

Individual differences in the relationship between domain satisfaction and happiness: The moderating role of domain importance



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that personality traits account for a substantial amount of variance in individual levels of subjective well-being (SWB). However, these studies are limited in their ability to explain the intra- and interindividual differences in the processes of SWB. To redress this shortcoming, researchers have focused on moderators of the relationship between domain satisfaction and global life satisfaction. However, those studies assume only one specific type of interaction pattern for all life domains. Based on a national probability sample from Japan this paper analyzes the role of domain importance in the relationship between domain satisfaction and the overall SWB level. Our study is the first to explore different kinds of interaction patterns in the importance satisfaction moderation of life domains. We identify four different types of domains: (i) domains in which satisfaction correlates with happiness only when the domain is considered as important; (ii) domains in which satisfaction correlates with happiness no matter whether it is considered as important or not; (iii) domains in which the slope of the correlation between satisfaction and happiness increases when it is considered as important and (iv) domains which show no correlation with happiness no matter whether it is considered as important or not.

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1. Introduction

Over the last four decades happiness studies have become an established field and research on subjective well-being (SWB) now features regularly and prominently in psychology and personality journals (see e.g. Bixter, 2015; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013; Weiss, Bates, & Luciano, 2008). Previous studies on SWB have revealed that personality traits account for a substantial amount of variance in individual levels of SWB. This is especially the case for extraversion and neuroticism (Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000; Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004; Weber & Huebner, 2015), but also other personality related variables such as self-esteem (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996), optimism (Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007), and positive illusions (Erez, Johnson, & Judge, 1995) show a strong correlation with measures of global life satisfaction.

While those variables can explain variance in SWB to a good extent, these studies are limited in their ability to explain the underlying processes of SWB, specifically the intra- and interindividual differences in the processes of SWB (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). In an effort to redress this shortcoming, researchers have zoomed in on the relationship between domain satisfaction and global life satisfaction as it

cannot be completely explained by traditional personality measures (Schimmack, 2008; Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002). Oishi et al. (1999) formulated the 'value-as-a-moderator' hypothesis and showed that values moderate the relationship between domain satisfaction and global life satisfaction. Another stream of research looks at the role of domain importance in the relationship between domain satisfaction and overall life satisfaction (see Hsieh, 2012b for a review of the literature). Hsieh (2012b) offers preliminary evidence to the effect that domain importance can moderate the relationship between domain satisfaction and global life satisfaction. Viewing importance as a value orientation, this finding can be interpreted as a variant of Oishi et al.'s 'value-as-a-moderator' hypothesis – which we will call 'domain-importance-as-a-moderator' hypothesis in this paper – even though Hsieh does not explicitly refer to Oishi et al. or use such a terminology.

However, all of these approaches work with the underlying assumption that there are interaction effects for *all* life domains analyzed. I.e. technically, they assume both the coefficient of the interaction term as well as the coefficient of the conditional main effect of satisfaction to be significant and positive.

However, previous studies in happiness research have shown that people do not always know what makes them happy. The best proof for this is the miscalculation of utility (Frey & Stutzer, 2014; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). Popular examples are the over-consumption of watching TV (Frey, Benesch, & Stutzer, 2007) and the commuting paradox

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(Stutzer & Frey, 2008). Applied to the context of domain satisfaction these findings imply that there is not necessarily an interaction effect between value/importance and satisfaction, at least not in all domains. Conversely, it is also possible that domain satisfaction only predicts global happiness if that domain is considered as important, which would lead to a significant interaction effect with the conditional main effect of satisfaction being not-significant.

Preliminary evidence for those theoretical considerations is provided by Yoon and Lee (2010). Applying the ‘value-as-a-moderator’ model to the context of social connectedness they find in one model only the interaction effect, and in another model only the conditional main effect to be significant. Unfortunately, they fail to discuss the implications of their findings for the ‘value-as-a-moderator’ model. In a similar vein, Lent et al. (2005) did not find support for the ‘domain-importance-as-a-moderator’ hypothesis.

Moreover, all empirical studies mentioned above also suffer from technical and sample-based shortcomings. The ‘value-as-a-moderator’ hypothesis (Oishi et al., 1999) e.g. has only been tested in an under-specified model setting focusing only on a limited number of domains.¹ A validation of the hypothesis in a well specified prediction model of global happiness or life satisfaction, encompassing all major life domains, is still missing. Hsieh (2012b) merely says that importance-satisfaction interactions can increase the variances explained (ΔR^2) in a global life satisfaction model, but fails to discuss the specific patterns of interaction which lead to this increase.

This paper investigates the validity of the ‘domain-importance-as-a-moderator’ hypothesis in the context of a fully specified happiness prediction model. As a guiding hypothesis we assume that both the interaction effects of domain importance-satisfaction as well as the conditional main effect of domain satisfaction are significant predictors of happiness (see Fig. 1 for our conceptual model). However, we expect that this hypothesis can only be confirmed in certain domains. Due to a lack of theory and empirical evidence we are not able to formulate specific hypothesis about each domain, making our research exploratory in nature.

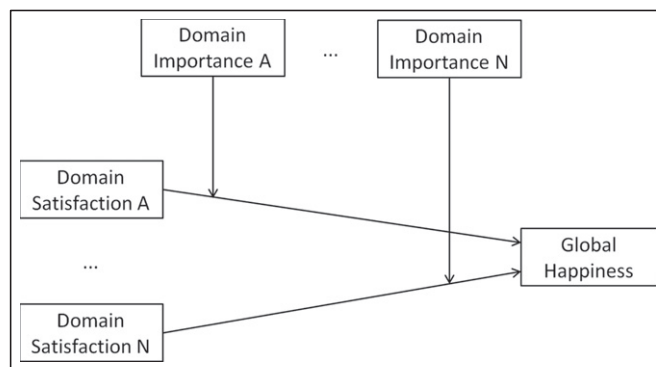
We contribute to knowledge in two ways: By showing that the ‘domain-importance-as-moderator’ hypothesis does not hold for all life domains we overcome the simplistic assumption and misspecifications of previous studies and reveal different types of relationships depending on the domain in question. Finally, by using a national probability sample we also overcome shortcomings of previous studies related to non-representative samples of small size.

2. Methods, data and strategy

The special nature of our research question required us to find reliable survey data that not only contains measures of happiness and domain satisfaction, but also measures of domain importance. While the former can be found in several large scale surveys (e.g. British Household Panel Study, German Socio-Economic Panel), the latter is not included in any major panel study (see for example the Cross National Equivalent File, CBEF). We identified the Japanese National Survey on Lifestyle Preferences (NSLP; in Japanese: *kokumin seikatsu senkōdo chōsa*) of the year 2010 as – to our knowledge – the only government commissioned, publicly available dataset that contains measures of domain importance and domain satisfaction.² The population of the survey includes 4000 men and women in Japan between 15 and 80 years of age and the sample is generated via a two-stage randomized stratified procedure. Due to the relatively high response rate (72.5%), there are 2900 completed questionnaires available for analysis.

¹ Oishi et al. (1999) only consider three randomly chosen domains (“grades”, “family”, and “social life and friends”), whereas Yoon and Lee (2010) only analyze the domain of social connectedness.

² For more information on the NSLP see <http://www5.cao.go.jp/seikatsu/senkoudo/senkoudo.html>. For a happiness analysis of the NSLP 2011 data see Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher (2015).



NB: Major life domains range from A to N.

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

2.1. Measures

2.1.1. Happiness

Our explained variable is the current happiness level of the respondent. The corresponding survey item reads: “How happy are you currently?”. Answer options range from 0 to 10 on an 11-point scale. Single item happiness scales are commonly used in happiness research (e.g. Bixter, 2015; Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008) and have been shown to be valid and reliable (Abdel-Khalek, 2006).

2.1.2. Domain importance

The NSLP 2010 captures domain importance as a dummy variable, asking people “When you evaluated your happiness feeling which of the following items did you consider important? Please check all relevant items”. It then lists nine pre-coded items: ‘financial situation’, ‘employment situation’, ‘health condition’, ‘spending free and satisfying time’, ‘purpose in life’ (regarding work, hobbies and social contribution), ‘family relations’, ‘friendship relations’, ‘relations at the workplace’ and ‘relations to the regional community’.

Note that it is necessary to emphasize the precise wording of the question which explicitly asks respondents to evaluate the domains *in terms of their importance regarding the overall feeling of happiness*. Other surveys, such as the World Values Survey, only ask respondents to “indicate how important it [the respective domain] is in your life”. With this kind of question, the link between importance and overall life satisfaction/happiness is left ambiguous, since some domains might be important in life, but are not related to life *satisfaction* itself. This is why the Japanese NSLP lends itself so suitable for analyzing the relationship between satisfaction and importance.

2.1.3. Domain satisfaction

Finally, respondents were asked to rank their satisfaction with several aspects of their life. The exact wording of the questions reads “How satisfied are you with each of the following items? Please indicate on a scale from ‘satisfied’ to ‘dissatisfied’ the state which comes closest to your personal feelings”. The respondents can then choose on a 1–5 Likert scale their level of satisfaction. The exact scale reads: “satisfied” recoded as “5”, “somewhat satisfied” recoded as “4”, “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” recoded as “3”, “If anything, dissatisfied” recoded as “2” and “dissatisfied” recoded as “1”. Note that all satisfaction measures have been mean-centered. For this analysis we focus on all the domains listed under the importance ranking question, except for ‘time’, for which no equivalent satisfaction measure was included in the survey.

2.1.4. Control variables

Finally, we include a number of control variables that are common in happiness estimations. We control for basic socio-demographic variables (household income, age, age squared, gender) and family relations

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