



Revisiting the relationship between maximizing and well-being: An investigation of eudaimonic well-being



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ABSTRACT

Research on the relationship between maximizing (i.e., the general tendency to seek only the best option and not settle for “good enough” options) and subjective well-being has led to conflicting findings. Although earlier studies suggested that maximizing is associated with lower well-being, more recent studies have challenged this conclusion arguing that it is based on improper measurement of the maximizing construct. Unlike prior research that has looked for answers to the maximizing–well-being question by addressing measurement issues of maximizing, this article offers an alternative perspective by addressing measurement issues of well-being. Specifically, the central proposition of this article is that research on maximizing and well-being needs to consider not only hedonic well-being, as has been the case so far, but also eudaimonic well-being (i.e., well-being derived from the development of one's best potential and the fulfillment of self-expressive goals). This research proposes and finds that maximizing is positively associated with eudaimonic well-being (Study 1) and this holds even after accounting for hedonic well-being (Study 2). These findings suggest that eudaimonic well-being is a useful construct that explains unique variance in maximizing. Implications for theory and research on maximizing, decision making and well-being are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Maximizing, a central concept in the decision making literature, refers to an individual difference (trait) in seeking the optimal alternative. Maximizers are individuals who “desire the best possible result,” as opposed to satisficers who “desire a result that is good enough to meet some criterion” (Schwartz et al., 2002, p. 1184). Schwartz et al. (2002) developed the first instrument to measure this construct, the Maximization Scale, and at the same time provided evidence that maximizing coincides with lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness and higher levels of regret and depression. Since the development of the Maximization Scale, research based on this scale has found that maximizers are less satisfied with the outcomes of their decisions than satisficers (e.g. Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006; Leach & Patall, 2013; Polman, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2002; Shiner, 2015), even if they make objectively superior decisions (Iyengar et al., 2006). Perhaps more dramatically, maximizing has been associated even with clinical assessments of depression, hopelessness and suicidal ideation through increased regret proneness (Bruine de Bruin, Dombrovski, Parker, & Szanto, 2016).

However, the measurement of maximizing has been surrounded by controversy. The original Maximization Scale (Schwartz et al., 2002) has been criticized for adopting a definition of maximizing that does not

only reflect striving for the best alternative but also difficulty and restlessness with that search (Dalal, Diab, Zhu, & Hwang, 2015; Lai, 2010; Rim, Turner, Betz, & Nygren, 2011; Weinhardt, Morse, Chimeli, & Fisher, 2012). For example, Purvis, Howell, and Iyer (2011) found that out of all Big Five personality traits it was neuroticism, and not conscientiousness, that emerged as the strongest predictor of maximizing, which is inconsistent with the definition of maximizing as seeking the best option. In the meantime, several scales have been proposed to address the shortcomings of the original scale (e.g., Diab, Gillespie, & Highhouse, 2008; Lai, 2010; Misuraca, Faraci, Gangemi, Carmeci, & Miceli, 2015; Nenkov, Morrin, Schwartz, Ward, & Hulland, 2008; Richardson, Ye, Ege, Suh, & Rice, 2014; Rim, Turner, Betz, & Nygren, 2011). In an effort to stay true to the original concept of maximizing as the tendency to always pursue the best, many of these scales disentangle maximizing from maladaptive decision making styles, such as decision difficulty.

Resonating with the debate over the measurement of maximizing, the relationship between maximizing and well-being has also been controversial. For example, one study found that the Big Five personality traits account for a significant amount of the variance in the negative relationship between maximizing and well-being found in various previous studies, and controlling for the Big Five the negative relationship between the two is attenuated (Purvis et al., 2011). Moreover, when maximizing is measured by scales that focus on high standards and not on decision difficulty, the negative relationship between maximizing and well-being disappears (Diab et al., 2008) or even becomes positive (Oishi, Tsutsui, Eggleston, & Galinha, 2014; Rim et al., 2011).

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Similarly, depending on how maximizing is defined and measured, different conclusions about its relationship with satisfaction with decision outcomes can be drawn (Giacopelli, Simpson, Dalal, Randolph, & Holland, 2013). In sum, studies measuring maximizing through the original Maximization Scale find mostly a negative association with well-being, whereas studies using other maximizing scales find mostly a negative association with the decision difficulty component of maximizing and not with its high standards component.

The studies briefly outlined above have tried to shed more light on the link between maximizing and well-being by refining the conceptualizations and measurements of maximizing. The current research moves in another direction and argues that in order to advance our understanding of this link other conceptualizations and measurements of well-being are also needed. Specifically, all studies so far investigating the link between maximizing and well-being have focused only on one type of well-being: hedonic well-being. This type of well-being is typically assessed through measures such as life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) or subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). However, this is not the only type of well-being that might be of relevance to maximizing. Ryan and Deci (2001) distinguish between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being building on two alternative philosophical traditions about the concept of well-being, hedonia and eudaimonia. Whereas hedonic well-being refers to the subjective experience of pleasure irrespective of the source from which pleasure derives, eudaimonic well-being refers to “quality of life derived from the development of a person’s best potentials and their application in the fulfillment of personally expressive, self-concordant goals” (Waterman et al., 2010, p. 41). A central tenet of eudaimonism is a call to live in accordance with one’s daimon (‘true self’), that is, to strive toward self-realization (Waterman et al., 2010). Although the link between maximizing and hedonic well-being has been extensively studied, the link with eudaimonic well-being has not yet been explored. This research attempts to fill this gap in the literature by proposing that maximizers derive eudaimonic pleasure from seeking the best option, as this decision making strategy might bring them closer to materializing their potential and help them engage in self-expressive activities. Considering that eudaimonic well-being requires investing effort in discovering and fully developing one’s best potential (Waterman, 2005), it can be argued that a maximizing tendency in decision making is associated with higher eudaimonic well-being. Choice is instrumental in controlling our environment and becoming the persons we want to be (e.g. Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2006). In that respect, striving to make optimal choices may be associated with higher pleasure deriving from a sense of self-actualization and purposeful living. Therefore, it was predicted that maximizing would correlate positively with eudaimonic well-being.

However, because different measures of maximizing stem from different conceptualizations of the construct and subsequently have different correlates, eudaimonic well-being was expected to correlate positively with measures of maximizing that capture only the high standards component of maximizing, such as the Maximizing Tendency Scale (Diab et al., 2008), and not with broader measures of maximizing that encompass decision difficulty, such as the Maximization Scale (Schwartz et al., 2002; for a comparison of the two scales see Dalal et al., 2015). Study 1 examined whether maximizing as measured by the Maximizing Tendency Scale, but not as measured by the Maximization Scale, correlates positively with eudaimonic well-being. Study 2 further examined whether eudaimonic well-being explains unique variance in maximizing over and above hedonic well-being. To this end, two typical measures of well-being, life satisfaction and subjective happiness, were additionally used in Study 2.

2. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to examine the correlations between maximizing and eudaimonic well-being.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Two hundred four US residents took part in an online study on MTurk. A power analysis performed before the data collection indicated that a sample size of 195 participants would be needed to detect correlation coefficients as low as 0.20. Seven participants failed an attention check (see procedure) and were excluded from all following analyses. The final sample ($N = 197$) comprised 99 men and 98 women, and age ranged from 18 to 72 ($M = 36.55$, $SD = 11.34$). In terms of ethnic background 164 were Whites, 14 Asians, 12 Blacks, 2 American Indians, and 5 of other origin.

2.1.2. Procedure and material

Two measures of maximizing and one measure of eudaimonic well-being were used. Participants were presented with the following scales: (a) the Maximization Scale (MS) (Schwartz et al., 2002), which consists of 13 items (e.g., “When I watch TV, I channel surf, often scanning through the available options even while attempting to watch one program,” “I often find it difficult to shop for a gift for a friend,” “Whenever I’m faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren’t present at the moment”); (b) the Maximizing Tendency Scale (MTS) (Diab et al., 2008), which consists of nine items (e.g., “No matter what it takes, I always try to choose the best thing,” “I don’t like having to settle for ‘good enough’,” “I will wait for the best option, no matter how long it takes”); and (c) the Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being (Waterman et al., 2010), which consists of 21 items (e.g., “I find I get intensely involved in many of the things I do each day,” “I find a lot of the things I do are personally expressive for me,” “It is important to me that I feel fulfilled by the activities that I engage in”). All items were answered on 7-point scales (1 – strongly disagree; 7 – strongly agree). Cronbach’s alphas for all scales in this study were adequate ($\alpha = 0.74$ for maximizing/MS; $\alpha = 0.91$ for maximizing/MTS; and $\alpha = 0.91$ for eudaimonic well-being). To control for careless responding an item was included in the eudaimonic well-being measure asking participants to skip completely that item to indicate they were reading. Finally, participants answered questions about demographics (age, gender, ethnicity).

2.2. Results and discussion

Pearson’s zero-order correlations showed that maximizing as measured by the MTS correlated positively with eudaimonic well-being, $r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$. However, that was not the case for maximizing as measured by the MS, $r = -0.11$, $p < 0.13$. The two maximizing scales correlated positively with each other, $r = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$ (for descriptive statistics see Table 1). Therefore, results of Study 1 support the prediction that higher levels of maximizing as measured by the MTS, but not as measured by the MS, are associated with higher levels of eudaimonic well-being.

3. Study 2

Study 2 used the same measures of maximizing and eudaimonic well-being as Study 1 as well as two hedonic well-being measures (life satisfaction and subjective happiness) in order to examine whether

Table 1
Reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics of scale scores in Study 1.

	Cronbach Alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Maximizing (MS)	0.74	2.00	7.00	4.13	0.91
Maximizing (MTS)	0.91	1.33	7.00	4.78	1.22
Eudaimonic well-being	0.91	2.19	6.86	5.05	0.91

Note. MS = Maximization Scale; MTS = Maximizing Tendency Scale.

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