



# Trait self-control: Why people with a higher approach (avoidance) temperament can experience higher (lower) subjective wellbeing



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## ABSTRACT

The present study sought to examine the interrelationships between approach and avoidance temperament, trait self-control, and subjective wellbeing, and to see whether trait self-control could mediate the effect of temperament on subjective wellbeing. Volunteers from the United States answered questionnaires measuring approach and avoidance temperament, trait self-control, and subjective wellbeing (assessed through happiness and life satisfaction). Preliminary analyses showed that the model was significant (absolute GoF = 0.51, relative GoF = 0.97, outer model GoF = 0.99, inner model GoF = 0.97,  $R^2 = 31.74\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Correlation analyses indicated: (a) positive associations between approach temperament, trait self-control, happiness, and life satisfaction ( $\rho_s = 0.22$  to  $0.62$ ,  $p_s < 0.001$ ); and (b) negative associations of avoidance temperament with trait self-control, happiness, and life satisfaction ( $\rho_s = -0.48$  to  $-0.24$ ,  $p_s < 0.001$ ). Mediation analyses revealed that trait self-control: (a) partially mediated the positive effect of approach temperament on subjective wellbeing (but the size of the mediating effect indicated that no mediation would take place); and (b) partially mediated the negative effect of avoidance temperament on subjective wellbeing. Finally, this study is the first to show that temperament can affect subjective wellbeing and that trait self-control can mediate their relationships.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most important questions addressed by positive psychology is “Why are certain people chronically happy?” Positive psychology refers to the scientific study of “...what makes life worth living” (e.g., Peterson & Park, 2014). In other words, positive psychology examines the processes underlying optimal functioning and healthy outcomes, such as subjective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing can be defined as “...people's overall evaluations of their lives and their emotional experiences” and “...includes broad appraisals, such as life satisfaction and health satisfaction judgments, and specific feelings that reflect how people are reacting to the events and circumstances in their lives” (Diener et al., 2017, p. 87). More specifically, it may refer to the notions of positive emotions, happiness, and life satisfaction. Research has revealed that genes—primarily expressed in terms of personality—accounted for approximately 80% of the variance of long-term subjective wellbeing (Nes, Røysamb, Tambs, Harris, & Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2006), suggesting that personality traits can influence strongly subjective wellbeing. The goal of the present article is to advance our understanding about how personality traits affect subjective

wellbeing. Although the relationships between the Big Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness) and subjective wellbeing have received considerable attention (e.g., see Chen, 2015; Soto, 2015; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008), there have not been any studies designed to explore the relationship between *temperament*—the most biological structure of personality—and subjective wellbeing.

### 1.1. Temperament and subjective wellbeing

Temperament refers to a basic and energizing structure of personality that is essential for adaptive functioning (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). Elliot and Thrash (2010) defined temperament as “...a general neurobiological sensitivity” (p. 866) to either appetitive (i.e., approach temperament) or aversive (i.e., avoidance temperament) stimuli, “...accompanied by a perceptual vigilance for, an affective reactivity to, and a behavioral predisposition toward such stimuli” (p. 866). Elliot and Thrash (2010) argued that temperament would structure several sorts of personality trait, such as the Big Five personality traits, emotionality, motivational systems, and regulatory focus. Through a series

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of studies (Studies 4 and 5), the authors revealed that approach temperament was positively related to extraversion (i.e. stable tendency to be active, sociable, and optimistic), positive emotionality (i.e., stable tendency to experience positive emotion), behavioral activation system (BAS) sensitivity (i.e., stable tendency to experience positive affect in response to positive cues), and chronic promotion focus (i.e., stable motivational orientation concerned with ideals and gains in self-regulation). By contrast, they evidenced that avoidance temperament was positively related to neuroticism (i.e., stable tendency to be emotionally unstable, insecure, and to experience anxiety), negative emotionality (i.e., stable tendency to experience negative emotion), behavioral inhibition system (BIS) sensitivity (i.e., stable tendency to experience negative affect in response to negative cues), and chronic prevention focus (i.e., stable motivational orientation concerned with obligations and losses in self-regulation).

Why would temperament influence subjective wellbeing? According to Elliot and Thrash (2010), approach (or avoidance) temperament would strengthen a focus on positive (or negative) events, thereby producing greater sensitivity to positive (or negative) stimuli. Such sensitivity would increase the quantity of positive (or negative) information processed in the cognitive system, thus leading to experience more positive (or negative) feelings. One can also propose that approach (or avoidance) temperament would process events according to approach-based (or avoidance-based) regulations and achievement goals, which would trigger agreeable (or disagreeable) states of mind (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). Additionally, approach-based regulations would be more efficient (i.e., faster and less costly) than avoidance-based regulations since they would treat a lower quantity of aversive stimuli, thus leading to activate a more limited number of cognitive operations and to save more cognitive resources (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). In sum, individuals with a higher approach temperament would experience more positive emotions and feelings over time. What is the link between emotions and subjective wellbeing? Diener et al. (2017) proposed that "...affect balance—experiencing more pleasant than unpleasant emotions—is strongly associated with life satisfaction" (p. 91), suggesting that wellbeing would result from experiencing more positive than negative emotions. This view has been supported by different empirical studies showing that positive emotions not only predicted positively wellbeing, but also mediated the relationships between predictors and wellbeing (e.g., Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014; Rousseau & Vallerand, 2008). Finally, we argue that approach (or avoidance) temperament would generate more positive (or negative) than negative (or positive) emotions, thereby promoting (or hindering) subjective wellbeing.

### 1.2. The mediating role of trait self-control

Personality has been conceived in terms of continuum arranged from the most decontextualized (general) to the most contextualized (specific) levels (e.g., Elliot & Thrash, 2010; Roberts & Wood, 2006). Assuming that personality is made of different personality units, such as dispositions, motives, abilities, and narratives, the neo-socioanalytic theory (e.g., Roberts & Wood, 2006) proposed that every personality unit is hierarchically organized. The theory also proposed that proximal relationships among the unit components would be stronger than distal relationships, and such a proximity effect would operate either across different personality units or within each of them. For example, temperament would be psychologically more proximal to conscientiousness than to subjective wellbeing.

Focused on motives, affects, and performance, Elliot and Thrash (2010) assumed that temperament would produce stable emotional, cognitive and behavioral tendencies to respond to contexts and situations. In their Study 6, they showed that performance-approach goals (i.e., intention to perform better than others) fully mediated the beneficial effect of approach temperament on exam performance, whereas performance-avoidance goals (i.e., intention to avoid performing worse

than others) fully mediated the detrimental effect of avoidance temperament on exam performance. Such results suggest that temperament would affect goal attainment (e.g., performance) by influencing self-regulation mechanisms. Because goal attainment promotes wellbeing (e.g., De Ridder & De Ridder & Gillebaart, 2016; Hagger, 2013, 2014), we presume that approach (or avoidance) temperament could promote (or harm) subjective wellbeing via activating adaptive (or maladaptive) self-regulation mechanisms. Self-regulation corresponds to self-corrective actions and adjustments taking place while pursuing desired goals, and trait self-control is known to be a crucial construct of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Trait self-control can also be viewed as a component of conscientiousness (a Big Five personality trait), which gathers several subtraits, such as conventionality, responsibility, industriousness (or abnegation), order (or organization), virtue (or morality), and self-control (Roberts, Chernysenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). In the present study, we considered trait self-control as a mid-level construct situated between approach/avoidance temperament (high-level construct) and subjective wellbeing (low-level construct).

Considered as a key predictor of subjective wellbeing (e.g., Briki, 2016, 2017; De Ridder & De Ridder & Gillebaart, 2016), trait self-control can be defined as a dispositional capacity of the self to operate appropriate adjustments in order to adapt to the surrounding environment (Tangney et al., 2004). Attempting to account for why trait self-control could influence wellbeing, De Ridder and Gillebaart (2016) assumed that people with a higher trait self-control would experience greater sense of wellbeing because they would "...engage more in goal-directed activities rather than trying to restrain their impulses" (p. 94), thus allowing them to achieve more often the goals they pursue. The authors also posited that achievement goal could "...constitute an important part of experiencing more well-being, since goal achievement has been known to cause positive affect" (p. 93). This echoes Hagger's (2013, 2014) theory of multiple pathways of trait self-control assuming that trait self-control would optimize the regulation of goal-directed processes by promoting facilitative strategies and overriding goal-disruptive temptations. Cheung, Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, and De Ridder (2014) evidenced these views by showing that trait self-control affected happiness via experiencing more promotion focus and less prevention focus. Other studies also evidenced that trait self-control positively predicted subjective wellbeing (e.g., Briki, 2016, 2017; Briki et al., 2015; De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Hofmann et al., 2014).

### 1.3. Study overview

The present study aimed at examining the interrelationships between temperament, trait self-control, and subjective wellbeing, and to see whether trait self-control could mediate the effect of temperament on subjective wellbeing. To do so, we constructed and analyzed a structural equation model (see Fig. 1). We proposed the following hypotheses:

- (1) *Relationships between temperament and subjective wellbeing:* Because individuals with a higher approach temperament would be more sensitive to positive stimuli (e.g., reward) (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), we expect approach temperament to predict positively subjective wellbeing. By contrast, because individuals with a higher avoidance temperament would be more sensitive to negative stimuli (e.g., punishment) (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), we expect avoidance temperament to predict negatively subjective wellbeing.
- (2) *Relationships between temperament, trait self-control, and subjective wellbeing:* Because approach temperament would promote goal attainment (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), we expect approach temperament to predict positively trait self-control as well as subjective wellbeing via enhanced trait self-control (indirect effect). By contrast, because avoidance temperament would harm goal attainment

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