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Which way to well-being: "More of the same" or "trying something novel"? The association of comfortable and experimental behavior styles to well-being

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we describe the development of a measurement of tendency towards displaying a comfortable behavior style, and/or an experimental behavior style across two studies. A comfortable behavioral style involves sticking to habits and routines, while an experimental behavior style involves being inclined to try out new ideas, actions or experiences. Study 1 involved developing the items, and determining the factor structure of the items using a student sample ($N = 189$, 85 male and 104 female, aged between 18 and 51). An exploratory factor analysis yielded the expected two factor structure, reflecting factors for a comfortable behavior style, and an experimental behavior style. Study 2 went on to further validate the measures via a second exploratory factor analysis, and establish the relationship of these measures to a variety of well-being outcomes using a sample collected via Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($N = 302$, 159 male and 138 female, aged between 18 and 68). The two factor structure was confirmed, and these measures were found to be related to outcomes including satisfaction with life, positive and negative affect, self-concept clarity, and sensation seeking. The potential applications for these measures are discussed.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, researchers have become increasingly interested in identifying activities or behaviors that may increase subjective well-being[1] (see meta-analyses in Mazzucchelli, Kane, & Rees, 2010; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). The extent to which each of these prescribed happiness enhancing activities is experienced as 'normative' or 'typical' will vary depending on the individual and their personal characteristics (i.e., their traits, values, goals) and present repertoire of behavior. For example, one activity prolifically associated with happiness is performing acts of kindness (e.g., Schueller & Parks, 2014). While this may be something that one person does on a regular basis, this behavior may be considered out of the ordinary for another person. This raises an important and as yet, unanswered question: Is happiness more likely to be increased by sticking with what we know (i.e., enacting habitual, familiar and comfortable behaviors) or by trying something novel (enacting a broader range of more varied and experimental behaviors)? Such knowledge may have practical implications for optimizing the choice of well-being interventions. Consequently, we present the results of two studies in which we develop and validate a questionnaire that operationalizes each of these approaches (Studies 1 and 2) and examines the associations between each of the resulting constructs and subjective well-being (Study 2).

1.1. Two distinct behavioral routes to well-being: sticking with what we know or trying something novel

In the following section we discuss two distinct approaches to improving well-being derived from existing theory and research: sticking with what we know (comfortable behaviors) and trying something novel (experimental behaviors).

1.1.1. Sticking with what we know: a comfortable behavior style

Within the positive psychology literature, only more recently has attention been given to the conditions needed to optimize the effectiveness of well-being interventions. According to person-activity fit theory the largest gains in happiness will be reached when there is a 'match' or 'good fit' between the type of activity and the type of person and their enduring characteristics such as their strengths, interests, values and inclinations (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). While there are different

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[1] We follow other authors (e.g., Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999) in using the terms "happiness" and "subjective wellbeing" interchangeably.

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approaches as to what constitutes a 'match' or a 'good fit', in the positive psychology literature the dominant conceptualisation utilizes the capitalization approach (Schueller, 2014) which contends that a 'good fit' is an activity that is consistent with a person's personal characteristics (Cronbach & Snow, 1977; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Such an approach appears to advocate that well-being is more likely to be increased when a person stays within their existing behavioral range through enacting activities that fit within the scope of their characteristics (e.g., enacting kind acts will benefit someone who values kindness).

Aside from the fact that such matching hypotheses make intuitive sense and are backed by anecdotal evidence (Schueller, 2014), other literature also alludes to the benefits of 'sticking with what we know'. For instance, enacting habitual behavior (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003) keeps cognitive resources free for other self-regulatory activities (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006), while constructs such as self-concordance (pursuing a goal/activity that fits with one's value/interests) and authentic living (i.e., acting in accordance with one's values and beliefs) are consistently associated with higher subjective and psychological well-being (Sheldon et al., 2004; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008).

To date, empirical support for person-activity fit theory has been mixed. Support can be found in research that has revealed that; value-environment fit is associated with higher well-being (see review in Sagiv, Roccas, & Hazan, 2004); there is between-individual variability in benefits gained from different happiness enhancing activities (Fordyce, 1977, 1983; Sergeant & Mongrain, 2011); practising signature strengths (i.e., behaving in accordance with primary positive traits) can increase well-being (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011); and that person-activity fit indirectly affects well-being through increasing adherence to the assigned activity (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). However, support for the tenets of person-activity fit theory is not evident in other research findings. Across four correlational studies, person-activity fit did not significantly predict either subjective or psychological well-being (Buchanan & Bardi, 2015). Participants assigned to a matched activity were not any happier than those randomly assigned to an activity (Schueller, 2011; Silberman, 2007). Happiness enhancing activities were most effective when they differed from an individual's dominant orientation (Giannopoulos & Vella-Brodrick, 2011).

One of the likely reasons for these mixed findings is that researchers have differed in how they have conceptualized person-activity fit. This is because an activity can fit a person in number of ways, it might fit their motives, basic needs, or core values (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

1.1.2. Trying something novel: an experimental behavior style

While the dominant notion of person-activity fit within positive psychology is based on "capitalization" (i.e., practising activities that are consistent with personal characteristic), person-activity fit may also be conceptualised as involving "compensation" defined as practising activities that overcome weaknesses or deficits and so help 'balance' an individual (Cronbach & Snow, 1977). But is it theoretically possible to behave in ways that substantially differ from our primary traits?

The average individual does have a tendency to display variation in their behavior in addition to a habitual trait personality (McCrae & Costa, 1996). Indeed, research by Fleeson (Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009) examining the density distribution of personality states demonstrates that the individual tends to display a dispositional trait personality, but with variation in personality states distributed around the trait personality. This tends to be performed to adapt to particular situations or goals (Bleidorn, 2009; Heller, Komar, & Lee, 2007). This is also reflected at the personality questionnaire response level, with previous research (Biderman & Reddock, 2012) suggesting that within-subject standard deviations in responding to particular personality traits or facets, calculated as measures of individual variation in specific item ratings within a trait/facet (an index of traitedness), are related to outcomes including life satisfaction and depression (Churchyard, Pine, Sharma, & Fletcher, 2014).

This capacity to display variation in behavior allows for the idea of practising compensation, to try behaviors that may be outside of the individual's behavioral norm for that situation in order to improve adaptation and well-being. Taking advantage of this capacity, Fletcher and Pine's (2012) approach to behavior change is based on giving the individual novel behavior suggestions to try that fall outside of their behavioral norm. This is in order to receive different feedback from their social environment (from the self and/or others) or to engage with completely new environments, and break habits. It is designed to widen the individual's behavioral repertoire of responses to a variety of situations, old and new. Other researchers sharing this philosophy of expansion over habituation include Fredrickson (2001) with the Broaden and Build theory. This theory suggests that experiencing different types of positive emotions allows the individual to expand their social and psychological resources, while negative emotions are useful only for responding to threatening situations, but otherwise hold the individual back and leave them prone to stagnation and habituation.

In terms of empirical support for the "trying something new" approach to well-being, several intervention studies show that enacting novel behaviors can help increase cognitive well-being, in terms of increased life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010) and physical and psychological well-being, in terms of decreased BMI, anxiety and depression (Fletcher, Hanson, Pine, & Page, 2011). This suggests that compensation approaches to behavior change are valid options as well as capitalization approaches.

1.1.3. Which way to happiness?

So on the one hand there is evidence that comfort can be found in familiarity, and pleasure can be gained from practising our strengths (Seligman et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2011), yet on the other hand, there is also evidence that without doing anything different or experimenting we cannot reasonably expect our happiness to change (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Fletcher & Pine, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2011). Schueller (2014) discusses the question of "Which strategy to choose?" within the context of person-activity fit. Schueller suggests that the decision concerning which intervention strategy to use should be influenced not only by the preference of the individual, but also their personality, motivation, and culture.

In the present research we aim to help advance the use of assessing personality characteristics in making the choice of a familiar behavioral strengths, or increased behavioral repertoire (novelty) intervention strategy. In particular, this research presents an important and novel contribution by establishing a measure of an experimental behavior style (liking to do something different or novel) and a comfortable behavior style (liking doing more of the same).

1.2. Operationalizing comfortable and experimental behavior styles

Based on the research reviewed in this introduction, we operationalized these two psychological constructs as follows:

1. Having a comfortable behavioral style, in which people stick to habits and routines for their own comfort and predictability,

2. An experimental behavior style, in which people are inclined to try out new ideas, actions or experiences to learn from them, and are flexible in their approach to life.

When designing an item pool to measure the comfortable behavior style, we were aware of the existence of Verplanken and Orbell (2003) Self Report Habit Index (SRHI), and Fletcher and Pine's (2012) Habit Rater. Although some of the items in this pool may bear resemblance to those in these two measures, there are important conceptual differences between this item pool and these two measures. While Verplanken and Orbell's SRHI focuses on general items tailored to fit a specific habit, Fletcher and Pine's Habit Rater asks more about tendencies towards specific instances of habitual or non-habitual behavior within a more general questionnaire format, we have focused on developing a measure without the focus on specific habitual behaviors in any