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Personality and Well-being

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Abstract

Although often thought of as an outcome of life experiences, well-being is a relatively stable individual difference. One explanation for this stability is personality. Personality traits are strongly associated with well-being. Moreover, these associations persist even controlling for the behaviors and life experiences that are fostered by personality traits. These strong associations suggest shared origins in genetics and temperament. Both personality and well-being show normative changes over time and longitudinal research suggests that each may set a context that influences development of the other. Although well-being is separate and separable from personality, individual differences at all levels are implicated in the experience of happiness.

Keywords: Personality, Well-being, Affect, Self-Regulation, Life Satisfaction

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Personality and Well-being

Observing newborns in a hospital nursery it is clear that some of the babies are happier than others. This noticeable feature of any group of people persists throughout life. Largely independent of specific circumstances, some people are happier, less unhappy, and more satisfied with their lives than others are. At least part of the explanation for the stability of well-being lies in reliable individual differences or personality. This essay reviews the substantial relationship between personality traits and well-being, summarizing the ways psychologists have tried to understand this relationship, moving from a focus on personality leading to (or influencing) well-being to a more nuanced and increasingly bidirectional perspective.

History, Measurement, and Associations

Both well-being and personality have been of interest to humanity for millennia: Hippocrates attached the bodily humors not only to emotional qualities (e.g., carefree, optimistic) but to personality traits (e.g., lively, talkative). Still, the emergence of the current vibrant study of well-being and personality can be traced to less than 40 years ago. The science of well-being gained its surest footing in the 1980s when, in a landmark article, Diener (1984) defined subjective well-being (now often termed *hedonic* well-being because of its emphasis on subjective feelings) as comprising the amount of positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA) a person experiences along with an evaluative judgment of life satisfaction. Similarly, although factor analyses had long been applied to personality traits, it was in the 1980s that the dominant trait approach to personality truly gained traction. Five broad traits were identified (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1988), including, neuroticism (sometimes named for its opposite, emotional stability), extraversion (outgoing, sociable), openness to experience (unconventional, creative, open-minded, interested cultural and intellectual pursuits), agreeableness (kind, nice, gentle) and

conscientiousness (reliable, dependable, persistent, orderly). Both well-being and personality traits are typically measured using face valid self-report scales, allowing these variables to be measured in large, representative samples. As such, conclusions about the associations between well-being and personality have been tested rigorously using large cross-sectional and, at times, longitudinal datasets.

Research strongly indicates that personality traits are one of the most robust concurrent predictors of well-being. Meta-analyses (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Steel, Schmidt, & Schultz, 2008) strongly support the following associations between personality and well-being.

Neuroticism is negatively correlated with well-being: It shares negative relations with PA and life satisfaction and a positive association with NA. Extraversion is positively correlated with well-being (especially PA). Agreeableness and conscientiousness also share positive associations with well-being. Longitudinal evidence extends some of these associations in predictable directions. Extraversion predicts greater PA and neuroticism predicts greater NA and lower life satisfaction, prospectively. Agreeableness predicts increases in life satisfaction over time (e.g., Specht, Egloff, & Schmulke, 2013).

What explains these consistent, robust associations? The way scientists have sought to answer this question has changed as research has accumulated. Early attempts to explain the association between personality and well-being were often framed in terms of how personality might influence well-being but more recently alternatives to this unidirectional approach have become more commonly considered. Research on the very strong association between extraversion and PA exemplifies this movement.

The Example of Extraversion

Scholars have tested a variety of highly intuitive and reasonable mediators for the association between extraversion and PA. For example, one explanation for how extraversion might influence well-being was through social activities. Such activities are a robust predictor of positive mood. Yet this sociability explanation cannot account for the fact that extraverts are happier than introverts even when they are alone (Lucas & Baird, 2004). Another possibility was that extraversion involves a susceptibility to PA, suggesting that extraverts are simply more likely to enjoy a large boost of positive mood when good things happen. Yet, in an exhaustive series of studies, Lucas and Baird (2004) found that extraverts were not only happier than introverts following positive mood inductions but also in control conditions. Research, then, points to the conclusion that high levels of PA may be “baked into” extraversion—that these variables share more than is implied in the search for the *influence of* extraversion on well-being.

Similarly, personality traits more generally predict well-being over and above variables thought to be important a happy and satisfying life (income, marital status, employment, health, etc.) (Lucas & Diener, 2015). Research has also examined whether traits moderate the effects of life events on well-being but evidence for such effects has been inconclusive and weak. On a general level, personality shares a strong relationship to well-being that is not mediated by contextual factors. Why might this be the case?

Temperament, Genes, and Development

Consider again those infants in the hospital nursery. Temperamental differences that exist in infancy may be the building blocks of both later personality traits and dispositional well-being, suggesting that Hippocrates’ ancient linking of personality traits with affective dispositions makes sense. Thinking about it in this way suggests that traits do not simply *lead to*

well-being differences, but rather they *reflect* differences in temperament, genetic, and neurobiological systems that inform both personality and well-being.

Individual differences in personality traits and well-being are substantially explained by genetic differences. Moreover, an analysis of 973 twin pairs (Weiss, Bates, & Luciano, 2008) revealed that genetic sources of variation in personality and well-being overlapped, especially for extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness. These analyses imply that the association between personality and well-being is, at least in part, explained by a shared (genetic) third variable.

Bear in mind that no amount of heritability suggests that environmental factors do not matter to any characteristic nor does a genetic role in these dispositions suggest that they are unchangeable. This analysis does suggest that personality and well-being are likely to be strongly related even as they may become increasingly differentiated with age and maturity. Indeed, over time we can think of them each influencing and being influenced by the other.

The closely intertwined relationship of personality and well-being is demonstrated in their relations over time. Each of these characteristics is relatively stable but they each show normative changes as well. For personality, trait changes over the life course show increases in agreeableness and conscientiousness and decreases in neuroticism--trait changes that appear to reflect maturation or personality development. For well-being, research shows a normative increase of PA and decrease in NA with age. Longitudinal studies demonstrate how levels of each of these classes of variables influences the normative changes of the other.

The strong concurrent associations between personality and well-being set a context similar to ceiling effects (Hill, Mroczek, & Young, 2014). For example, high extraversion sets a high bar for positive affect and therefore extraversion is likely to predict *less change* in PA over

time. Rather, extraversion predicts stable, high levels of PA with age and neuroticism predicts less decline in NA with age (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001). Such results demonstrate how personality contextualizes age-related well-being changes and show personality as a force for stability in well-being.

The Pursuit of Happiness and Personality Development

Even longitudinal studies are correlational and fully understanding the association between personality and well-being requires consideration of the pathway *from* well-being *to* personality changes. Well-being may influence personality because it provides a powerful incentive to engage in behaviors that lead to pleasant feelings. An individual might change his or her typical behavior to gain happiness. The resulting affect might reinforce that behavior. Behavioral changes might become routinized such that they become part of the person's typical repertoire, a part of his or her personality. Is there any evidence for well-being predicting trait changes?

Two large-scale longitudinal studies have demonstrated that high stable levels of well-being systematically predict increases in conscientiousness and agreeableness, and decreases in neuroticism (Soto, 2015; Specht, Egloff, & Schmulke, 2013), a pattern of trait changes that is widely considered to represent personality development. Thus, high well-being appears to foster behaviors and feelings that contribute to increases in mature personality traits.

Alternative Approaches to Personality and Well-being

There are other ways of conceiving of personality and well-being. Personality encompasses not only traits but a host of other variables including motives. Motivational pursuits representing intrinsic (vs. extrinsic values) are positively predictive of well-being (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Other personality constructs (e.g., beliefs and expectancies), as well

as lower level trait facets are related to well-being in very intuitive ways. It is likely that as research continues to explore the association between personality and well-being each class of variables will be studied in ever more fine grained detail. In addition, subjective well-being does not subsume all of the ways well-being has been conceptualized. For example, “flourishing” is an approach to well-being that balances both subjective well-being and indicators of social well-being. Flourishing is less strongly related to traits and may be less genetically related to them as well (Keyes, et al., 2015).

Self-regulation and the Changing State of Well-being

Consider that two components of well-being, PA and NA, include state-like aspects. That PA and NA are responsive to life events and circumstances is crucial to their role in self-regulation. Moods tell us how things are going and spur us to take action when the news is not good. If well-being were perfectly stable, self-regulation of goal-directed action could not occur. Consider, as well, that recent research (using longitudinal datasets) has documented long-term changes in well-being (typically declines) spurred by life events (Luhmann, Hofman, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). Such results suggest that some events are not so easily adapted to as was previously thought. Thus, although personality supports the stability of well-being, it is not immune to changes fostered by life events. Happiness is not wholly a “personality-thing.” However, the two psychological characteristics are sufficiently linked that one ought not to be considered without the other. Personality and well-being are strongly connected and best understood when considered together.

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