



Calm down – It's only neuroticism. Time perspectives as moderators and mediators of the relationship between neuroticism and well-being



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 October 2015

Accepted 3 January 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Neuroticism

Carpe Diem

Time perspective

Well-being

ABSTRACT

Neuroticism is associated with poor well-being, and researchers search for variables that influence the relationship between these two constructs. The current study is focused on time perspective (TP) as a moderator and mediator of the link between neuroticism and selected aspects of well-being, that is, self-esteem, satisfaction with life, optimism and life engagement. The results suggest that, contrary to expectation, strong concentration on the present, perceived as an important and unique time area, by highly neurotic individuals intensifies the negative relationship between neuroticism and self-esteem, satisfaction with life and life engagement. Attention has been paid to the importance of distance to time for the well-being of people with high levels of neuroticism. Moreover, the findings provide evidence for the role of negative past TP and unbalanced TP in explaining the negative association between neuroticism and well-being.

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1. Introduction

“Now go to sleep. Count stars. Think of the quietest thing. Like snow (...) now snow is falling through the stars.”

“A Christmas Memory”, Capote (1996, p. 45).

The aim of the current study was to examine empirically the influence of time perspective (TP; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) on the relation between neuroticism (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and selected measures of well-being (self-esteem, satisfaction with life, life optimism and life engagement), first as a moderator with specified interaction effects, and secondly as a mediator in the path from neuroticism to well-being.

1.1. Neuroticism

Of the five basic personality traits, neuroticism is the most strongly related to distress and poor well-being (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; McCrae & Costa, 1991; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). According to Eysenck (1967), neuroticism reflects differences in emotional reactivity to negative environmental stimulation. People with high neuroticism tend to experience fear, depression and guilt, and react to stressful events, such as changes in their life situations, with stronger distress than emotionally stable people (Mroczek & Almeida, 2004; Swagler & Jome, 2005). Neuroticism is mostly considered as a biologically conditioned trait. From the biological perspective, the tendency to experience negative emotional states is caused by a

highly sensitive limbic system that tends to be reactive, especially in stressful situations (Haas, Omura, Constable, & Canli, 2007; Norris, Larsen, & Cacioppo, 2007; Eysenck, 1967).

Although the links between neuroticism and well-being are well documented, the mechanisms explaining the relationships between these variables are not completely clear (cf. Feltman, Robinson, & Ode, 2009; Zhang & Howell, 2011). To investigate these mechanisms, researchers have sought to identify the variables influencing the relationship between neuroticism and well-being. For example, rumination and worry (Roelofs, Huibers, Peeters, Arntz, & van Os, 2008), physical activity (Gallant & Connell, 2003), daily hassles (Hutchinson & Williams, 2007), and fantasy (Lee, 2009) have been found to mediate the relationship between neuroticism and depression. Mindfulness has also been found to partially mediate the link between neuroticism and subjective well-being (Wenzel, von Versen, Hirschmüller, & Kubiak, 2015) and to moderate a neuroticism-depressive symptoms link (Feltman et al., 2009; Barnhofer, Dugan, & Griffith, 2011). The identification of such constructs is greatly significant, all the more so because neuroticism is poorly susceptible to change; therefore, knowledge about the variables connected with the neuroticism and well-being relationship that are simultaneously relatively susceptible to external factors, could be applied in therapeutic actions taken to help individuals high in neuroticism.

In the current study, TP is examined as a variable influencing the relationship between neuroticism and well-being because, among others, research findings suggest that people's level of well-being is influenced by feelings related to objective events in life, their interpretation and assessment being in the temporal context rather than as events themselves (cf. Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998; Lyubomirsky, 2001; Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002; Zhang & Howell, 2011).

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1.2. Time perspective

Time perspective, which is a basic dimension of psychological time, describes a tendency to be guided in one's actions by a specific period of time, that is, the past, present or future (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Researchers indicate that TP differs from basic traits of personality because it is a variable that is more influenced by environmental factors (elements of culture, such as education, religion and upbringing as well as social and economic status) rather than biological factors (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Time perspectives may also be influenced by intentional action, for example, by individual endeavours or professional psychological interventions. Researchers, whose studies are supported by the results of therapeutic activity, suggest that TP may be a framework for therapeutic interventions, especially for patients suffering from mood disorders (van Beek, Kerkhof, & Beekman, 2009; van Beek, Berghuis, Kerkhof, & Beekman, 2011; Zimbardo, Sword, & Sword, 2012). Consequently, insights into the links connecting TP with neuroticism and well-being may be important for psychological practice.

Time perspectives affect many aspects of human life; for example, concentration on the future was connected with optimism and health-promoting behaviours (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999, 2008; Barber, Munz, Bagsby, & Grawitch, 2009). A past positive TP was positively correlated with the sense of safety, having social support, amicability and energy, and was negatively correlated with neuroticism (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005; Zhang & Howell, 2011; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). A past negative TP was connected with neuroticism, depression, fear, problems in social relations, gambling, negative mood, low self-esteem, and propensity for addiction (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Klingeman, 2001; Stolarski, Matthews, Postek, Zimbardo, & Bitner, 2014; Zhang & Howell, 2011). Both fatalistic and hedonistic concentration on the present was positively correlated with risky behaviours (Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997; Daugherty & Brase, 2010). A present hedonistic TP did not relate significantly to neuroticism, while a present fatalistic TP did (Zhang & Howell, 2011). In studies conducted by Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), both hedonistic and present fatalistic TP correlated negatively with emotional stability. An active present TP, named *Carpe Diem*, involving a focus on the 'here and now', and convictions regarding the importance and uniqueness of every moment of life, was correlated positively with a sense of life satisfaction, a sense of meaning in life, positive emotions and the perception of time as creative and friendly (Sobol-Kwapinska, 2013; Sobol-Kwapinska & Jankowski, in press; Sobol-Kwapinska, Jankowski, & Przepiorka, in press).

In recent years, a large number of studies have focused on a balanced TP, defined as a relatively strong concentration on the positive past combined with a moderate concentration on the future and hedonistic present, as well as a weak concentration on the fatalistic present and negative past (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999, 2008). People with balanced TP were characterised as having greater satisfaction with life, less negative affect, a greater sense of life, more frequent positive affect, greater self-actualisation, optimism and sense of effectiveness, and a greater ability to defer gratification (Drake, Duncan, Sutherland, Abernethy, & Henry, 2008; Boniwell, Osin, Linley, & Ivanchenko, 2010; Stolarski, Bitner, & Zimbardo, 2011; Stolarski et al., 2014). A balanced TP, additionally combined with a high intensity *Carpe Diem*, was even more strongly and positively correlated with well-being measures than a balanced TP without this type of present TP (Sobol-Kwapinska & Jankowski, in press).

To summarise this short overview, we note that concentration on the positive past, concentration on the future, *Carpe Diem* and a balanced TP are connected with positive aspects of functioning. A fatalistic and past negative TP seem to be related to negative consequences.

Research findings indicate that some types of TP (past negative, past positive, present fatalistic) are significantly correlated both with neuroticism and different measures of well-being, whereas other types (*Carpe Diem*, present hedonistic, future) are insignificantly correlated or significantly correlated only with neuroticism, or only with well-being.

The consideration of the influence of a TP on the neuroticism and well-being relationship allows us to presume that, according to the criteria suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), TP depending on the type, will act as a moderator or mediator in this relationship.

1.3. TP as a moderator and mediator

To date, TP has not been considered as a moderator in the relationship between neuroticism and well-being. A variable functions as a moderator when it changes direction or strength (or both) from being a predictor variable to a criterion variable. A moderating effect is determined statistically by the presence of an interaction effect between the predictor and moderator, upon the criterion (Baron & Kenny, 1986). If TP was a moderator in the relationship between neuroticism and well-being, it would mean that the direction and intensity of this relationship would depend on the level of a specific TP type. However, there have been studies where variables related to TP were investigated as moderators in the neuroticism and well-being relationship. Mindfulness, which is a concentration on the present combined with the attitude of openness, distance, acceptance and non-assessment of reality (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), is one of these variables. In studies conducted by Barnhofer et al. (2011) and Feltman et al. (2009) mindfulness moderated the relationship between neuroticism and depressive symptoms: neuroticism was related to depression in individuals with low to medium levels of mindfulness, but not in those with high levels of mindfulness.

Time perspective can also be analysed as a mediator in the relationship between neuroticism and well-being. The variable functions as a mediator to the same extent that it accounts for the relationship between the predictor and the criterion. Moderators specify when certain effects can be observed, whereas mediators explain how or why such effects appear (Baron & Kenny, 1986). If TP is a mediator in the neuroticism and well-being relationship, it means that neuroticism exerts its influence on well-being through a specific type of TP.

Zhang and Howell (2011) found that most negative relationships between neuroticism and life satisfaction were accounted for by a past negative TP, and some of them by a past positive TP (a combination that explains 50% of the link). According to Zhang and Howell (2011), people with high levels of neuroticism are less satisfied with life due to their negative assessment of the past. Wenzel et al. (2015) revealed that mindfulness partly mediated the relationship between neuroticism and subjective well-being (SWB): a low level of mindfulness was the cause of low subjective well-being in people with high levels of neuroticism; mindfulness was a significant mediator only at a high level of neuroticism.

To summarise, present research findings have indicated that concentration on the present combined with an attitude of acceptance, not judging, and an openness toward reality, may function as a moderator in the neuroticism–depressive symptoms relationship, and, thus, it may counteract the negative consequences of neuroticism. Moreover, research findings suggest that neuroticism exerts its influence on well-being through a past TP's, especially a negative past TP.

1.4. Present study

The present study examined how a TP impacts upon the effect of neuroticism on well-being, covering moderation and mediation models. Regarding well-being measures, we wanted to explore aspects of psychological functioning related to satisfaction with the self, with life in the past, present and future, and with the world and life in general. These measures concern both subjective well-being (satisfaction with life) and elements of psychological well-being (self-esteem, optimism and life engagement) (cf. Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Alessandri, Caprara, & Tisak, 2015).

We formulated the following hypotheses based on research and theoretical analyses:

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