



## Subjective well-being: Above neuroticism and extraversion, autonomy motivation matters



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### ABSTRACT

This study tested whether general causality orientations explained unique variance in subjective well-being (SWB). That is, whether autonomy and impersonal orientations predicted SWB above trait dispositions. Hypotheses were tested by structural equation modeling (SEM) of data from a large sample ( $N = 1181$ ). Results showed that a higher autonomy orientation predicted increased SWB above neuroticism and extraversion, whereas impersonal orientation was non-significant. Based on these results and the principles of integrative personality psychology, we argue that such distinct individual differences should be considered together in personality explanations of behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

Being happy and leading satisfying lives reflect important concerns of most people (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Happiness and satisfaction are studied as subjective well-being (SWB), which comprises life-satisfaction, positive affect, and lack of negative affect (Diener et al., 2003; Schimmack, 2008). Examples of positive affect are feelings of energy and engagement, and examples of negative affect are distress and anxiety. A high degree of SWB impacts other aspects of life. Thus, high levels of positive affect foster sociality and physical health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), indicating that SWB is more than just a pleasant state of mind. But individuals are not equally likely to achieve high levels of SWB. Specifically, personality traits such as extraversion and neuroticism are strong predictors of SWB (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008).

Personality is not limited to trait dispositions, but encompasses motivational aspects such as regulation of motivation (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Capturing such regulations, general causality orientations are defined as “relatively enduring aspects of people that characterize the source of initiation and regulation, and thus the degree of self-determination, of their behavior” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 109) and they influence affect, cognition, and observed

behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). We examined whether differences in causality orientations explained SWB above neuroticism and extraversion. Below, we first describe traits and causality orientations. Then we review studies that have examined relations between causality orientations and SWB. Finally, we outline the hypotheses for this study.

Traits are described as de-contextualized, genetically determined, biologically based, and stable individual differences that account for the consistency in a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Traits are organized according to five domains: Neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Neuroticism reflects tendencies towards intensity and frequency of negative emotions and thoughts, whereas extraversion reflects tendencies towards intensity and frequency of positive emotions and thoughts (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Many studies have found that neuroticism and extraversion predict SWB (i.e., Steel et al., 2008). However, these two domains encompass more than stable positive and stable negative emotions. Exceeding negative affect, neuroticism includes tendencies towards self-critical thoughts (i.e., prolonged rumination), social vulnerability, as well as avoidance strategies (e.g., Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006); and beyond positive affect, extraversion includes tendencies towards social and status engagements (i.e., dominance), adventurous yearnings, as well as approach strategies. Since neuroticism and extraversion are the strongest predictors of SWB, we directed our focus towards these two traits (Steel et al., 2008).

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According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), causality orientations are modes of general motivational regulation that develop as the products of social interaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT researchers have conceptualized three such modes: (1) *Intrinsic motivation* refers to autonomous self-regulation of behavior (i.e., determined by volition, interest, and enjoyment). Autonomy oriented individuals typically regulate themselves according to personalized goals, as well as their own standards and beliefs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Such individuals display higher levels of reflection (e.g., Thomsen, Tønnesvang, Schnieber, & Olesen, 2011), experience more well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and have a more secure sense of self-worth (Hodgins, 2008; Hodgins & Knee, 2002). (2) *Extrinsic motivation* refers to controlled regulation of behavior (i.e., determined by reward and punishment, by feelings of pride or shame, or by simple rationales). Control oriented individuals typically regulate themselves in accordance with or defiance against social norms, cultural values, and external demands (Deci & Ryan, 2000). (3) *Amotivation* refers to poor or impersonal regulation of behavior (i.e., the experience of determination incompetence). Impersonally orientated individuals may experience events as out of their control and tend to feel unable to act in ways that could lead them towards desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Instead, they often turn to satisfying immediate addictions or they become overwhelmed by depressive moods (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They show lower levels of reflection (e.g., Thomsen et al., 2011), and display both helplessness and several forms of ill-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hodgins, 2008; Hodgins & Knee, 2002).

The relationship between causality orientations and SWB has been examined in several studies. Three correlational studies examined emotions and found that autonomy orientation was related to increased positive affect and reduced negative affect, and impersonal orientation was related to increased negative affect (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Luyckx, Schwartz, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Goossens, 2010; Luyckx et al., 2007). Two other correlational studies examined well-being at work, one study found that autonomy orientation was related to increased job-satisfaction (Lam & Gurland, 2008), while another study found no relationship (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Two experimental studies found that individuals high in autonomy orientation experienced reduced negative affect after performance feed-back (Bober & Grolnick, 1995; Neighbors & Knee, 2003), though a third study found no effect (Knee & Zuckerman, 1996). A fourth study found that individuals high in autonomy orientation experienced increased positive affect and reduced negative affect when integrating negative events into their life-story (Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011). Finally, a fifth study, which controlled for neuroticism, found that individuals high in autonomy orientation experienced increased well-being after an expressive writing assignment (Weinstein & Hodgins, 2009). Most studies have found no relation between control orientation and SWB (Baard et al., 2004; Bober & Grolnick, 1995; Knee & Zuckerman, 1996; Lam & Gurland, 2008; Luyckx et al., 2007, 2010; Neighbors & Knee, 2003; Weinstein & Hodgins, 2009; for exceptions see Deci and Ryan (1985) and Weinstein et al. (2011)). With respect to autonomy and impersonal orientation, the above studies suggest that autonomy orientation is positively related to SWB and that impersonal orientation is negatively related. Hence, we focused on autonomy and impersonal orientations as positive and negative predictors of SWB in the present study.

The findings that personality traits and causality orientations are both related to SWB, raises the question whether causality orientations explain SWB above traits. Relevant to this question, two previous studies have shown that causality orientations and personality traits are conceptually independent (Olesen, 2011; Olesen, Thomsen, Schnieber, & Tønnesvang, 2010). Autonomy orientation was related to extraversion, agreeableness, and openness,

but still emerged as an independent factor in both exploratory and confirmatory analyses. Impersonal orientation was strongly related to neuroticism (and related to reversed extraversion), but still emerged as an independent factor. Since these studies suggest that causality orientations are conceptually distinct from, but related to personality traits, and since causality orientations predict SWB, we expected that causality orientations would explain unique variance in SWB.

Specifically, we hypothesized that autonomy orientation would predict SWB above neuroticism and extraversion (i.e., as indicated by a significant positive relationship). We tested this hypothesis in a structural regression model, in which latent factors for neuroticism, extraversion, and autonomy orientation predicted latent SWB. Similarly, we hypothesized that impersonal orientation would predict SWB above neuroticism and extraversion (i.e., as indicated by a significant negative relationship). We tested this hypothesis in a subsequent model, in which latent factors for neuroticism, extraversion, and impersonal orientation predicted latent SWB. Thus, if causality orientations maintained significant relationships with SWB in these analyses, it would confirm our hypotheses.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and recruitment

We collected data from first year students at Aarhus University (AU). The sample consisted of 1181 students (59.01% women), age  $M = 21.80$ ,  $SD = 4.36$ . The response rate was 21.3%. Recruitment took place in collaboration with the AU Registry. The researchers received a list, which contained e-mail addresses for all students. The researchers sent out invitations to participate. The welcoming page of the questionnaire served as an informed consent form, which the participants had to accept.

### 2.2. Materials

Participants completed a number of questionnaires. Traits were measured by the Danish NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, Costa & McCrae, 2004). The 60 item NEO-FFI assesses dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Items consist of general personality statements, which are scored by self-report on scales ranging from 0 – *strongly disagree* to 4 – *strongly agree*. Descriptive statistics and internal reliabilities for neuroticism and extraversion are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Means, standard deviations, and cronbach's  $\alpha$  for neuroticism and extraversion, autonomy and impersonal orientations, and SWB.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
<i>NEO-FFI</i>			
Neuroticism	23.74	7.69	.84
Extraversion	30.43	7.11	.83
<i>GCOS</i>			
Autonomy	99.98	8.91	.79
Impersonal	61.77	13.83	.83
<i>PANAS</i>			
Positive affect	34.71	6.69	.84
Negative affect	20.76	6.48	.81
<i>SWLS</i>			
Life-satisfaction	24.13	6.48	.86

Note:  $N = 1181$ . NEO-FFI, NEO five-factor inventory; GCOS, general causality orientations scale; SWB, subjective well-being; PANAS, positive and negative affect schedule; SWLS, satisfaction with life scale.

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