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It's Complicated: A Review of Literature on Happiness and the Big Five

One of the great quests of an individual's life is often to find happiness. But what does "happiness" mean? Can it even be "found?" These questions and more have been addressed with the growth of the positive psychology movement, a modern attempt to examine happiness from a scientific perspective. A natural first step in the study of happiness is evaluating exactly who is happy, and why. While a great many factors influence one's satisfaction with life, personality is an especially relevant contributor to consider. Personality factors influence how people see the world, how they behave, and how they move through life, so it follows that these same factors would strongly influence one's ultimate failure or success in achieving happiness. The Five Factor model of personality is a tried-and-true trait model which breaks personality down into five basic components: extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. This empirically-validated model has been combined with the relatively recent positive psychology movement to study how personality traits affect individuals' overall happiness. The Big Five traits of neuroticism and extraversion have been shown to correlate strongly with measures of individual happiness, but this effect is moderated by both internal and external factors of an individual's life circumstances.

In order to study the relationship between personality traits and happiness, one must first establish exactly how to evaluate this concept. A common measure for happiness is subjective well-being, which can be broken down into individual scales of life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. This measure of happiness was utilized by Luhmann, Hawkey, and Cacioppo (2013), who noted that people often attribute their happiness to the wrong sources, an error known as "source confusion." Considering the question of how accurate people are at assessing the sources of their own happiness or unhappiness, these researchers conducted a study to evaluate what people think about when evaluating their subjective well-being. In this study, 414 participants (64% female) completed an online survey which contained personality measures, a life satisfaction questionnaire, affect measures, and questions requiring an explanation of participants' considerations throughout the rest of the test. 80% of participants indicated that they had primarily considered their life circumstances when completing the happiness measures, especially topics such as career, family life, and romance. Researchers

noted that these factors actually do play a large role in determining happiness, and so participants had displayed relatively little source confusion in their responses. However, few people mentioned personality as a factor which influenced their subjective well-being. Results indicated that people low in neuroticism expressed less negative affect, but that negative thoughts were more strongly correlated with subjective well-being for these emotionally stable individuals than for highly neurotic participants. This is likely because less neurotic individuals tended to report only seriously negative life events, rather than minor stressors, making their perceptions of negativity more accurate than participants scoring high on neuroticism. Individuals underestimated the role that personality plays in their well-being, focusing more on external influences such as work and family. While this study indicates that personality is not the be-all, end-all of happiness research, results suggest that personality -- and, specifically, the Big Five traits -- tend to be overlooked as factors influencing one's happiness and well-being.

Considering the relationship between happiness and personality, a study by Soto (2013) evaluated the longitudinal correlation between the Big Five personality traits and measures of subjective well-being. This study built on previous research which indicated that personality traits can indirectly affect one's happiness by influencing behaviors which ultimately lead to greater subjective well-being for an individual. If someone is highly agreeable, for instance, they might engage in more prosocial behaviors, leading to stronger social relationships and an ultimately higher perception of their own well-being. Researchers used a survey of the Big Five Mini-Markers, Positive and Negative Affect Medical Outcome Scales, and an eight question life satisfaction interview, all of which were assessed annually over five years. Participants were 16367 Australians between the ages of 15 and 93 years old, split relatively evenly between male and female. Results of this study indicated that high subjective well-being, infrequent negative affect, and frequent positive affect were correlated with higher agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness, as well as with lower neuroticism. The only Big Five trait which was not significantly related in this study was openness. The most strongly predictive traits studied here were extraversion (related to positive affect) and neuroticism (related to subjective well-being and negative affect). These results indicate a relationship between subjective well-being and personality, but researchers are careful to note that it is as yet unclear which direction causality flows in this relationship. Personality and happiness are somewhat reciprocally connected: a high subjective well-being might lead to the development of specific traits (such as extraversion), and

these traits will in turn continue to raise well-being. In addition, the effects of changes in personality on subjective well-being may be cumulative over time -- this study evaluated a five-year span of participants' lives, but different traits may come to have differing values as an individual ages. While low neuroticism and high extraversion were here shown to be the strongest predictors for subjective well-being, further research should consider the intricacies of these traits in different environments and demographics.

Extraversion and neuroticism have proven to be some of the best personality indicators for happiness, and so considering the effects of these specific traits is a necessary step towards advancing our understanding of the relationship between traits and well-being. High positive affect and low negative affect, which are correlated with extraversion and neuroticism, include high energy, full concentration, and engagement in activities. However, these same qualities also place an individual at risk for hypomania. Hypomania is understood as a subclinical expression of mania, which manifests affectively, cognitively, and somatically in individuals. Kirkland, Gruber, and Cunningham (2015) created a study which evaluates neuroticism and extraversion, with the goal of examining the positive and negative outcomes associated with these two traits in the sphere of positive psychology. Researchers broke down both traits into two tenets in order to better understand the intricacies of their relationship with well-being: extraversion was studied as assertiveness and enthusiasm, and neuroticism as volatility and withdrawal. In this study, 352 undergraduate students completed a survey which evaluated trait positive and negative affect, Big Five personality traits, subjective well-being, and hypomania risk. Results suggested extraversion and neuroticism were significantly related to both subjective happiness and hypomania risk, but this effect was dependant on the specific factors of each trait. Happiness was associated with high enthusiasm and low withdrawal, and hypomania was related to high assertiveness and high volatility. In this sense, both of these traits were associated with positive and negative outcomes. Extraversion promotes well-being in that it leads an individual to be enthusiastic, but an overly assertive extravert might be at risk for hypomania. In the same way, only one specific aspect of neuroticism (volatility) is associated with hypomania, meaning that the trait as a whole may not be negative. Exploring traits and personality requires a detailed approach; simply considering the correlation between a basic trait and happiness ignores the many mediating factors which influence how a trait relates to one's well-being.

Further advancing research on the intricacies of the relationship between Big Five traits and happiness, Suldo, Minch, and Hearon (2014) investigated personality and life satisfaction factors in high school students. Researchers had noted that higher subjective well-being in adolescence is related to higher cognitive engagement, greater academic aspirations, and better relationships with teachers. It naturally follows that these outcomes might also be associated with specific personality traits. However, research has shown that Big Five factors may not affect all individuals equally. Boys and girls tend to be similar in levels of extraversion, but girls express more neuroticism and agreeableness. In addition, extraversion and openness have been used to predict GPA, but this predictive relationship is much stronger for girls than it is for boys. This study recruited 624 high school participants between the ages of 13 and 19 (63% female), who completed self-report measures of life satisfaction and Big Five traits. Analysis revealed that 47% of the variance in individuals' satisfaction scores was accounted for by the Big Five factors, with neuroticism as the strongest predictor. Researchers posited that this correlation is due to the psychopathological symptoms associated with high neuroticism (such as anxiety, anger, and depression) which tend to decrease life satisfaction in most individuals. Openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness were also predictors of life satisfaction, although they were not as strongly related as neuroticism. Finally, gender differences in trait expression appeared in the study of agreeableness: high agreeableness was correlated with higher life satisfaction for girls, but lower life satisfaction for boys. This significant difference in the effect of a trait on happiness indicates that traits are mediated by outside factors; cultural roles and expectations may influence which traits are valuable and for whom, thereby making it difficult to generalize about the valuability of any one specific trait over another.

When considering mediating forces on the relationship between traits and personality, it is essential to consider other dimensions of personality. McAdams and Pals (2006) discuss five dimensions of personality which extend beyond solely traits: cultural influences, life narratives, characteristic adaptations, dispositional traits, and evolution. Characteristic adaptations, which include goals and motivations, act as strong mediators to the expression of traits, an immediately adjacent level of personality in McAdams and Pals's model. Albuquerque, Pedroso de Lima, Matos, and Figueiredo (2012) sought to examine this personality framework further, and studied the mediator effect of personal projects between Big Five traits and subjective well-being. The researchers noted that individual traits might influence one's appraisal of their personal projects,

which stem from the goals and motivations of the “characteristic adaptation” level of personality. In the study, 398 Portuguese primary and high school teachers completed a survey in which they were evaluated for Big Five traits, subjective well-being, and their personal analysis of projects they have worked on over their lifetime. Analysis of personal projects focused on those activities which individuals viewed as particularly defining, and required that participants evaluate projects both in terms of objective success and their emotions towards the project. The results suggested that all Big Five traits predicted components of subjective well-being, especially neuroticism and extraversion (in keeping with the trends of existing literature). The efficacy of personal projects was found to mediate the relationship between personality traits and well-being, and researchers proposed that this was a result of the competence and control experienced in personal projects, especially those with anticipated positive outcomes. This study by Albuquerque et al. demonstrates the variety of factors which can not only affect happiness, but affect how strongly personality relates to happiness.

The five studies reviewed here present strong evidence within the literature of psychology for a relationship between the Five Factor model of personality and individuals’ subjective well-being, a pattern which is especially pronounced for the traits of neuroticism and extraversion. These two traits’ overwhelming dominance over the other Big Five traits in terms of predicting subjective well-being necessarily requires a discussion about why exactly extraversion and neuroticism are so influential in determining one’s happiness. The chief explanation for these traits’ salience in the literature comes from the fact that both extraversion and neuroticism are related to how one interprets events. As extraversion is highly correlated with positive affect, and neuroticism with negative affect (Soto 2013), it would appear that these traits have a large effect on perception of life events. An individual low in neuroticism and high in extraversion would more likely have an optimistic outlook on life, hoping for the best and envisioning positive outcomes for their personal endeavors. While agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness all influence one’s behaviors, especially in a social setting, this adds a degree of distance between perceptions of well-being and the trait itself -- rather than influencing behavior which in turn influences well-being, extraversion and neuroticism cut to the chase and immediately affect how positively one views the world. Examining these five studies reveals that objective life circumstances, while they are significant, are not all that matters when

considering happiness. It would appear that subjective well-being is largely about how one sees the world.

As exemplified by Albuquerque et al. (2012) and Suldo et al. (2014), personality traits are only one of a myriad of forces which influence one's happiness. The higher levels of McAdams and Pals's "New Big Five" present other influences on personality which can affect subjective well-being in a variety of ways. Albuquerque et al. discussed the role of characteristic adaptations, but another level of personality, culture, plays a significant role within subjective well-being. Suldo (2014) briefly discussed gender differences as a factor which determines how traits relate to happiness, but this research might be expanded to include other cultural factors such as individualism versus collectivism, age-related values and ideals, or normative expectations of behavior. The relationship between personality and happiness depends on internal factors such as goals and motivations as well as external factors like culture, all of which influence how and when individuals may express or benefit from specific traits.

Research on the Big Five personality traits and subjective well-being indicates that, while traits such as neuroticism and extraversion play a large role in predicting one's happiness and life satisfaction, this effect is mediated by a variety of other factors. The growth of the positive psychology movement has presented an abundance of research into what makes people happy and why, and personality is a large factor to consider in this investigation. Happiness largely transcends specific circumstances, and pertains more to how these circumstances are interpreted, so much remains to be studied in terms of how our perceptions of well-being are shaped, and exactly how much control individuals have over their own life satisfaction. Traits are only a small part of the larger image. Happiness, it would appear, is quite complicated.

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