



# Aversion to happiness and the experience of happiness: The moderating roles of personality



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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined the possible moderating roles of personality on the link between the fear of happiness and the experience of happiness, with happiness defined as the frequency of positive and negative affect. Respondents completed measures of affect, fear of happiness, and the big-five personality inventory. Result revealed substantial moderating effects of personality, but the pattern differed across positive and negative affect. Whereas higher levels of agreeableness and neuroticism potentiated the effect of fear of happiness on positive affect, higher levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience weakened the effect. On the other hand, except for higher levels of extraversion that also undermined the influence of fear of happiness on negative affect, fear of happiness and negative affect were positively related at all levels of the personality dimensions. These findings highlight the need to incorporate personality into the study and theoretical articulations of the operations of the fear of happiness.

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## 1. Introduction

Findings have shown that happiness is positively related to several desirable outcomes, such as success, long life, peace, democracy, economic progress, and prosocial behaviours among others (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Oishi & Schimmack, 2010). Consequently, people are now encouraged to pursue happiness whenever and however possible (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011). However, emerging line of evidence shows that the pursuit of happiness can equally be counterproductive (Ford, Mauss, & Gruber, 2015; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). As a result, people tend to avoid the pursuit of happiness under conditions they think may lead to aversive outcomes. This phenomenon is currently referred to as “aversion to” or “fear of” happiness (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014; Joshanloo et al., 2013), and has been largely attributed to culture (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). Although the influence of culture on happiness is well documented, studies have also shown that personality substantially influences variations in happiness both directly and indirectly (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). Hence, our aim here is to explore the possibility that personality moderates the relationship between fear of happiness and the experience of happiness. To this end, we first review the concept of fear of happiness especially because the concept is relative new. Next, we define happiness as employed here. Thereafter, we

discuss how different personality dimensions, anchoring on the big-five model, are likely to moderate the link between the fear of happiness and the experience of happiness.

### 1.1. Aversion to happiness

Aversion to happiness represents the idea that “happiness is not always good” (Gruber et al., 2011, p. 223). It involves “an overarching belief about the extent to which it is rational to pursue or avoid happiness for oneself or one’s society, with different reasons to avoid different personal relations to happiness cumulatively contributing to the strength of this belief” (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014, p. 720). It is associated with the idea that there are wrong degrees of happiness, wrong time for happiness, wrong ways to pursue happiness, and wrong types of happiness (Gruber et al., 2011), and bad things are likely to happen to one and relevant others when happiness is pursued along these wrong ways (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). There are now empirical evidences in support of this phenomenon. For instance, placing high value on happiness is inversely related to happiness under happy occasions (Mauss et al., 2011), and has been implicated in depressive symptoms (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2014) and bipolar disorders (Ford et al., 2015). Frequent use of positive emotion words, which ordinarily would have been taken as a sign of positive functioning, appears to be positively related to contemplation of one’s own death and heightened mortality salience (Kashdan et al., 2014).

Besides these empirical evidences, fear of happiness appears to exist under different guises across cultures. For instance, the expression norm

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for positive affect associated with victory among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria is moderation especially when it involves fellow Igbos. They believe that intense celebration belittles those who lost or did not have the opportunity to compete. For the Igbos, such action shows lack of “concern for others”. Hence, people who violate this norm risk being labelled antisocial or “wicked”. Consequently, the expression of happiness under such conditions is often moderated. Our aim here is to explore the possibility that personality conditions the extent to which such norms can influence individuals’ experience of happiness.

## 1.2. Happiness defined

Scholars often distinguish between two different, but related, types of happiness. On one hand is the hedonic happiness that is usually defined and measured in terms of (in)frequent feelings of positive and negative affect (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991). On the other hand is the eudaimonic happiness, which involves the diverse strands of views on personal progress and growth, such as self-actualisation, goal attainment, and value realisation (Huta & Waterman, 2014). Here, we define happiness according to the hedonic approach. Scholars, including eudaimonic researchers, acknowledge the robustness of affect as an indicator of happiness (Raibley, 2012). For instance, Raibley (2012) argued that eudaimonic happiness can lead to the experience of hedonic happiness, and the experienced hedonic happiness has the capacity to inform further pursuit of the associated eudaimonic dimension. Also, the idea that the fear of happiness is strongly grounded in culture (Joshnanloo & Weijers, 2014) coupled with the fact that affective experiences are grounded in culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) makes affect particularly relevant here. It is therefore reasonable to envisage a pronounced relationship between fear of happiness and affect.

## 1.3. Fear of happiness, personality and the experience of happiness

The relationship between happiness and personality can be deconstructed into two paths. First, some personality dimensions overlap conceptually with happiness (Soto, 2015). Second, personality grounds the link between other variables and happiness (Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002). Whereas we draw from both lines of relationships, our major focus is on the later relationship. We employed the big-five personality structure, which has been used extensively in the field of happiness (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Next, we explore how each dimension of the big-five moderates the relationship between the fear of happiness and the experience of happiness.

### 1.3.1. Extraversion

Extraversion denotes the tendency to be energetic, active, and enthusiastic (Costa & McCrae, 1992). It has both interpersonal and temperamental facets (McCrae & Costa, 2003). The interpersonal aspect includes being sociable and affectionate, whereas the temperamental side involves the tendency to consistently feel positive. People who score high on extraversion are often cheerful, drawn to excitement, admire interpersonal relationship, and are thrill seekers, whereas people who score low tends to be withdrawn, quiet, and independent (John & Srivastava, 1999). It is deducible from the foregoing that the elements of extraversion are antithetical to the rudiments of fear of happiness. In addition, extraverts often exhibit behaviours that are likely to undermine the operations of fear of happiness, such as the tendency to always create amiable environments (DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins, 2002). It appears therefore that extraverts are inherently equipped to inhibit exogenous hindrances to happiness. Hence, we hypothesize that *higher levels of extraversion will undermine the influence of fear of happiness on the experience of happiness* (H1).

### 1.3.2. Agreeableness

Agreeableness represents the tendency to be accommodative, altruistic, and supportive (McCrae & John, 1992). It is sometimes described as the humane aspect of personality (Digman, 1990). People who score high on this trait tilt towards charities and good causes (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Hence, they are predisposed to savouring happiness associated with such social acts. However, given the core elements of this trait and the proposal that fear of happiness is culturally required, higher levels of agreeableness is more likely to boost the influence of fear of happiness. The tendency for agreeable people to be law-abiding and conform to group norms as well maintain group cohesion (DeYoung et al., 2002; Joshnanloo, Rastegar, & Bakhshi, 2012; Parks-Leduc, Feldman, & Bardi, 2015) are grounds on which fear of happiness, as a cultural norm, is expected to thrive. Hence, we hypothesize that *higher levels of agreeableness will enhance the influence of fear of happiness on the experience of happiness* (H2).

### 1.3.3. Neuroticism

Neuroticism assesses the consistency to experience negative emotions. Higher levels of this dimension represent significant instability in mood, affect, and emotion. People characterised by this trait are usually anxious, depressed, impulsive, and hostile (Costa & McCrae, 1992). They express high levels of fear, always worrying, and generally moody (John & Srivastava, 1999). Neuroticism is conceptually and instrumentally related to happiness (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Conceptually, it shares similar latent valence with negative affect (Anglim & Grant, 2014). Instrumentally, it encourages the adoption of maladaptive strategies that inhibits the experience of happiness (Hotard, McFatter, McWhirter, & Stegall, 1989). It is therefore more likely to boost the undermining effect of fear of happiness. Hence, we hypothesize that *higher levels of neuroticism will boost the influence of fear of happiness on the experience of happiness* (H3).

### 1.3.4. Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness represents the propensity to follow orders, act after thorough thinking, and to exhibit higher levels of self control such as delay of gratifications (John & Srivastava, 1999). Conscientious people tend to be highly organised, prioritize tasks, and adhere to plans (John & Srivastava, 1999). It has been shown to be positively related to happiness, especially happiness accruing from social acts (Anglim & Grant, 2014). However, the social and normative nature of fear of happiness, which are consistent with core characteristics of conscientiousness, such as the tendencies to conform to norms, obey orders, adhere to rules, and self control (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002) suggest that higher levels of conscientiousness are likely to boost the effect of fear of happiness. We therefore hypothesize that *higher levels of conscientiousness will boost the influence of fear of happiness on the experience of happiness* (H4).

### 1.3.5. Openness to experience

Openness to experience reflects the tendencies to explore new ideas and to take risks (Costa & McCrae, 1992). People who are open to experience are often curious and ready to welcome challenges and new occurrences (Costa & McCrae, 1992). A recent meta-analysis shows that this trait is positively related to happiness (Steel et al., 2008). Apparently, the features of this trait, as listed above, are antagonistic to fear of happiness. For instance, the tendencies to take risks and explore new ideas are inconsistent with the notion of fear, suggesting that the happiness of people who are open to experience is less likely to be undermined by fear. Thus, we hypothesize that *higher levels of openness to experience will reduce the influence of fear of happiness on the experience of happiness* (H5).

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