduct a meta-analysis that examines the magnitude, direction, and mediators of the relationships between GMA and job and life satisfaction.

Our study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, this study seeks to clarify the nature of the seemingly ambiguous relationships between GMA and job and life satisfaction. Folk wisdom suggests that intelligence and happiness are antithetical, but we propose theory-driven hypotheses that predict positive relationships between the constructs. Second, we answer researchers' calls to expand the criterion space associated with GMA beyond job performance to include important attitudinal outcomes not typically considered in the study of intelligence. We believe the present meta-analysis will directly address the recent calls from scholars to “explore the limits of what intelligence predicts in work settings” (Scherbaum, Goldstein, Yusko, Ryan, & Hanges, 2012, p. 144). Third, we draw from the gravitation model and job design theory to develop and test a theory-driven model. Specifically, we posit that GMA has positive indirect effects on job and life satisfaction through the mediating effects of job complexity and income. That is, GMA is postulated to have a positive, indirect relationship with attitudes, because higher GMA individuals gravitate towards more complex jobs and earn higher income (Judge et al., 1999; McCormick, Jeanneret, & Mecham, 1972; Ng et al., 2005; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004) than lower GMA individuals. In turn, both complex jobs and higher income are associated with greater happiness at work and in life in general (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010c; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). We also test several methodological moderators in an attempt to clarify the ambiguous findings in previous empirical studies and to provide a parsimonious theoretical framework regarding the link between GMA and job and life satisfaction.

1. Theory and hypotheses

1.1. Overview of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and GMA

In the current study, we focus on two aspects of happiness that are relevant to individuals' work and life: job satisfaction and life satisfaction. Put simply, job and life satisfaction are individuals' evaluations of how much they like or dislike their jobs and lives, respectively (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Job and life satisfaction are inextricably linked, as meta-analytic research has shown that the corrected correlation between the two is 0.44 (Tait, Padgett, & Baldwin, 1989). There are two explanatory mechanisms that account for the strong covariance between these two constructs. First, according to the spillover effect, work is a central component of individuals' lives, and therefore work attitudes have a strong influence on individuals' life attitudes (Tait et al., 1989). Similarly, individuals' evaluations of their life outside of work have an effect on how one feels at work because their positive or negative attitudes about their lives permeate the work day (Judge & Watanabe, 1993). A second perspective attributes the job-life satisfaction relationship to dispositional sources (Heller, Judge, & Watson, 2002). According to the dispositional perspective, affective dispositions (e.g., positive and negative affect) underlie individuals' experiences in both their jobs and lives, and cause a spurious relationship between the two sets of attitudes that are attributable to these dispositional influences. Because of this, we control for the effects of extraversion and emotional stability, which correspond closely to positive and negative affect, respectively, on job and life satisfaction in our analyses.

In terms of their relevance to both individuals and organizations, job and life satisfaction have been shown to relate to important work and life outcomes. For example, the job satisfaction-job performance link has been referred to as the “Holy Grail” of industrial psychologists (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Landy, 1989), with good reason, as it is difficult to imagine two constructs that are more central to the study of organizational behavior. Job satisfaction also relates to a host of other important outcomes, such as turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), promotions (Ng et al., 2005), and income (Judge et al., 1999). Similarly, life satisfaction has been found to relate to broader career and life outcomes, such as objective and subjective health (Judge et al., 2010a; Judge & Watanabe, 1993; Wright, Cropanzano, Bonett, & Diamond, 2009), job attainment (Judge, Klinger, & Simon, 2010b), as well as performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000) and income (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984). As this body of research shows, workers' job and life satisfaction are important not only to organizations in the form of increased productivity, but to workers themselves because of the resulting rewards and beneficial life outcomes associated with these attitudes.

GMA, defined as a “general mental capability that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience” (Gottfredson, 1997, p. 13), occupies a similar position of centrality in the management literature. As we have alluded to, GMA is positively related to a host of behaviors valued by organization, such as job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (Schmidt, Shaffer, & Oh, 2008; Gonzalez-Mulé, Mount, & Oh, 2014), in addition to beneficial outcomes for individuals, such as extrinsic career success in the form of income and occupational attainment (Ng et al., 2005). However, conspicuously missing from the extant literature is a meta-analytic examination of how GMA relates to both job and life satisfaction. This gap in the literature is surprising, because there is a long history of research that investigates both the situational (e.g., characteristics of jobs; Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2013) and dispositional (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Judge et al., 2002) antecedents of job and life satisfaction. To this end, in the

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